

Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* and post-2008 Revolts: From the Discourse of the Master to the Destituent Power of the Real¹

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Introduction

Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite* has been globally praised for presenting a new perspective on class conflict and for placing the precarious working class at its center. Prestigious awards such as the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Festival or the unprecedented Oscar for the Best Film (for a film in a language other than English) only corroborate this global consensus. But I think it's the opposite. *Parasite* is an overworked and convoluted narrative about the impossibility of overcoming, dismantling, or exiting neoliberal capitalism. Literally, the South Korean film is a cinematic version of Fredric Jameson's infamous dictum that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the

¹ A short version of this article, centered exclusively on the analysis of the film, was published earlier in Spanish: "Nuestra imaginación global continúa siendo neoliberal." www.ctxt.es. 2-13-2020.

end of capitalism."² Therefore, the interesting thing to analyze is how we all have enjoyed globally, in almost ecclesiastical communion, our last cinematic surrender to the ideology of late capitalism. And at that, it must be admitted, Bong Joon Ho's film is a work of genius.³

Parasite is also a pertinent departure point to revisit some of Žižek's theories on the issue of neoliberalism's global fantasies and on Lacan's four discourses. In order to do so, it will be necessary to reflect on the visibility of another global event: the revolts that have taken place throughout the world after 2008 (henceforth "post-2008 revolts"), and more specifically after the Arab Spring of 2011. Actually, they have intensified precisely during the year of *Parasite*'s release, 2019, in what some have called a new "Red October," from Chile to France and Iraq. The question is whether both *Parasite* and the post-2008 revolts, with their common emphasis on class conflict, also share the complementary and symmetrical discourses of the analyst and the hysteric respectively.⁴ If *Parasite* seems to assert the discourse of the analyst, whereby the audience finally traverses the fantasy of neoliberal capitalism as the Other's enjoyment, the post-2008 revolts appear to resort to the discourse of the hysteric, whereby they challenge the neoliberal discourse of the Master by posing the question of class (are we a class? are we in power or oppressed?) but ends up identifying with the capitalist elite's desire (the desire of the Other), so that, like in any hysterical injunction, they ultimately reinforce a late-capitalist symbolic-economic order by avoiding the trauma of their lack. After all, the post-2008 revolts only seem to desire the restoration of a non-corrupt socialdemocratic state of welfare they perceive as traumatically lost (or lacking)

² "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world." Fredric Jameson. "Future City," *New Left Review* 21 (May-June 2003): 76.

³ The fact that the film was produced for a global audience is clear in the statement of CJ Group's chairman Miky Lee, the main producer and financier of the film. As *The Wall Street Journal* states, "[T]he success of 'Roma,' which won three Oscars last year including best director, gave Ms. Lee faith that critics and audiences are growing increasingly open to foreign-language films. This has been boosted in part by an explosion of international content distributed by streaming platforms like Netflix. 'I was very inspired by 'Roma.' It was a foreign director, it's not an English language movie and it won best director,' she says." Andrew Jeong and R.T. Watson. "How 'Parasite' Became South Korea's Accidental Breakout Hit." *The Wall Street Journal*. 5-2-2020. www.wsj.com. Access: 2-5-2020.

⁴ Jacques Lacan. *Seminar of Jacques Lacan XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton and Co. 2007.

at the hands of neoliberal capitalism, so that they identify with the desire of the capitalist neoliberal elite, i.e. with the desire of the Other, as the only way to continue to desire and be in late capitalism. In short, their *object petit a* cause of desire is social status (as class and political subject) in the neoliberal market, so that they can disavow the trauma of their lost middle-class position in the bygone welfare state.⁵

If *Parasite* has been hailed as revolutionary, it is precisely because, in its violent logic, it unleashes the spectatorial drive and allows the audience to look at the terrifying maternal *jouissance* supposedly hidden in the mansion of the elite Park family. Yet, rather than full *jouissance*, the spectators attain the truth that allows them to traverse their fantasy: one is always excluded from the enjoyment of neoliberal capitalist wealth, regardless of whether one ends up as its prisoner (the working-class father, Kim Ki-taek, at the end of the film), remains outside fantasizing about becoming part of the elite for a good cause (the son, Ki-woo, fantasizes about buying the house in order to liberate his father, fully aware of the fantastic nature of his dream), or dies in the attempt to enjoy neoliberal elite wealth (the father of the Park family, Dong-ik, who dies knived by Ki-taek). At the end of the film, the fatherless neoliberal family vacates the house and sells it to a German family who has just arrived and is ignorant of the events, so that this foreign family too is bound to repeat the narrative of the film as capitalist drive.

In an article on Lacan's four discourses, Žižek posits that there is a revolutionary subject in the discourse of the analyst who can provide the truth to topple the master signifier's hold on the unconscious of the oppressed global masses (and spectators), as *Parasite* seems to do:

Finally, the analyst's discourse stands for the emergence of revolutionary-
emancipatory subjectivity that resolves the split of university and hysteria. In it,
the revolutionary agent - *a* - addresses the subject from the position of
knowledge that occupies the place of truth (i.e., which intervenes at the
"symptomal torsion" of the subject's constellation), and the goal is to isolate, get

⁵ Although in several instances, such as the Milan lecture, Lacan talked about a fifth the discourse, the discourse of the capitalist, I will not consider this possibility here, as he concludes that the market is the new truth that cannot be challenged. Jacques Lacan. "On Psychoanalytic Discourse" *Lacan in Italia, 1953-1978. En Italia Lacan*. Milan: La Salmandra, 1978. 32-55

rid of, the master signifier that structured the subject's (ideologico-political) unconscious.⁶

In turn, the post-2008 protests have been dismissed by many leftist philosophers, including Žižek, for their lack of a revolutionary agenda, as they ultimately have no clear ideology, only blind activity as sign of aimless potential. According to this assessment, the people who participate in the revolts are unable to articulate themselves as a political subject and, therefore, they do not transcend the discourse of the hysteric, which, according to Lacan, always desires a Master (the Master's desire) and finds as truth its object of desire, thus further cementing the hold of the Master. It is important to recall that Lacan already answered similarly to the protesters of May 1968 when he claimed that "I would tell you that the revolutionary aspiration has only one possible way of ending, only one: always with the discourse of the Master, as experience has already shown. What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a Master. You shall have one!"⁷

In his *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (2012), Žižek attempts to make a distinction between the irrationally negative and cause-less riots of 2011 in the UK, prompted by the police killing of a young man, and the later protests of the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. As he concludes for the British revolts of 2011:

Although the UK riots of August 2011 were triggered by the suspicious death of Mark Duggan, it is generally accepted that they expressed a deeper unease—but of what kind? Similar to the riots in the Paris suburbs in 2005, the UK protesters had no message to deliver. The contrast with the massive student demonstrations of November 2010, which also turned violent, is clear. The students had a message—the rejection of the government's higher education reforms. This is why it is difficult to conceive of the 2011 riots in Marxist terms, as indicative of an emerging revolutionary subject; much more appropriate here is the Hegelian notion of the "rabble"—referring to those outside the organized social sphere, prevented from participating in social production, who are able to

⁶ Slavoj Žižek. "Jacques Lacan's Four Discourses." www.lacan.com. N.d. Access: 2-15-2020.

⁷ Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII: Psychoanalysis upside down / The reverse of Psychoanalysis 1969-1970*. Dublin, 2001: 8. www.esource.dbs.ie/handle/10788/166. Access: 2-22-2020.

express their discontent only in the form of “*irrational*” *outbursts of destructive violence*, or what Hegel called “abstract negativity.” Perhaps this is the hidden truth of Hegel, of his political thought: the more a society conforms to a well-organized rational state, the more the abstract negativity of “irrational” violence returns.⁸ (my emphasis)

Yet, when he analyzes the Arab Spring of 2011 and Occupy Wall street, he seems to find a political discourse and articulation, unlike in the UK revolts analyzed above. But, even in this case, he concludes that such a political articulation is negative, for the people do not have the questions that would allow them to find the answers they already have (are) in themselves:

Of course, the problem remains: how can we institutionalize collective decision-making beyond the framework of the democratic multi-party system? Who will be the agent of this re-invention? Or, to put it in a brutal way: who knows what to do today? There is no Subject who knows, neither in the form of intellectuals nor ordinary people. Is this then a deadlock, a case of the blind leading the blind, or, more precisely, the blind leading the blind where each assumes that the other can see? No, because the respective ignorance is not symmetrical. It is the people who have the answers, *they just do not know the questions to which they have (or, rather, are) the answer.*⁹ (my emphasis)

In other words, the people’s answers are on the side of the Real, on the side of social and economic traumas inflicted by neoliberal capitalism, so that the people can only access them symptomatically. Yet, once the symptomatic nature of the “political revolts” is contrasted with the earlier irrational revolts, supposedly without a political message or reason, what emerges is not a difference, but rather a continuity in the way both types of revolts organize themselves negatively through acts that are physically or symbolically violent. Neither type of revolt can articulate its politics, except in a symptomatic and indirect way, that is, unknowingly, without having questions for its answers.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek. *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London: Verso, 2012. 53.

⁹ Ibid, 90.

However, the problem remains: are these revolts hysterical? At first sight, it appears they can only articulate their identity, their truth, negatively through the Master's desire, thus, ultimately confirming Lacan's dictum that they only "aspire to a Master." Furthermore, this idea is confirmed by Žižek's later publications, where he demands a progressive version of Thatcher,¹⁰ a Master of the left,¹¹ or a new Lenin,¹² thus echoing Badiou's own thinking, in what ironically can be defined as Žižek's own believe that the Other, in the form of a leftist leader or Master, is a subject supposed to enjoy and to know—something he has always condemned as the source of all totalitarian violence.

Against the Lacanian formalization of the four discourses, the comparative analysis of *Paradise* and the post-2008 revolts, shows that, when transposing Lacan's theory to the political arena of global capitalism, as Žižek does, there is no discourse of the analyst and, therefore, films, such as *Parasite*, become *object petit a*-s of the discourse of the Master and the University. Furthermore, I will defend that the political subject in revolt (as analysand) has already traversed its fundamental fantasy: it already departs from the acceptance of the castration of the Other, of the neoliberal capitalist order, in so far as the blind neoliberal elite embodies the Other. The people participating in the post-2008 revolts already know that the ruling elites do not have answers to fix the neoliberal capitalist order or improve the situation of the precarized middle-classes (Žižek's proverbial "case of the blind leading the blind.... and the led assuming that the leaders cannot see either"). Christine Lagarde's declarations (as the discourse of the University) that the policies of the IMF had harmful rather than beneficial effects on the countries intervened in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis represents the moment when its castrated status as Master is acknowledged, although, this does not prevent the IMF from continuing to adopt the same policies and decisions.

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek. "The simple courage of decision: a leftist tribute to Thatcher." *New Statesman*. April 17th, 2013. www.newstatesman.com. Access: 22-1-2020.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek. *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism*. New York: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2014.

¹² Slavoj, Žižek. "Today's protests indicate the scale of troubles in our paradise." RT. October 28th, 2019. www.rt.com. Access: 22-1-2020.

Thus, in the following, I will posit that the subject of these revolts represents the irruption of the Real, in a way that Žižek's transposition of Lacanian theory to capitalism has not addressed yet. In short, I will argue that the post-2008 revolts point to a new reorganization of neoliberal ideology and late capitalism as the symbolic order that resituates the non-elite subject of the revolt, not as barred and within such order, but as radically excluded and exterior, so that it stands for the Real. Hence, films such as *Parasite*, which tend to present the precarized working class as imprisoned inside the neoliberal order and, thus, seemingly coming to terms, traversing, its foundational fantasy (the capitalist Other's castration), instead articulate the ultimate ideological ruse of neoliberalism: "there is not outside, capitalism cannot be overcome, there is no true oppression to overcome, we are all oppressed by a violence that is not class-based but human and universal, etc." In a formula that seems contradictory, I will also defend that it is necessary to posit a non-barred subject that is, nevertheless, the symptom of itself: the revolting subject is its own truth, originating in its own trauma of neoliberal exclusion and precarization.

Therefore, and against Žižek's proposals, I will argue that the subjects of the post-2008 revolts do not desire a Master, as they are not hysteric and/or do not respond to the discourse of the hysteric. This will also require to redefine the Master, *qua* embodiment of the Other, as not castrated, for the neoliberal class has access, as class, to the *jouissance* of financial capitalism beyond the law: this class resorts to corruption, to breaking the law, and to asserting its exceptionalism, in a global state of exception, of which the master signifier has become Donald Trump. Therefore, I will conclude by redefining Agamben's proposal of destitution (destituent power) in new Lacanian-Žižekian terms, so that the only revolutionary politics of the future become negative and resort to the very mechanism of neoliberal exclusion as its destituent power, for the revolting subject knows the traumatic answers that the elite does not.¹³

¹³ Giorgio Agamben. "For a Theory of Destituent Power." <http://www.chronosmag.eu/index.php/g-agamben-for-a-theory-of-destituent-power.html>. Access: 2-1-2020.

From British and American Gothic to Global Comedy

The fact that *Parasite* breaks genre limits and reorganizes them in a new fashion enhances its global novelty and reception: *Parasite* mixes violence and slapstick humor à la Tarantino but reorganizes them according to Gothic horror conventions. So, we need a new name for this new hybrid genre: neoliberal Gothic comedy. Were it not too long, I would call it “global oriental neoliberal Gothic comedy.”

It is important to understand the Gothic logic of the narrative, which otherwise seems comedic in its exaggerated violence. It is well understood since Freud that Gothic narratives are connected with the uncanny, the un/homely, and with the return of the repressed, so that the Other's desire and *jouissance* is indirectly represented as overwhelming and horrific through the symptom of the monster and its gaze. Yet, it is important first to analyze and to historicize the details of the film. If I denounced above *Parasite's* "overworked and convoluted narrative about the impossibility of overcoming, dismantling, or exiting neoliberal capitalism," it is precisely because the film is rendered in a Gothic fashion, following the conventions of the British Gothic horror genre of the late 18th and early 19th centuries (*The Monk*, *Melmoth the Wonderer*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Castle of Otranto*, etc.). At least since Eve Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, we know that the main rule of the Gothic genre is precisely that one cannot escape from the castle or the mansion.¹⁴ The Gothic genre uses claustrophobia to generate universal horror. In *Parasite* too, two unconnected working-class families, the Kims and the married couple Moon-gwang/Geun-se, are trapped, in a very British-Victorian way, by having their respective patriarchs imprisoned in the neoliberal and architecturally fashionable new castle of the global capitalist elite (the film provides indexical references to the Kims' business in New York). Thus, the castle emerges again as the center of this new global allegory, as the site of the uncanny, of the unhomely, in an neoaristocratic or neoliberal elitist refashioned architectural design, since it is not a home but a mansion-castle. But in the British Gothic convention, it is the colonialist-imperialist Protestant class in power that experiences the anxiety of entrapment by portraying Spanish, Irish, and Italian nuns and monks as well as nobility

¹⁴ In this respect, Bong resorts to Western representational conventions, unlike in previous films such as *Host*, where the direct referent is *Godzilla* and the Japanese *kaiju*.

freaks. It is an entrapment anxiety that is further exacerbated in later narratives such as *Dracula*, as the narrative evolves into what Stephen D. Arata calls "reverse colonization:"¹⁵ Dracula travels from the peripheries of the British Empire in Transylvania to London to eat and colonize the British. In short, Gothic anxieties of claustrophobia (of not being able to leave the castle) are always a sign of aristocratic hegemony, of elite power or privilege and, therefore, of fear of losing such status.¹⁶ But, in *Parasite*, it is rather the opposite: the working class is the one who suffers from anxiety—an anxiety that is presented as the latest sign of the new affective technology of neoliberalism: insecurity, fear of precarization, terror of becoming homeless and destitute. In other words, the conventions of the Gothic genre are reversed in the film so that no one can fantasize about exiting or overcoming neoliberalism.¹⁷

This represents a return to older Gothic conventions, but in a global fashion, as the film goes beyond what could be characterized as the previous most successful filmic rendition of the Gothic: the Hollywood horror film of mid-20th century, represented by Hitchcock as both middle class and North American. In *Pyscho*, for example, Slavoj Žižek observes a triple middle-class spatial organization, whereby the maternal superego is on the first floor, Norman's ego on the ground floor, and the unconscious, embodied by the mother's corpse, in the basement (*The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*).¹⁸ In short, in this most recent South Korean rendition of the the Gothic, what is at stake is precisely the enjoyment, the *jouissance* of a global neoliberal big Other, always embodied by the subject supposed to know and to enjoy. Thus, the film begins as a fantasy of having access, even if it is as workers of the castle-mansion, to the

¹⁵ Stephen D. Arata. "The Occidental Tourist: 'Dracula' and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization." *Victorian Studies* 33 (1990): 621-45.

¹⁶ See my "Geo-bio-politics of the Gothic: On the Queer/Inhuman Dislocation of Spanish/English Subjects and their Others (For A Definition of Modernity as an Imperialist Geobiopolitical Fracture)." *1616: Anuario de literatura comparada* 4 (2014): 153-67.

¹⁷ At the end of the film, the main tension and fantasy is reduced to an old-fashioned (Morse) dialogue between father and son. Women (mother and daughter) as transitional and secondary characters are dismissed or pushed to the background.

¹⁸ The Freudian triad, now, would have to be posited geopolitically, so that the superego is the global audience and film industry (including festivals such as Cannes), the ego would be the narrative and images of the film, and the Id would be located at the level of all the protests and revolts that have emerged since the Arab Spring of 2011, unleashed by a middle-class on the verge of precarization and by the precariat itself.

enjoyment of the Other. The first form of this fantasy of enjoyment is constructed when the Kim family can abandon its precarious working status and gains access to a regular salary, the salary of the son Ki-woo, the first member who is hired to work in the mansion-castle.

Parasite's reversed Gothic logic—the hegemonic ideology of neoliberalism—is integrated into its filmic narrative core to such an extent that, once the son of the working family, Ki-woo, becomes an English teacher for the rich daughter, Park Da-hye, the rest of the Kim family has no choice but to follow him compulsively—as if guided by a mysterious but infallible Gothic logic—and, thus, to enter a castle they do not know yet they will not be able to leave unscathed. The working class, embodied by the Kim family, acts here with an "unethical logic" and a "universal dishonesty"¹⁹ that aligns them with the Spanish picaresque genre of the 16th-17th centuries, rather than with any subsequent social discourse (socialism, anarchism, solidarity, etc.), so that the mansion-castle becomes the Gothic-uncanny space the entire family fantasizes about invading parasitically and leaving unscathed at will. Here again, picaresque is combined with a comic and ironic touch that, nevertheless, does not become social commentary or critique. This compulsion to join the staff of the elite family, the Parks, is thus originally presented as a direct enjoyment, as working class, of the wealth of the mansion, aptly signified through the narrative about its origin: it was designed by a fictional famous South Korean architect, Namgoong Hyeonja, for himself and, thus, it is unique and desirable even in its design.

Yet, it is precisely at that point, when the Parks, the neoliberal elite owners of the castle, leave in a camping trip to exorcise the haunting they can indirectly perceive through their youngest child's trauma, that the working-class Kims meet their future fate in the form of Geun-se, the husband of the former caretaker Moon-gwang whom they have managed to have fired. Here the fantasy of accessing the enjoyment of the Other embodied by the elite Parks escalates so that the working-class Kims mimic and parody, perform, the absent Park family, so that, for a night, they take the place of the latter. This abject performance where class-limits are transgressed seems the the *object petit a*

¹⁹ I owe the expression to my colleague Elizabeth Scarlett.

cause of the Kims' desire: they have access to all the commodities and luxuries of the mansion while pretending to be the Parks. Yet, as Lacan establishes, the *object petit a* cause of desire is simply a signifier or object that keeps at bay the traumatic nature of the violent enjoyment of the big Other, as embodied by the Master, the subject supposed to know and enjoy.

Yet at that very precise moment, the Kims are visited by Moon-gwang, the old caretaker, who takes them over to the traumatic and violent side of the enjoyment of the Other, thus shattering the Kim's fantasy of a non-traumatic access to *jouissance*. As the Kims, following the caretaker, descend down to the basement and, then, further down, to the bunker underneath, they discover the hideaway of Moon-gwang's husband, Geun-se, who has been hiding from loan sharks for four years, after his business went bankrupt. The husband's monstrous and psychotic look further emphasizes what, at first, seems the traumatic nature of the enjoyment of the Other: only through violence and corrupt practices such as abusive lending can the neoliberal elite enjoy its wealth and status. In short, the traumatic and violent nature of the enjoyment of the Other is brought to its full force by representing the mansion's nuclear bunker as the simultaneous prison and safeplace of the bankrupt working-class husband. This is the obscene secret of the elite's enjoyment *qua* Masters and embodiment of the Other, which the film reveals in its full Gothic horror.

The fact that many establishing and tracking shots either follow the characters from behind or show them in front, but without a clear subjectivizing shot-reverse-shot structure, creates a filmic gaze that further accentuates the abject and monstrous point of view from which the spectator follows the characters and is himself or herself progressively entrapped at the bottom of the mansion. The bunker, although originally designed as a nuclear shelter against the possible attack of North Korea, was hidden from the new neoliberal owners, the Parks, and so what originally was a deterrent against a Cold-War horror—the traumatic fantasy of being decimated by North Korea—now becomes a different kind of “nuclear” shelter: an abject and ambivalent subterranean space that entraps the indebted working class while offering it a temporary shelter so that, ultimately, this class remains trapped as the underbelly of neoliberal capitalism in South Korea.

This is why the first subjects to experience the violent return of the repressed, of the uncanny, are precisely the Kims, a precarized family who must fight to contain the threat of this other entrapped-sheltered working class that the the former caretaker and her husband embody. The latter also represent the Kim's encounter with their own economic and social trauma: they also live in an underground home, a basement, which gives them shelter but also marks them irremediably as part of the South Korean precariat who is imprisoned and condemned to an empoverished existence. Moreover, the smell or scent that the basement exhudes marks the Kims biologically, as a different "race" that smells as "boiled rags," the expression the Park father uses to describe their odor.

From this point on, the film dives into a violent frenzy of narrative accidents, coincidences, and fortuitous encounters that are simply designed to entrap the audience, not only through its monstrous gaze, but through its narrative. This is the most manipulative and forced part of the film, where coincidences are piled up with the sole objective of making the public feel the ghostly effect of neoliberalism at a cinematic level. The audience is pushed into the dungeons of the film, so that even they cannot leave a manipulative and affectively painful film that clearly is going nowhere. The film manipulates even nature, the weather, so that the working family cannot return home: after the initial fiasco prompted by the unannounced return to the Parks, the whole Kim family manages to escape from the neoliberal Gothic castle unscathed, but torrential rains flood their underground home and, as a consequence, the next morning, they have no choice but to return to the neoliberal castle. The numerous stairs and passages they need to take to descend to their basement home at the bottom of a hill further enhances the castle-village geographic and social hierarchy of the Gothic.

When the Kims return to the mansion-castle the following morning to help and participate in the birthday party, partaking the wealth and luxury of the mansion no longer is a fantasy of enjoyment, but the cruel and sadistic injunction of the big Other to enjoy: you must enjoy! The birthday party and its surreal and violent celebration of working-class resentment, always attenuated through comic touches of hilarious excess *à la* Tarantino, brings working-class violence, contained and imprisoned till that point in the bunker, to the open air, to the yard, so that in a reversal of roles, it appears that this

time it is the precarized working class who truly has access to the violent enjoyment of neoliberal capitalism, of its riches and luxuries, previously hidden inside the mansion-castle. Geun-se, the dead caretaker's husband, tries to kill the Kim son, Ki-woo, with a stone and then wounds fatally his sister, Ki-jung. In turn Kim father stabs Park father, so that, at the end, there is only one patriarchal figure left who goes back to the position of the original working-class husband, Geun-se, in order to symbolize the unavoidable and rigid logic of late capitalism, whereby the working class and its representative, the father, always end up embodying the monstrous and abject secret of neoliberal enjoyment by the big Other and its Master class—even the son, Kim-woo, voided of the comradeship of his sister, goes back to the basement, to the other Gothic jail outside the mansion-castle.

Yet, it is important to emphasize the way the enjoyment of the Other is brought from the basement to the light, to the frontyard, in order to act out, to perform, the working class's enjoyment of its own liberation and resentment towards the elite class, the Master. It is at this moment, in daylight and outside the mansion—outside the traumatic bunker—that the film finally liberates the audience from their cinematic-Gothic entrapment, and, thanks to its comedic rendering of violence, allows them to watch the movie for what it is: a celebration of the neoliberal Gothic, which shows a working-class family trapped in a distant land, in the new global Orient of *Hallyu* (Korean popular culture). It is no longer the viewer's own Gothic fantasy of horror and *jouissance*, but that of an Other. This is the ideological triumph of the film, somebody else's fantasy becomes the *objet petit a* cause of the desire of our own fantasy. Here is where the film asserts the order of a global neoliberal Master and its surplus of enjoyment. It is important that at the end of the film the Park father dies and his family vacates the mansion-castle, so that an unsuspecting German family buys and moves into the mansion. The film has become our object of desire, so that we desire a film desiring a neoliberal order, which is open, once again, to be viewed and desired, not by the Kim family but rather by ourselves. The mansion restores a global capitalist drive that desires endlessly an object whose surplus enjoyment rests with the Other. Yet, this film is not a Western film. It is therefore important to analyze further the way a South-Korean

film articulates a global neoliberal fantasy in geopolitical terms through nostalgia and resentment.

The Discourse of the Master: Deplorables, Racial Working-Class Resentment, and Progressive Orientalism

Parasite creates an effect of distance, so that the audience can view and enjoy working-class entrapment but ultimately walk away from it, unlike the film characters, unscathed, i.e. as if the entrapment ultimately was that of another class elsewhere. In order to do so, the film relies on a sophisticated system of affectivity and neorientalism that transforms the traumatic and abject attempt to *jouissance* by a (South Korean) precarized working class into a spectacle, into a film, an *objet petit a* produced elsewhere (and marked as such through Korean language and English subtitles) so that it enforces the desire of the neoliberal capitalist Other, and thus our own global desire.

Since *Parasite* introduces the new (South Korean) neoliberal elite class, embodied by the Park family, as naive, gullible, narcissistic and, ultimately, as not even intelligent enough to defend its status and wealth (represented primarily as female through the role of the credulous wife, Park Yeon-kyo), the film creates a sense of anger, of resentment, which is not articulated politically but affectively. It is no accident that, at the end of the film, when the son of the Kim family, Ki-woo, fantasizes about amassing a great fortune to buy the house and free his imprisoned father, the camera brings him back to the family basement in the last shot. The film gives rise to the same affectivity that the neoliberal right of the West (with Trump as its epicenter) has been able to deploy successfully against what Nancy Fraser has called "the progressive neoliberal elite," from Bill Gates to the Hollywood liberals.²⁰ But *Parasite* has done so, in a very subtle way, mixing picaresque comedy and Gothic horror violence, so that class resentment is codified in a very benign, intelligent, and humorous way, and, as a result, a global progressive audience can celebrate and enjoy it without guilt. Deep down, this respectable audience tells itself, "this is a satire, it is dark humor." That is, the film is a global fetishistic representation of class conflict, so that the audience can identify with

²⁰ And as I will argue below, it has also been deployed against any non-national alien (racially or ethnically marked minorities, domestic, il/legal, or migrant).

the poor working class, feel their resentment and entrapment, enjoy their violence towards the neoliberal Other (the Park family), but, at the end, disconnect from them, without realizing that the film places that very same audience in the position of the neoliberal progressive elite that supposedly critiques.

It is the ideological maneuver by which the Other who is supposed to enjoy more (the Jew, the Progressive liberal b/millionaire, the Muslim Terrorist, the Immigrant who abuses social services, etc.) is constructed as the Other in possession of surplus enjoyment, whereby it is also posited as an exterior subject entirely disconnected from our own social order. Therefore this identificational disconnect allows for the fantasy that the Other can be expelled, destroyed, and ousted in order to regain the surplus enjoyment that the Other possesses illegally or immorally. The maneuver through which this is achieved in the film is complex and sophisticated.

It is no coincidence that *Parasite* represents a South Korea devoid of immigrants and, therefore, as ethnically and/or racially homogeneous, for this allows a global progressive audience to enjoy class resentment through a very old-fashioned working-class representation that no longer is prevalent in the West: "a working class constituted by a traditional, racially homogeneous, heterosexual nuclear family with two children." Thus, the film ends up creating, in Europe and North America, a nostalgic fantasy for the old white national working class that has nothing to do with the new precarious class of the present, where postcolonial immigrants, racial minorities, or non-nuclear families headed by working women are becoming the new norm. The appearance of this type of Western precarized working classes in the film would destroy the filmic fantasy that allows the Western progressive audiences to identify with a working class that is not a Western symptom of the impending precarization that even they are enduring or are afraid they will eventually suffer.

It is not a coincidence that, at the end of the film, Kim father and son, separated by the mansion-prison, resort to one of the oldest instantaneous forms of long-distance communication: the Morse code, an anachronistic form characteristic of incipient Western industrialization. This would explain the universally acclaimed sense of class vindication that everyone has enjoyed in the film: as a spectator, one can become—or identify with—the entrapped and outraged precariat (racially homogeneous and morally

conservative) whom Hilary Clinton dismissed in the United States as “deplorable” and, yet, one can remain part of the progressive global upper-middle class viewership who can enjoy the fantasy and spectacle of a political film about a “real working class” without North American or European postcolonial-migratory-precarious-feminized conflictivity and symptomatology, which would destroy the spectatorial Western fantasy altogether. It is no coincidence that the father of the elite family, Park Dong-ik, despises the chauffeur and father of the working-class family, Kim Ki-taek, by making repeated remarks about the latter’s “deplorable low-class odor,” so that, in the final scenes of the film, when Ki-taek, the “deplorable” working-class father, knives his “deploring” Clintonesque elite employer, Dong-ik, the audience celebrates this murder, motivated by class resentment, in all its abject violence. The viewership enjoys class resentment, that is, the resentment of a racially homogeneous, traditional low class towards the neoliberal progressive elite Other—a class that, in the West, also runs the risk of extending its resentment against any racial, ethnic, sexual, or gender minority *qua* Other that enjoys more. Thus, it feels good to be class-resentful as long as the filmic fantasy permits to posit a lost, bygone working class (in the West) as the subject of resentment and violence towards an elite neoliberal Other and its unlawful enjoyment.

In short, this film allows the audience to enjoy the conservative Trumpian resentment of the working class in a deplorable way and, at the same time, to hate (and stab) the neoliberal elite from the distance that the couch and the television set create. This distance ensures that the viewers remain progressive and liberal enough to see and enjoy their fantasy about a story of “real” class conflict and entrapment, as it has not been represented before in the West. This is the political enjoyment achieved by *Parasite* through a global neoliberal version of progressive Orientalism: we enjoy better our own fantasy of class conflict in an oriental setting of Gothic entrapment and resentment than in any Western setting where our class symptoms might become too traumatic. In my analysis, Bong Joon Ho would be the native informant (Asian, Oriental) who simulates or imitates the racially homogeneous patriarchal²¹ representation of the (South Korean) working class for the global West, for its main audience, by resorting to

²¹ Only the youngest kid of the Park family, Da-song, experiences the Gothic conventions in the correct historically way.

nostalgic Trumpian resentment, coded as a fantasy of Gothic entrapment. In short, *Parasite* allows the viewers to feel all the thrills of class conflict, but without being contaminated by its traumatic and symptomatic violence, in a filmic spectacle that is ultimately an oriental mimicry of Western old-fashioned white working-class conflict.²²

In this way, a film that supposedly allows us to see “real class conflict” becomes the one that actually restores a capitalist neoliberal order at a very global level (hence the unprecedented Oscar to a film in a language other than English). *Parasite* enacts a fantasy that keeps us from facing class conflict on a global level. The film itself becomes a global master referent and subject supposed to know that, while telling us how to desire and fantasize about class conflict, actually restores the inevitable and metaphysical status of late capitalism: the more we fantasize about class conflict, the more we are entrapped in the order that legitimizes neoliberal oppression. Thus, Lacan’s warning about the May 1968 movement becomes true in *Parasite*: “What the Western audiences aspire to as revolutionary spectators of *Parasite* is a Master. And they have gotten one!” *Parasite* represents the return of the neoliberal Master and our compliance to its neoliberal desire as embodiment of the late-capitalist big Other.

More generally, even the best “Masters of the Left,” preconized by leftist intellectuals such as Žižek and Badiou, end up enforcing the Gothic fantasy that there is no outside to the neoliberal order and, so, they can only implement changes within the market. From Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales’s “Andean or Bolivarian capitalism” to

²² I have not looked into the reception of this film in China or India yet. It would be important to compare the reception of the film in South Korea before and after the awards received in the West.

The references to the Western film genre and to “Indian” (Native American) representations (from the teepee in the yard, to the murderous toy-size tomahawks) are a sign of an intelligent native who inscribes the West as a childish game that eventually turns traumatic and murderous.

Bong Joon Ho was known for two of his previous films, *The Host* (2006) and the Hollywoodesque blockbuster *Snowpiercer* (2013). It seems that what in *The Host* was a clear denunciation of US imperialism and the complicity of the South Korean government against a working class that had to fend for itself, but managed to prevail in the end, once it has been filtered by the Hollywood conventions of *Snowpiercer*, has ended up becoming, in *Parasite*, a very sophisticated vindication of global neoliberal capitalism.

Further analysis would require a comparison with films such as *The Joker* (2019), *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019) as well as the latest Tarantino film *Once upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019). For a short history of previous foreign films nominated to the Best Picture Oscar category, see Sara Aridi, “These 10 Foreign Language Films Have Been Nominated for Best Picture.” *The New York Times*. Feb. 3, 2020. www.nytimes.com. Access: 2-1-2020.

Jeremy Corbin and Bernie Sander's social democracy, these Masters always end up enforcing a fantasy of class conflict, which in its internal and unescapable staging, only manages to enforce the neoliberal fantasy that an Other enjoys more. Ultimately, their exclusion of the Other in any of its forms—from the progressive neoliberal elite to the “deplorable” post-working-class unemployed precariat, native or migrant—only enforces general aspirations to an authoritarian and reactionary Master who is supposed to know and to enjoy. To turn Lacan on Žižek and Badiou, “their revolutionary aspiration for a Master of the Left has only one possible way of ending, only one: always with the discourse of the authoritarian neoliberal Master, as experience has already shown. What they aspire to as revolutionaries is an authoritarian Master. They shall have one!” This is why it is important to return to the post-2008 revolts to rethink a form of politics that bypasses what Lacan termed a “revolutionary aspiration for a Master.”

The post-2008 Revolts as Self-Symptoms: The Global Real and Destituent Politics

Unlike in the case of *Parasite*, I want to argue that it is impossible to represent political collectives, such as the protagonists of the post-2008 revolts, at this point, due to their own lack of political articulation; one could argue in Hegelian terms that they are a subject in itself but not for itself. They can only be represented—and they can only represent themselves—as the symptom of a global trauma, or as the global irruption of the Real. This is why Hollywood's imagination can only create filmic collective representations in which the revolt is ultimately negative, Other, and its surplus enjoyment is posited as that of an individual (*The Joker*, 2019), a collective (zombie movies, specially *The Walking Dead*, 2010-), an elite class (vampire films, specially *The Twilight series*, 2008-2012), or a social collective turned elite class (mutant movies, specially the *X-Men* series, 2000-2018). This is why Hollywood always represents collectives through a fantasy about an unethical, amoral, or abject Other, and always ends with the latter's violent elimination or subordination to a human positive order, i.e. the market-oriented liberal democracy. So, today's best Hollywood films become elaborate fantasies about symptoms that cannot be represented or are represented negatively as Other.

Similarly, the coverage of the post-2008 revolts in the media are always partial and, ultimately, aim to enforce the fantasy that the masses in revolt are not us, but the Other who enjoys more than us. It is only in the direct and common occupation of the public space—from the digital domain of WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter to the streets, public squares, and highways of towns and cities—that the revolting people represents themselves: the subject of the post-2008 revolts becomes a collective in itself. However, as most critics have pointed out, their symptomatic nature does not allow them to move on to what it should be the next necessary step toward the discourse of the analyst: they do not become a subject for itself, as they do not desire an analyst as object *petit a* cause of their desire. Rather, they articulate and perform, they act out, their negative symptomatic nature, their truth, which, unlike in the discourse of the analyst is not S2, knowledge, but rather a lack of knowledge or a negative knowledge. Conversely, the product is not S1, the Master, but the revolt itself as the impossibility of the Master.

This new scenario points in a negative direction that Žižek, and Lacanian theory in general, has not fully addressed yet as a possibility: a negative politics without a Master or Analyst. Žižek's reservations to such a possibility are well known: active permanent mobilization is untenable and tiresome and so eventually we want to delegate it on a subject supposed to know, who in a communist regime, would not rely on the discourse of the university. Yet, when any progressive claim to a Master is internal to late capitalism and, thus, can be turned into the desire of the capitalist Master—whose embodiment is the neoliberal global elite—there is no possibility for a Master of the Left. Such a leftist desire is already immersed in a neoliberal fantasy about the progressive nature of the Master.

Only Agamben has suggested a new form of politics in globalization, which would escape such a neoliberal fantasy about a progressive Master. In a public lecture given in 2013 in Athens, he introduced the idea of destituent power: a politics of destitution and deposition. As he concludes:

The Security paradigm implies that each dissention, each more or less violent attempt to overthrow its order, become an opportunity to govern them in a profitable direction. This is evident in the dialectics which binds tightly together

terrorism and State in an endless vicious spiral. Starting with [the] French revolution, the political tradition of modernity has conceived of radical changes in the form of a revolutionary process that acts as the *pouvoir constituant*, the «constituent power» of a new institutional order. I think that we have to abandon this paradigm and try to think something as a *puissance destituante*, a «purely destituent power», that cannot be captured in the spiral of security. [...]

To think such a purely destituent power is not an easy task. Benjamin wrote once that nothing is so anarchical as the bourgeois order. In the same sense, Pasolini in his last movie has one of the four Salò masters saying to their slaves: «true anarchy is the anarchy of power». It is precisely because power constitutes itself through the inclusion and the capture of anarchy and anomy, that it is so difficult to have an immediate access to these dimensions, it is so hard to think today something as a true anarchy or a true anomy. I think that a praxis which would succeed in exposing clearly the anarchy and the anomy captured in the Security government technologies could act as a purely destituent power. A really new political dimension becomes possible only when we grasp and depose the anarchy and the anomy of power. But this is not only a theoretical task: it means first of all the rediscovery of a form-of-life, the access to a new figure of that political life whose memory the Security State tries at any price to cancel.²³

I believe that the negative politics of the post-2008 revolts points to a negative scenario where late capitalism, as the symbolic order of a neoliberal ideology, situates the non-elite subject, not within such order, but in its exterior, as radically excluded, so that it stands for the Real that supports and structures such order from without. This also makes necessary to posit a non-barred subject that is, nevertheless, the symptom of itself: the revolting subject is its own traumatic truth, originating in its own trauma of neoliberal exclusion and precarization. Thus, the subjects of the post-2008 revolts do not desire a Master, as they are not hysteric and/or do not respond to the discourse of the hysteric; at the same time their negative politics are not reduced to the revolt in the

²³ Giorgio Agamben. Ibid.

public sphere, but to its way of life, so that it does not have to delegate politics to a Master. Moreover, this requires to assume that, in neoliberalism, the Master is not castrated: the neoliberal class has access, as class and embodiment of the Master, to the *jouissance* of financial capitalism, beyond the law, i.e. as it resorts to corruption, to breaking the law, and to asserting its exceptionalism, in a global state of exception, of which the master signifier has become Donald Trump. If this is so, then the only “revolutionary” politics of the present are negative as they resort to the very mechanism of neoliberal exclusion: destituent power, which, in the case of the revolting subject, is articulated as a way of life rather than as an intermitent politization and occupation of the public sphere.