

Ascending the Ladder or Failing to Survive:
Exploring Issues of Social Mobility in *Parasite* and *Knives Out*

Discourse and dialogue pertaining to class struggle, capitalism, and social mobility transcend geographic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. This is the case as no single country can claim the aforementioned issues as being endemic within their borders. Instead, the notion that the rich usually stay rich, while the poor typically become poorer is universally held. Upwards social mobility — the ability to ascend from one social class to another, to leave behind the trappings of a less glamorous life in favor of greater comfort — is overwhelmingly rare. So rare that an American citizen born into the bottom quintile of earnings, “only has [a] 7.8% chance of reaching the top 20% when they grow up.”¹ In fact, the chance that a “child from the bottom quintile” will continue to remain in said category is unfortunately, the “highest in the United States” when compared to other North American and European countries.² When looking at social mobility in South Korea, it is initially difficult to trace upwards (or downwards) social movement due to the fact that approximately 40% of the population holds three surnames: “Kim, Lee, and Park.”³ That being said, a closer look at laws and practices surrounding education and marriage reveal that social mobility in Korea is likely “no faster than in other countries” and in fact, may be “potentially slower.”⁴ This state of affairs makes it possible to look at, and compare Rian Johnson’s *Knives Out* with Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite*. Both films, despite their narrative and structural differences, explore the friction that exists between people of the working class and those of the upper class. Both films probe at the possibility of social mobility. That being said, in *Knives Out*, upwards social mobility is realizable for Marta Cabrera. In *Parasite*, the opposite is true. This is the case as the Kim family only temporarily experiences a slight reversal of fortunes before their house of cards comes crashing down. This paper will illustrate that the family-

¹ “Americans Overestimate Social Mobility in Their Country,” *The Economist* (The Economist Newspaper), accessed May 29, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/02/14/americans-overestimate-social-mobility-in-their-country>.

² Alberto Alesina, Stefanie Stantcheva, and Edoardo Teso, “Intergenerational Mobility and Preferences for Redistribution,” *American Economic Review* 108, no. 2 (2018): pp. 521-554, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20162015.532>.

³ Gregory Clark et al., “Social Homogeneity and Mobility” (Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 182-198, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5hhrkm.13>, 196.

⁴ Gregory Clark et al., “Social Homogeneity and Mobility” (Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 182-198, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5hhrkm.13>, 198.

friendly nature of *Knives Out* coupled with the fact that having Harlan Thrombey's support endows Marta Cabrera with the ability to ascend the social ladder. In contrast, *Parasite*'s more mature approach paints a bleaker picture — one where the Park family is kind to the Kims, but is unwilling to see them as being anything other than second class citizens. Simply put, this essay will investigate conventions of genre, MPAA ratings, relationships between the haves and the have-nots, and the concept of intergenerational wealth transfer in order to elucidate why upward social mobility is possible in *Knives Out* and utterly impossible in *Parasite*.

In *Knives Out*, despite the Thrombeys and their threats and subterfuge, Marta Cabrera is able to keep all that Harlan Thrombey has bequeathed to her. On the other hand, the final arc of *Parasite* leaves one member of the Kim family dead and one exiled to a hidden bunker. The remaining two members of the Kim family — Chung-sook and Ki-woo — are forced to reckon with their loss and have no choice but to carry out their lives in the squalor of the semi-basement. *Parasite* allows Ki-woo to retain his ambition — to dream that one day his hard work and education might empower him enough to purchase the Park's home and save his father from the confines of the bunker. That being said, the harsh realities explored in *Parasite* make Ki-woo's fantasies seem far-fetched and unlikely at best, and utterly inconceivable at worst. The viability of upwards social mobility in *Knives Out* versus *Parasite* partially boils down to differences in genre and MPAA ratings. *Knives Out*, as per the MPAA, is a PG-13 whodunit — a murder mystery with comedic elements that is targeted to appeal to adults and teenagers alike.⁵ *Knives Out* is a fun romp where the fallout of a class struggle is easier to stomach. While Harlan and Fran both die, their deaths are quickly avenged. It is also critical to note that neither death is particularly gruesome — in fact, CGI was used to “digitally paint out some of the blood” in certain scenes.⁶ It is therefore clear that the goal of *Knives Out* as a PG-13 movie is to appeal to a wide audience. This aspect of *Knives Out* ensures that there be a happy ending for the protagonists and a fitting punishment for the villains. Benoit Blanc is able to solve the mystery and arrest Ransom Thrombey, while Marta is given the keys to the castle and the remainder of the Thrombeys are left dumbfounded at their inability to retain their wealth, power, and status.

⁵ Josh Weber, “Knives Out: 10 Things We Learned From The Director's Commentary,” ScreenRant (Screen Rant, March 7, 2020), <https://screenrant.com/knives-out-behind-the-scenes-facts/>.

⁶ “Knives Out,” IMDb (IMDb.com, 2019), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8946378/trivia?ref_=tt_trv_trv.

Parasite is a R rated thriller aimed at more mature audiences. In fact, *Parasite*'s own marketing campaign positions it as simultaneously being both "darkly hilarious" and downright "heart-wrenching."⁷ Situating *Parasite* in the landscape of film and cinema as being a more adult-oriented film allows for a less heavy-handed take on issues of class and mobility. In *Parasite* it's hard to know which family to root for — the Kims exploit the naïveté of the Parks, and the Parks succeed in only seeing the Kims as a commodity. Both families cause strife in the lives of Moon-gwang and Geun-sae. The Parks fire Moon-gwang at the drop of a hat, and the Kim family conspires against both Moon-gwang and Geun-sae in an attempt to eliminate the competition. *Parasite* racks up quite the body count as Dong-ik, Ki-jung, Moon-gwang, and Geun-sae are all left dead. The audience is also left to wonder if Da-song survives his seizure, and if Ki-taek ever escapes the the four oppressive walls of the underground bunker. With an R rating *Parasite* is more free than *Knives Out* to crush the hopes and dreams of the characters, and to leave the audience with feelings of discomfort and unease. In the simplest of words, *Parasite* is wholly brutal, and as the movie ends it becomes clear that there are no winners, only losers — and this includes the audience in addition to the characters.

It is also important to consider the relationships in each film between those with privilege and those without. In *Knives Out*, Marta is Harlan's nurse, friend, and close confidant — this is evident during their game of Go and becomes even clearer when the two refer to morphine as being "the good stuff." As the story develops it is obvious to the audience that Marta cares far more for Harlan than his actual family and that her grief over his death is genuine. Harlan's intent to protect and help Marta is integral to the development of the plot. This is the case as Harlan uses the final moments of his life to craft an escape plan for Marta in an effort to help her maintain her innocence. Harlan's close relationship with Marta nullifies the attempts of the other members of the Thrombey family. None of their feeble attempts to wrench away Marta's inheritance are successful because Harlan and Marta's friendship empowers Marta to fight for what she deserves. As the movie progresses, she realizes that Harlan's resources are hers and that her failure to use them to appropriately defend herself only functions to cheapen Harlan's dying demands. Without Harlan's support and adoration there is no means by which Marta can ever

⁷ "NEON," *Parasite*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.parasite-movie.com/synopsis/>.

seek to ascend upwards socially. This is the case as the window for Marta' upwards movement only opens when she and the family learns about the contents of Harlan's will.

In *Parasite* there is no close bond between the Park family and the Kim family. This is the case as the Parks view each member of the Kim clan as being commodities — as individuals defined by their jobs alone. For instance, Dong-ik remarks to his wife that while Ki-taek is a good driver, he sometimes comes too close to crossing the line and speaking out of turn. The matriarch of the Park family, Yeon-gyo, almost instantly recoils after shaking hands with Ki-taek — fearing that his hands might be unwashed and contaminated with tuberculosis. The youngest member of the Park family, Da-song remarks that all the new employees, “Kevin” and “Jessica” included — smell the same. This prompts the Kim family to discuss the fact that there is no way to escape the way they smell unless they can finally leave the four walls of the semi-basement behind. Only Da-hye sees Ki-woo as being more than her tutor — but her interest in him is contingent on his ability to maintain his identity as the worldly and university-educated Kevin. Even if Da-hye can manage to look past Ki-woo's deception, to accept him for who he is, the attitudes and actions of Dong-ik and Yeon-gyo would likely stand in the way of any future romance. This ideological and social distance between the Kim family and the Park family forces Ki-woo to imagine a reality where in order to maintain his relationship with Da-hye, he would have to hire actors to play his mother and father in order to truly sell the idea that he belongs within the world of the wealthy. In *Knives Out*, the Thrombeys attempt to relate to Marta — they fail consistently by peppering micro-aggressions in to their conversations, but they try. In *Parasite*, no such attempts are made. This lack of reliability between the haves and the have nots makes social ascension in the world of *Parasite* that much harder. If there is no scope for honest and earnest conversation, how can wealth and power ever be reallocated? How can a girl like Da-hye ever carry on a relationship with Ki-woo?

According to Howard P. Chudacoff, the work done by historians and anthropologists in recent decades reveals that the “acquisition of property” is often intimately connected to an “individual's persistence in a community” and the ability to achieve “upward social mobility.”⁸

⁸ Howard P. Chudacoff, “Success and Security: The Meaning of Social Mobility in America,” *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (1982): pp. 101-112, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2701821>, 102.

This is a key point to take into consideration when looking at both *Parasite* and *Knives Out* as both films grapple with issues (or in the case of *Parasite*, dreams) of property ownership. In *Knives Out*, Harlan Thrombey's choice to leave Marta Cabrera the inheritance in place of his family is supremely significant. This is because the notion of inheritance is far more complicated than the passing on of material wealth. Instead, the concept of inheritance further includes the passing on of "concepts of intergenerational mobility of socioeconomic status" and access to knowledge about "social reproduction of status and culture."⁹ In fact, the first few seconds of the film seamlessly establish the inherent ties that exist between the accumulation of wealth and the ability to wield and exercise power. This is the case as the movie begins with a shot of Harlan's mansion, steeped in fog and isolated in its grandeur. The sheer magnitude of the mansion is clear because it dwarves the bare trees and the two large dogs in its immediate vicinity. The shot then cuts to a close up of a coffee mug. The text on the mug reads: "My House. My Rules. My Coffee!!" The juxtaposition of the two shots clearly conveys to the audience the importance of the house, and the notion that the ownership of the Thrombey Estate confers power. At the reading of the will, when the family learns that Harlan has left his assets, both liquid and otherwise, to Marta Cabrera, they put aside their differences and unite against Marta. Their motives are transparent and it becomes obvious that keeping the house and Harlan's other assets within the the family safeguards the social standing of the Thrombeys. The final shot of the movie depicts Marta standing on the balcony, looking down on the remaining Thrombeys with Harlan's mug in hand. This shows that the Thrombeys are now beneath Marta, and that her ability to acquire Harlan's wealth and assets positions her to better take care of her sister and her undocumented mother. *Knives Out* in allowing the immigrant to win helps to subvert the whiteness often associated with old money and property ownership. As a result, the implications of Marta's upwards social movement are far-reaching and impactful.

Unlike *Knives Out*, in *Parasite* there is no inheritance left behind by Dong-ik that the audience is made aware of. Instead, it is assumed that Yeon-gyo, Da-hye, and Da-song (in the event that he survives his seizure) are able to relocate to another home either by way of Dong-

⁹ Robert B. Avery and Michael S. Rendall, "Lifetime Inheritances of Three Generations of Whites and Blacks," *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 5 (2002): pp. 1300-1346, <https://doi.org/10.1086/344840>.

ik's fortune, or the fortunes of other family members and associates. The audience is never truly left to wonder about the remaining members of the Park family and their fate — this is key in emphasizing the idea that the rich, regardless of the obstacles they face, often have the means and the resources to preserve their wealth and status. The death of Dong-ik completely erases the chance of a romantic future for Da-hye and Ki-woo — which only serves to further shatter the chances that the Kim family has at upwards social movement. For the Kim family, the potential relationship between Ki-woo and Da-hye allows them to imagine a reality where they can someday live in the Park family home freely — enjoying the large expansive rooms, the expensive liquor that lines the shelves, and the sunlight that illuminates the entirety of the garden. Dong-ik's death further condemns the Kim family as it drives Ki-taek into permanent hiding. In the final scenes of the film, Ki-woo dreams of a better future — but at this point, the audience knows better than to hope for more. There is a somber realization amongst most who watch *Parasite* that there is no reality in which Ki-woo can ever rescue his father and reunite his family. *Parasite* offers no respite for the poor — instead the Kim family stagnates in their social strata, forever cursed to endure the musty, poorly lit semi-basement.

While both films satirize the lives of the wealthy and paint a dark picture regarding the lives of the poor, *Knives Out* prioritizes fun and in doing so allows for a female character of color to ascend into the ranks of the rich and powerful. Marta's triumph in the final moments of *Knives Out* versus the bleak or rather intentionally ambiguous ending of *Parasite* speaks volumes on the type of audience each film was created for. While quite unrealistic and fantastical, *Knives Out* imagines a world where the good are able to win based on their merit alone. Conversely, *Parasite* mirrors the realities of capitalism by depicting the complex relationship between the Kim family, the Park family, and another unexpected set of parasites. *Parasite* does away with what it means to be a hero and what it means to be a villain — instead there are only victims of greed and capitalism. As a result, there is no real ability to move upwards or downwards in the world of *Parasite*. This is because *Parasite* reflects the reality that social mobility is often slow and uncommon — that there is no plan that gets an individual from point A to point B seamlessly.

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