Parasite, the discussion

Bong Joon-ho, 2019. A discussion guide in six parts: the story, the big questions, then the film's own frames for camera, sound, mise-en-scène and editing.



The first shot of the film · 0:00:45

You have seen the whole film. Bring this guide to class on Thursday. We start with what happens, because you cannot read a film you have not followed. Then we move to the questions the film leaves open, and then to the frames.

Every frame in this guide has a time under it. The times come from the copy we watched, so they may be a few seconds out in another copy. Each frame comes with one question. Answer it out loud first, then in your notes.

PART 1

What happens

The plan

1 Each of the Kims gets a job in the Park house. How does each one get in? Which lie is the cleverest, and which is the cruelest?

2 Why does Mrs Park trust the Kims so quickly? What does she believe about the people who recommend them?

3 Moon-gwang loses her job because of a peach. Who else does the plan hurt?

The house

4 The Parks go camping, and the Kims drink in the living room. How do the Kims talk about the family that pays them?

5 Moon-gwang rings the doorbell in the rain. Why do the two poor families fight each other instead of working together?

6 Moon-gwang's husband has lived under the house for years. What does it mean that the Parks never knew?

The line

7 Mr Park likes that his driver never crosses the line. What is the line in this house, and who draws it?

8 Hidden under the living room table, Ki-taek hears Mr Park describe his smell. Why does this hurt more than anything else he has had to do?

9 At the party, Mr Park covers his nose. Ki-taek attacks him a moment later. Why then?

The ending

10 Ki-woo writes a letter to his father and plans to earn enough money to buy the house. Do you believe he will?

11 The last shot is the same window as the first. What has changed, and what has not?

PART 2

The big questions

These have no single answer. Take a side, and point at a scene to defend it.



Up to the Parks · 0:13:06



Down from the Parks · 1:33:00

1 Who is the parasite?

The Kims live off the Parks. The Parks cannot cook, clean, drive or teach their own children without other people. Moon-gwang's husband lives off both. Can a family be the host and the parasite at the same time?

2 Is anyone in this film a bad person?

Every family in the film is trying to survive, and people still die. If no single person is to blame, what is?

3 Does money make people kind?

> *Money is an iron. Those creases all get smoothed out by money.* CHUNG-SOOK

Chung-sook says Mrs Park is nice because she is rich. Ki-taek also says that rich people have no creases on them. Is kindness easier when you have money? If it is, is it still kindness?

4 Can you plan a life?

> *You know what kind of plan never fails? No plan.* KI-TAEK

Ki-taek says this in a shelter full of people who lost their homes that night. Is it wisdom, or is it giving up? After that night, does anyone's plan work?

5 What can you not wash off?

The Kims change their names, their clothes and their stories. They cannot change their smell. What marks where a person comes from, and can it ever be removed?

6 Can anyone climb?

The film is full of stairs. The Parks live at the top of the hill. The Kims live below the street, and Moon-gwang's husband lives below the Parks' house. Look at the two frames above. Does the film believe anyone can move up?

Camera

Name what the camera did, in the syllabus's word. Then say what it does to you.



The first shot

0:00:45

ESTABLISHING SHOT · A FRAME WITHIN THE FRAME · TILT

The camera looks out through the semi-basement window at the height of the street. The shot holds, then tilts down to find Ki-woo on his phone.

Where does the film put you before you meet anyone?



Up to the house

0:13:06

LOW ANGLE

Ki-woo climbs the last steps into the Parks' garden. The camera is below him, looking up into the sun.

Why does our first sight of the Parks' world look up at it?



The interview

0:14:30

OVER-THE-SHOULDER SHOT

We sit behind Mrs Park. Ki-woo faces her, and us, across the table.

Whose side of the table are we on? Who is being tested?



The back seat

0:38:40

POINT OF VIEW · FRAMING IN THE MIRROR

The camera sits in the back of the car, where Mr Park sits. We see the back of Ki-taek's head, the road ahead, and the rear-view mirror above him.

Who is watching whom in this car?



The underpass

1:32:40

LONG SHOT · DEEP SPACE

On the walk home in the rain, the Kims pass through an underpass. They are small, and the tunnel runs away behind them.

How does their size in the frame change how you feel about them?



The shelter

1:38:55

HIGH ANGLE · CLOSE

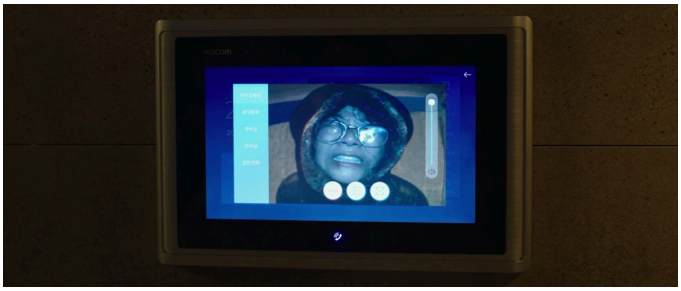
Ki-taek and Ki-woo lie on the floor of a gym, among families who lost their homes in the same storm.

The camera looks down on them. What else does it let you see beside them?

PART 4 · LESSON 04

Sound

A still cannot make a sound. Remember what you heard at each of these moments, and name it.



The doorbell

1:03:55

DIEGETIC SOUND

The Kims are alone in the house. Moon-gwang rings the bell in the rain, and her voice comes through the small speaker of the intercom.

What happens to the room when the bell rings? What had the room sounded like a minute before?



Under the table

1:26:36

DIALOGUE · SOUND PERSPECTIVE · SILENCE

The Parks settle on the sofa. The Kims are hidden under the long table in front of them. They must make no sound, and they hear every word.

Where is the listener in this scene? What does Ki-taek hear that he was never meant to hear?



The rain

1:34:50

DIEGETIC, AMBIENT SOUND

Water pours down the steps as the Kims walk home. The same storm is falling on the Parks' lawn.

What does the rain sound like at the Parks' house, and what does it sound like here?



The peach

0:40:21

NON-DIEGETIC MUSIC · SCORE

The plan to remove Moon-gwang plays under a grand piece of Baroque-style music, written for the film by Jung Jae-il and called "The Belt of Faith".

Nobody in the film hears this music. Why give a cruel plan music this grand?

Listen again at home. Pick one of these four moments and play it with your eyes closed. Write down every sound you hear, then name each one: diegetic or non-diegetic, near or far.

PART 5 · LESSON 05

Mise-en-scène

Setting, props, lighting, costume. Everything in the frame was put there on purpose.



0:07:25



1:37:25



2:04:32

The rock

PROP · MOTIF

A friend gives the Kims a scholar's rock that is meant to bring wealth. In the flood, Ki-woo lifts it out of the water. At the end, he puts it back in a stream.

What does the rock mean in each frame?



The toilet

1:36:45

SETTING

The Kims' toilet sits on a ledge, the highest point in their home. In the flood, Ki-jung sits on its lid.

What does the set tell you about this family before anyone speaks?



The glass wall

1:14:10

SETTING · FRAMING

The Parks' living room: a long sofa, bare surfaces, and one wide window full of lawn.

Compare it with the Kims' window. What does each family see when it looks out?



The bunker

1:07:30

LIGHTING · COLOR

The corridor under the house is bare concrete, lit green by fluorescent tubes.

Compare this light with the light in the Parks' kitchen. Who lives in which light?



The tent

1:25:45

PROPS · LIGHTING

Da-song camps in his tent on the lawn during the storm. His parents watch it through the glass.

On the same night the Kims' home floods, the Parks' son sleeps outside for fun. What does the tent mean to each family?



The portrait wall

0:19:05

SETTING · PROPS

Mrs Park shows Ki-woo her son's painting. It hangs beside the formal family portrait.

What do the two pictures say about what this family wants you to see?



The party

1:47:05

COSTUME

Ki-taek and Mr Park wear feathered headdresses for Da-song's birthday game.

Both men are in costume. Who is performing, and for whom?

PART 6 · LESSON 06

Editing

Where the cuts fall, how fast they come, and what the film puts side by side.



The flat · 0:42:03



The car · 0:42:11

Rehearsal and performance

CROSS-CUTTING · MONTAGE

The film cuts back and forth between the flat, where the family rehearses from a script, and the car, where Ki-taek tells the story to Mrs Park. The whole plan runs about fifty shots in under five minutes.

Why show the rehearsal and the performance at the same time? How does the speed of the cutting make the plan feel?



1:32:40



1:33:00



1:34:50



1:36:45

The walk home

SEQUENCE · CONTINUITY

These four frames come from four minutes of the film, in this order: the underpass, the steps, the water on the steps, the flooded flat.

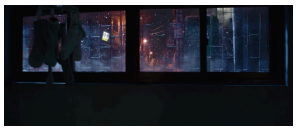
Watch the order of the places. Does any shot in the sequence take the Kims back up?



0:00:45



2:05:45



2:06:36

The last cut

CUT TO BLACK · BOOKENDING

Ki-woo imagines the day his father walks up out of the basement into the sunlit house. The screen goes black. The last shot is the window from the first shot, at night, in the snow, and the camera tilts down to Ki-woo.

Why end on the same window? What does the cut to black do to the dream before it?

After today. Your Parasite post is set at the end of this lesson: six frames, three lines each, and one paragraph on how the camera builds the difference between the two families. It is due on the blog before P6 on Wednesday 23 September.