Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber
The tragedy and the insects

https://www.academia.edu/42243377/
The_tragedy_and_the_insects

theanarchistlibrary.org

The tragedy and the insects

Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber

Film critics appear to be unanimous that Bong Joon-Ho's 2019 film Parasite is a brilliant meditation on social inequality. They're wrong. It is not a movie about social inequality. Or, it is, but this is almost secondary. It is a theological movie, even if based in a religion the director has basically made up, about a God who abandoned us.

In the film, God's place is filled by an architect who designed the house where a rich family live. The house is perfect, spacious, bright, divine. While we only see the architect's own face once, very briefly, on an old black-and-white photograph, his presence is felt throughout the movie.

The film develops in two architectural levels, between which the characters move along endless stairs. The poor are almost exclusively seen descending, the rich going up.

The ambiguity of the title is established from the start. At the very beginning of the film, after we meet what seems a cute comical poor family living in a "semibasement" whose wireless has just been cut of; at some point, a literal parasite, some kind of bug, appears. Before long, an exterminator appears to fumigate the streets of the tawdry neighborhood they live in, and the father instructs his son not to close the window — they can

take advantage to kill their own bugs for free. As a result, the entire family ends up choking on the gas. In other words, the father doesn't yet realize that he and his family are the real parasites. He doesn't understand they already live in hell. As the film goes on, this the fact that they do becomes increasingly impossible to avoid.

One could proceed from here, as many have done, to analyze Parasite as a social critique of capitalist society, which explains how terrible — but potentially reversible — economic conditions can divide people into what seem like two biological classes, forcing some to become cockroaches and others (such those who live in the architect's heavenly creation) to live as gods. But again, this would not be quite accurate. The movie does more than suggest an analogy: it treats the characters as if they actually have become gods and insects, though unusually contemptible insects, and decidedly pathetic gods. The initial parasite is referred to as a "stink beetle." Throughout the movie, whenever the theme of smell recurs, it's always rich people sniffing something on the poor ones that they can't help but find disruptive, unpleasant, and weird: much later, it is precisely when the rich father pauses in the middle of a massacre to sniff in disgust at the poor family that the poor father finally loses his composure and murders him.

Much of the actual plot is ostensibly about the scheming manipulations of the poor family, who insinuate their way into jobs as servants in the wealthy household. But this plot unfolds in a larger context where the rich are constantly sitting in judgement over the poor in their midst, "forced" by circumstances to make decisions on who gets to enter heaven, and who is forcibly expelled. They seem gods. From the perspective of those below they certainly are. But that divinity is entirely dependent on a complete inability to perceive almost anything going on around them: most dramatically, perhaps, the fact that for years now, their lights have been blinking in morse code. While all this has the superficial appearance of social crit-

icism, and the director doesn't seem particularly happy with the social arrangements he presents us with, it's hard to describe the result as exactly "critical". Criticism, after all, implies the possibility that things might be organized otherwise. That in turn means that the present order is in some sense a mistake. Otherwise you might as well be criticizing an insect. A film that naturalizes a state of affairs this completely can only end up sending a reactionary message; and this is precisely what this movie does. There is no hope. The poor regularly betray each other to win the favors of the rich. Appeals to solidarity amongst the oppressed are invariably rejected. Brief flickers of humanity are either mocked, rejected, or come to nothing — or they are punished with brutal violence.

One might even say this is not really a film about human beings at all, or anyway, not creatures that can be judged by human standards. (Again, one does not sit in moral judgment on a cockroach, or even, really, a ghost.) It's ultimately a movie about architecture: both the architecture of its plot, and the physical structures in which the inhabitants move. These structures are displayed not as a set of competing objects — a beautiful house of the rich and decrepit slums of the poor — but as a single maze, inside which people are programmed to move in certain ways: up and down, in light and in dark. This a complicated universe teeming with transitions, windows, smells, levels — so that the relation between spaces has all the intimacy of relations between people. Human relations do not have such intimacy; but the characters do have a similar intimacy with spaces. One of the themes of the movie appears to be how space, materiality (one of the main characters of the story is literally a stone) defines human destinies, to the point of suggesting no one, certainly not the characters, probably not any of us, are able to avoid the roles that have been built inside of us by inhabiting a certain organization of space, one which also places some in hell, and others, in paradise.

One of the themes of the work of Pierre Bourdieu is that the symbolic codes by which human beings operate, our instinctual sense of what's right and proper, all the habits and feelings we so deeply incorporate that it would never occur to us that they are there, are internalized largely through processes of moving about in space. Or more accurately, by moving through the architecture of spaces created by those who shared exactly those same cultural dispositions. To pass through a Medieval cathedral is to absorb an entire cosmology, without ever explicitly knowing it is there: a sense of top and bottom, what's permissible or impossible, about desired spaces and those that horrify us. To move through a traditional Algerian house is to assimilate a series of symbolic schemas: up is to down, as dry is to damp, as cool is too hot, as male is to female… that seem as natural as the very ideas of «dry» or «damp» themselves. We are trapped by our symbolic dispositions. Rich and poor absorb very different ones, and this is one of the main reasons the rich remain rich (as they feel comfortable around people like themselves), and the poor, even if they come into money or opportunity, are invariably found wanting. In Parasite, this spatial determination of class opportunity becomes literal.

At first, we are encouraged to think we're dealing with stock characters in a comedy of manners: an industrious family man and cheerful father, a cunning housekeeper, artsy daughter, caring son. But this is largely to set up the viewer; one expects such a story can only proceed through a series of misunderstandings to end with songs, dances, and reconciliation. Instead, Parasite soon turns out to be a horror movie. Its outcome is as inexorable as the fate of a tragic hero - mass murder and eternal imprisonment — but by priming us to expect playfulness, the director obliges us to come to the slow and uncomfortable realization that the characters are not particularly nice people, since (as they themselves agree, when during a drinking binge they discuss the envy they all feel for the rich family's benevolence), they simply can't afford

in novel form. If so it's a painful, desperate work of poetry, that leaves no room for redemption, as if the post-apocalyptic world that we used to imagine, inhabited only by cockroaches, has already happened, yet none of us have completely noticed yet.

to be–while at the same time creating situations where it's almost impossible not to identify with them anyway. Perhaps this is the essence of horror. The most terrifying creatures, after all, are those that turn you into one of them (vampires, werewolves, zombies…), and perhaps the most terrifying thing anyone can be turned into is an insect (viz., The Fly): since insects are, simultaneously, disgusting, mechanical, and extremely vulnerable. If so, tragedy is the situation where you realize you have always been an insect and didn't know it. You thought you were Agamemnon; then the gods squish you like a bug. (If so, Kafka's Metamorphosis might be considered the most ingenious twist on this theme, since, throughout the book, it's completely unclear whether Josef K actually has been turned into a cockroach, or simply woke up one day convinced that he had.)

If being an insect means to be, effectively, a machine crawling mechanically through spaces not of one's own creation, then all the characters in the film are contemptible insects in one way or another. This is true not just the poor who live underground, but God's chosen, the oblivious rich family, who not only fail to suspect the poor family's sometimes rather obvious machinations, and thus, the real identities of the servants who make their lives possible, but are not even aware they live directly over hell, which the real God (the architect) has constructed directly underneath their infinitely beautiful family nest. It turns out that the architect built a bunker as a refuge in case of Armageddon, but then didn't want to admit it to the new owners. "People are often embarrassed to admit this sort of thing" the former housekeeper remarks. What is one to make of a god who's ashamed of having created hell?

Maybe the only person in this universe who could lay claim to some sort of "humanity" was precisely this architect. It turns out there is a cursed, demonic ghost trapped in this hell, in the form of an ostensibly still-alive middle-aged man. He ended up there in part because his wife was the former housekeeper, in

part, because of debt, business trouble, and the vagaries of the Korean social security system, but ultimately, because of his own surrender to an utter lack of ambition. He watches from below and turns on and off the light every time the chosen residents climb the stairs. In other words he has become an actual mechanism in the house's architecture.

In another district of hell — the poor suburbs of the city, where the poor family's basement home is first seen as a target of random passers-by urinating on the window, then, last seen, as an inundation of floodwater from the sewers literally fills it up, the father of the family first colludes in Machiavellian schemes of advancement, then, finally admits to his son he isn't ultimately any different than the demon in the basement, since he, too, doesn't really have a plan. Plans invariably come to nothing. What's the point? As a result, when the first demon breaks out from hell and dies in a bloody rampage, the father ends up replacing him, condemned to stay in hell forever. (His son is relegated to succeed him as man of the family in the old hell, and vows to someday rescue him, though we all know this is impossible.) New owners take over Paradise — a German family, who were not told about the massacre, and settle in the house, oblivious as the previous owners to what lies below: a spirit-demon who will, for all we know, someday run amok and kill them all.

The critics are right in one sense. Parasite is itself a fantastic piece of architecture, and, in its own way, quite beautiful. Still, we think there's a reason we found ourselves feeling hopeless and slightly dizzy coming out of it. This is a work of theology, a moral drama about the impossibility of morality, since it is about the work of a God who doesn't seem to particularly care what happens to his creation; he just left, sold the place for no apparent reason, and abandoned its denizens to lives predetermined by a structure which even he found slightly embarrassing.

It seems rather ironic, then, that this is being hailed as a critical reflection on social inequality. Compared even to some of the director's earlier work (the Host for instance) it feels more like a shudder of surrender. One need only compare other comparatively bleak reflections from the past: they almost invariably threw out something to break out of the overall architecture of the plot. Dostoevsky's «Notes from underground,» or Crime and Punishment, where the heroes, locked in an unbearably sorrowful and gloomy city spend their lives in ghastly pubs, or walk along the endless dirty channels, is drawing on a rich tradition that does have undeniable elements of social criticism: Korolenko's «Children of the Underground», Gorky's «The Lower Depths», where heroes are similarly tormented in a deadly slums, and turn into half-mad creatures. All this seems to be sending a similar message to Parasite. The difference is that characters in such novels do not simply exist for the sake of the structure. This allows the reader to identify with a crazy-quilt of voices in the city, rich and poor, freaks and angels, as Bakhtin was later to stress, their manners of speech are universes that clash with one another, and argue with the author; much as in a Dickens novel, the critical quality largely comes from the fact that so many of the characters are just so stubbornly weird they embody at least potential universes unto themselves. In Parasite, everything that might seem potentially selfvalidating about the protagonists (the daughter is a budding artist, the son is doggedly loyal…) turns out only to have been introduced to further some line of plot: it turns out to be a building block in the architecture, and nothing more.

Since everything is there to support the architecture, the relationship between rich and poor is not ultimately antagonistic, but rather interdependent - every aspect of the poor is ultimately there to help them trick the rich; the rich are dependent on the poor for their existence. In this sense the movie resembles less a novel than a poem, in the same way that, say, Nikolai Gogol described his Dead Souls as a poem, dressed up