Nature Will Not Be Ignored

Ecology and Neoliberalism in the Cinema of Bong Joon-ho

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the filmography of Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho [Pong Chun-ho], and to provide a limited textual analysis of each film divided across two categories: the “explicitly ecological” and “implicitly ecological”. The intent is to, by viewing all of Bong’s films leading up to his critical and commercial success *Parasite*, argue that *Parasite* is as much an environmental film as it is critical of neoliberalism and globalization, both of which are common readings of not only *Parasite*, but all of Bong’s work.

The findings are that while *Parasite* avoids overt and exaggerated displays of eco-destruction visible in his Sci-fi films, the film still displays a conscious environmental awareness. The rainstorm featured in the second act of the film can be viewed not only through a local lens as an example of the dichotomy between wealthy and poor families in South Korea as it pertains to environmental crises, but as a microcosm of how climate change stands to impact the financially disenfranchised across the globe as climate shifts continue to grow.
Keywords: Bong Joon-ho, Korean Cinema, Ecology, Environmentalism, South Korea, Neoliberalism, Capitalism, The Host, Parasite, Snowpiercer, Okja, South Korea, Pollution, Barking Dogs Never Bite, Mother, Cli-fi, climate change,
1. **Introduction**

1.1 **Background**

At the 92nd Academy Awards held on February 9th 2020, the name on everybody’s lips was South Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho [Pong Chunho]. With his film *Parasite* (*Kisaengch'ung*, Bong Joon-ho, 2019) Bong not only became the first Korean filmmaker to win the award for Best Director, but also managed to win the award for Best International Feature Film, Original Screenplay and most impressively Best Feature Film. Perhaps *Parasite*’s historic achievement as the first non-English language feature to win Best Picture should not have come as such a surprise, considering that the film had already become the first Korean film to receive the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival a year prior. An achievement which ended up setting the standard for a stellar awards season. Nevertheless, Bong Joon-ho had solidified his reputation as an A-list director, both domestically within South Korea and internationally.

For those already familiar with his work, the themes at the forefront of *Parasite*’s narrative were nothing new for the filmmaker. Topics such as bureaucratic oppression, institutional corruption, ineptitude and immorality and lack of accountability as a result of these matters are universal themes observable throughout all of Bong’s work. Long before the story of the low-income Kim family infiltrating the household of the wealthy Park family, journalist and critic Nam Lee,
author of *The Films of Bong Joon-ho* describes the sociopolitical angle of Bong’s filmography as follows: “[h]is works explore the problems of Korea’s social system, reveal political and moral corruption and social injustice, and (in)directly address unresolved issues in Korean history.”¹

Yes, Bong’s films are undeniably critical of the contemporary state of the world and South Korean society in particular, yet as Lee elaborates “[Bong’s] work remains squarely in the realm of commercial entertainment, achieving wide appeal through his appropriation of Hollywood genres.”² His films frequently feature issues directly linked to globalization, the complicated relationship shared between South Korea and the United States and the neoliberal economic forces at the center of all these issues. Bong’s criticism of neoliberal South Korea in the post IMF-bailout-era in particular is a subject which is often highlighted in both reviews and scholarly texts.

An aspect of Bong’s filmography which is rarely given focus however is how Bong’s films frame and utilize ecology and nature, an odd oversight as it is so often directly linked to the neoliberal-critical narratives at the center of the films. While Bong’s three science fiction films are undeniably definable as what is often coined as “Cli-Fi”: climate aware science fiction, Bong’s less fantastical works are rarely discussed as they relate to nature, both ecologically speaking as well as human environmental impact.³ Be it a serial killer compelled to kill after it rains or a professor desperately attempting to attain tenure being disturbed by a dog’s nonsensical barking, Bong’s films never allow the characters or the spectator to shut the natural world outside of the theater out. Or to allow themselves to forget their own place within it, for that matter.

**1.2 Purpose of Study and Method**

Written works on Bong Joon-ho’s films were in abundance both within and outside of the Korean discourse even before the critical and commercial success of *Parasite*. Yet surprisingly

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² Lee, Nam, 8.
few authors have dedicated space in their writings to discuss Bong’s relationship to themes of ecology and nature. Due to this, how these themes permeate Bong’s films along with the concepts of neoliberalism and globalization, subjects framed as being key to Bong’s work, also remain mostly unexplored in the larger scholarly discussion.

The purpose of this thesis is to fill this gap and contribute to the overall discussion of the cinema of Bong Joon-ho. To examine not only how his ability to inject social commentary into his narratives has become an expected part of his filmmaking process, but also how mankind’s relationship with the natural forces both surrounding us as well as those inside of ourselves play an equally important, yet under-discussed element in Bong’s cinematic oeuvre. The primary aim will be to examine Bong’s filmography and by concluding with his most recent success, Parasite argue how all the ecological themes present in Bong’s previous work; be it explicit as in his high-concept science fiction films or implicit as in Memories of Murder (Sarinŭ Ch’uŏk, Bong Joon-ho, 2003) or Mother (Madŏ, Bong Joon-ho, 2009) resulted in a film which combines environmentally aware cinema with a contemporary neoliberal-critical narrative which took the world by storm. Along with this, the implications of what the international phenomenon created by Parasite may entail will be raised.

In order to achieve the desired conclusion, this thesis will be divided into three primary sections. Rather than presenting Bong Joon-ho’s films in chronological order, this study will instead have them divided into the previously eluded to categories of “explicitly ecological” and “implicitly ecological”, followed by a section dedicated to a textual analysis of Parasite where themes and observations brought up in Bong’s other films are applied to Bong’s most recent and commercially successful film. The films included in the initial category “Explicitly Ecological”, The Host (Koemul, Bong Joon-ho, 2006), Snowpiercer (Bong Joon-ho, 2013) and Okja (Bong Joon-ho, 2017) are those defined by Korean film critic Lee Young-cheol [Ri Yŏng-ch’yŏl] as being the films in Bong’s filmography which “clearly reveal who pollutes nature.” Lee also classifies these three works as films about “Girls intending to heal nature” [Ch’ayŏn-ŭl hoebokharyŏnün sonyŏdŭl],

further emphasizing their shared ecologically focused narratives. Additionally, Bong’s segment in the French anthology film *Tokyo!* (Michel Gondry, Leo Carax, Bong Joon-ho, 2008), *Shaking Tokyo* will also be included in this category despite being undiscussed entirely by Lee Young-cheol. This decision is due to the film’s entire narrative revolving around a naturally occurring phenomenon and how it disrupts societal norms, warranting its inclusion.

A common trait outside of Lee’s designation is that all of these works contain science fiction elements as well, most likely due to the Sci-Fi genre’s ease in ability to convey allegorical messaging.

The second, shorter section: “Implicitly Ecological” will discuss the remaining of Bong’s films, sans *Parasite*, exploring how themes and observations made pertaining to the works included in the previous section can be applied to Bong’s other, less fantastical, grounded works.

Consider the structure of the essay as a form of mathematical formula, in which the two former categories equal *Parasite* as the formula’s solution. That just as how 2 + 2 will logically equate to 4, themes and concepts which permeate all of Bong’s filmography logically result in a film such as *Parasite*. A point of note is that while the works discussed are presented in a non-chronological order, within their individual segments they will however be presented in order of release. Primarily as to be able to chart any noteworthy developments of potential value for the thesis, as well as to minimize the risk of confusion.

Along with these segments, it will be necessary to provide a brief introductory segment both providing some necessary South Korean history as well as contemporary South Korea’s relationship with issues of environment and ecology.

**Note:** In order to limit the scope of this paper, Bong’s short films, as well as films which he has co-written the screenplays for such as *Antarctic Journal* (*Namguk Ilgi*, Yim Pil-sung, 2005) and *Sea Fog* (*Haemu*, Shim Sung-bo, 2014) will not be discussed. The one exception to this will be *Shaking Tokyo*, as it is still part of a feature length film.
1.3 Previous Research & The Cinema of Bong Joon-ho

As previously mentioned, writings on Bong’s work exist in a plethora of various forums both from Korean as well as international scholars, critics and filmmakers. For the purpose of this study, a primary source will be the aforementioned book *The Films of Bong Joon-ho* by Nam Lee. Throughout her book, Lee determines several factors which are relevant to issues discussed in this thesis. Among the most beneficial of these is Lee’s observation that Bong’s films all tend to fall under the storytelling umbrella she has coined as a “narrative of failure”. Meaning plots where while the absolute worst potential scenario is not where the story concludes, it never ends with the saccharinely sweet and satisfactory victories which Bong’s contemporary Hollywood counterparts tend to do.⁶ For instance, while the family in Bong’s first Sci-Fi work, *The Host* overcome their differences and kill the monster, eldest brother Gang-du’s [Kang-du] daughter, who they have fought to save, does not survive. Likewise, in *Memories of Murder*, the two at-odds detectives develop a more functional relationship, yet they nonetheless fail to identify the murderer.

Lee also recognizes a “Leitmotif of Misrecognition” which penetrates all of Bong’s work. People and objects are mislabeled and incorrectly recognized consistently in Bong’s narratives. This tendency, which Bong himself admits “is important in my films,” is echoed by his biographer Jung Ji-youn [Jŏng Ji-yŏn], who is also a source of note.⁷ These observations within Bong’s work will, along with theology scholar Minjung Noh’s [No Min-chŏng] article *Parasite as Parable: Bong Joon-ho’s Cinematic Capitalism* in which she examines Bong’s films from the perspective of how they are applicable to the theory that neoliberalism has transformed capitalism into the modern-day religion of the masses will be of importance.⁸

Besides Nam Lee’s encompassing book, the paper *Pong Chunhoŭi yŏnghwa, changnŭ chayŏnida* [The Genre of Bong Joon-ho’s Films is Nature] by Lee Young-cheol, in which Lee examines the films of Bong Joon-ho with a focus on how they relate to nature will be an essential source.⁹ Lee argues not only that Bong’s films are all intrinsically linked to nature throughout their narrative

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⁶ Lee, Nam, 63.
⁸ Noh, Min-jung, “Parasite as Parable: Bong Joon-ho’s Cinematic Capitalism”, *Cross Currents* vol. 70, NO 3, 249.
⁹ Lee, Young-cheol, 59-82.
content, but also through editing and cinematographic choices. Lee also argues that while a superficial reading of Bong’s work can easily result in a conclusion that women are merely violated and victims in his films, they are actually at the heart of his filmmaking ideals, both as actors within the narratives as well as evidence of mankind’s misdeeds against nature.¹⁰

One aspect of note regarding Lee’s analysis is that it predates the release of Parasite, yet does mention it as being in production at the time of the article’s writing. Lee ends his appraisal of Okja (Bong Joon-ho, 2017) by saying that “in a capitalist society the individual bourgeoisie’s violence and power cannot be overwon,” ending the segment admitting that he “cannot know how [these themes] will unfold in Bong Joon-ho’s films in the future.” This appraisal and inability to include Parasite in his essay allows this thesis to attempt to add to Lee’s argument.¹¹

To expand on Lee Young-cheol’s observation of the inability to overwin the violence and power of capitalism in Bong’s films, the argument can also be made that the cinema of Bong, no matter the genre or number of environmental themes or language contain a cautionary, eco-awareness. A sense of understanding that whether it is our own personal instincts, the environment that surrounds us or even the weather’s mercilessness, in the end no matter our place in the unforgiving system of neoliberal capitalism, we are all at the mercy of forces beyond ourselves. We are all part of a structure even grander in design than our families, cities and nations, and no matter how much some of us may try, nature will not be ignored, and any damage we do to nature will leave a mark. It is through this lens which this thesis will be analyzing the selected films.

1.4 South Korea and Environmentalism

To discuss ecology and environment in Bong’s films, one must naturally put his films within a local environmental context. The Republic of Korea saw a near miraculous increase in average income and development of industry during the reign of Park Chung-hee [Pak Chŏng-hŭi], transforming the nation from a poor, globally ignored country into an industrial powerhouse impossible to disregard. As Choong Nam Kim writes “It took Korea only 11 years (1966-1976)

¹⁰ Lee, Young-cheol, 65.
¹¹ Lee, Young-cheol, 76.
to double its real income per person, whereas it took Japan 34 years (1885-1919).” Elaborating, “[t]he big push for development of heavy and chemical industries became the basis for the comprehensive development of a self-reliant economic structure that ultimately made Korea competitive with Japan and other advanced countries.”

This reliance on heavy industry, and eventual expansion into the technology sector while a clear route for Korea to become a competitive economy on the world stage, also brought with it a multitude of environmental issues which still plague the country. Despite the fact that the government has set several goals for the country to combat both climate change and pollution in recent years, much remains to be done.\(^\text{13}\) As of 2021 Korea was still the “the world's leader in plastic consumption per capita,” the average Korean consuming 460 single-use plastic bags in a year cited as an example.\(^\text{14}\)

Along with this, the nation’s inability to curb its air pollution issues despite several new regulations and legislation imposed through government policy, can be argued help perpetuate an instilled feeling of helplessness in those in the citizenry concerned with environmental issues.\(^\text{15}\) A report in the International Journal of Labour Research concluded that as of 2012 “the focus of Green New Deal policies in the Republic of Korea has not been on the protection of the environment and the creation of decent green jobs. These policies have rather been designed as a green façade for policies of economic growth through technology development and export.”\(^\text{16}\)

This type of assessment, while by no means unique to South Korean attempts at curbing manmade impact on the environment, can certainly be seen as yet another example of reason for distrust in government protection and evidence of inaction or unwillingness to attempt to tackle issues of ecological origin if it risks harming economic interests.


Korean citizens still remember the hardships they faced in the past and what was needed to be sacrificed to gain democracy, peace and relative economic stability. They also recall how often something may seem assured, only to be stolen by forces beyond control. Be it emancipation from the Japanese leading to the fracturing of the Korean Peninsula, democracy being stifled by Park Chung-hee or most recently, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis resulting in the forced opening of the domestic market to foreign interests, skepticism of the biggest perpetrators of pollution as well as those attempting to regulate said actors is an understandable attitude to take. Bong’s films certainly do, at least.

One final point worth making before the textual analysis is begun is to broach the subject of neoliberal capitalism and ecology as it stands in our contemporary society. While politicians and companies which benefit and endorse the free market and liberalization of financial decisions, control of assets and weakening of “big governments” frequently make claims of privatization and free market responsibility being an adequate body of regulation and preservation of ecological structures and ecosystems,¹⁷ this thesis is written with understanding of Noh Minjung’s assertion that “[c]apitalism is not a religion of salvation,”¹⁸ and that as it currently stands, the free market is at odds with attempts to curb environmental destruction.¹⁹

1.5 Note on the Transcription & Translations
As this essay is concerned with films part of an international discourse, nearly all works and individuals cited and discussed have widely accepted romanizations. Therefore, rather than adhering strictly to the McCune-Reischauer system, this essay will instead utilize these accepted transcriptions. However, where appropriate, the McCune-Reischauer transcription will be included within brackets.

As is standard, when discussing Korean sources, the surname will precede the given name unless said scholar has chosen to have their name structured otherwise.

¹⁸ Noh, 254.
Furthermore, as it pertains to the translation of Lee Young-cheol’s article *Pong Chunhoûi yŏnghwa, changnū chayônida*, the translation applied for quotes is provided by the author of this thesis.

2. **The Explicitly Ecological Films: Girls Intent on Healing Nature**

2.1 *The Host* (2006): The Monster is Not the Villain

A shadow floats beneath the surface of the Han’s edge. A crowd of onlookers are pointing and speculating as to what can be causing it. Gang-du, the oafish son of a riverside shop owner throws a can into the water to get the shadow’s attention and yells “it ate the can!” when a tentacle-like appendage seizes it. Gang-du cannot imagine that this shadow, this looming threat beneath the surface, is about to cost him both his daughter, Hyeon-seo [Hyōn-sŏ] and his elderly father. Nor can he fathom that pollution; the very act with which he is engaging by throwing cans into the water, is to blame for it.
To engage with *The Host* on any analytical level without comparing it to the Japanese kaiju-film *Godzilla* (*Gojira*, Ishihiro Honda, 1954) is difficult.\(^2^0\) Not only are both films ecological cautionary tales, in which the concerns are embodied in the form of mutated monsters set loose on the unsuspecting populace, but both films’ plots draw upon actual incidents perpetrated by the United States of America. In the case of the event in *The Host*, in which a Korean lab worker is ordered by an American supervisor to dump “dirty” formaldehyde down the drain, it is based on an actual incident referred to as “the McFarland incident” which took place in the year 2000.\(^2^1\)

To understand why Bong’s continued usage of imagery and narrative elements critical of American actions and policies is relevant to the themes of ecology and environmentalism in his films, one need look no further than the current state of the world’s attempt to handle our most pressing environmental issues. The United States of America, with its immense influence over not only South Korean economic interests, but that of the whole world is a nation which is the world’s second largest source of carbon emissions, surpassed only by China which produced twice as much CO\(_2\) as the U.S. as of 2016, with a significantly larger population.\(^2^2\)

Despite posturing of environmental protection and programs to increase investment in renewable energy sources, thereby decreasing the reliance on fossil fuels, the U.S. by the start of President Barack Obama’s second term still produced twice as much CO\(_2\) per capita than Chinese citizens.\(^2^3\) This was exacerbated throughout the presidency of Donald Trump, during which decades of environmental policies were rolled back, as chief of staff Ryan Jackson assured “we do not have to choose between environmental protection and economic development.”\(^2^4\) The United States, not only as a global leader, but as one of Korea’s closest international partners and

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\(^{20}\) Kaiju-films are a genre of predominantly Japanese films featuring giant monsters destroying human cities. Kaiju as a term refers both to the film genre and the monsters themselves. Ergo, *Godzilla* is a Kaiju-film and Godzilla, the monster is a Kaiju.


\(^{22}\) “CO\(_2\) Emissions by Country” Worldometers.com (Accessed May 25\(^{th}\), 2022) [https://www.worldometers.info/co2-emissions/co2-emissions-by-country/](https://www.worldometers.info/co2-emissions/co2-emissions-by-country/)

\(^{23}\) “CO\(_2\) Emissions per Capita” Worldometers.com (Accessed May 25\(^{th}\), 2022) [https://www.worldometers.info/co2-emissions/co2-emissions-per-capita/](https://www.worldometers.info/co2-emissions/co2-emissions-per-capita/)

the “symbolic Vatican of the capitalist religion”, for better or worse, is intrinsically linked with essentially any ecological discussion one can have as it pertains to Bong’s films.\(^{25}\)

While there was certainly America-critical material in *Memories of Murder*, it was in *The Host* which Bong’s signature criticism of outside forces’ impact on Korean interests was truly pushed to the forefront for the first time. Chungmoo Choi states “Bong Joon-ho’s filmography shows a track record of his vision of an anarchy that discredits the legitimacy of the nation-state or, at least, depicts South Korea as a colony of the neo-imperial United States,” before proclaiming that “*The Host* is perhaps the most pronounced cinematic statement of that anarchic vision.”\(^{26}\) In fact, upon its initial US release, the film was criticized for its alleged anti-American sentiment.\(^{27}\) As surmised bluntly by scholar Brandon Taylor “the American characters are depicted as evil, brainless, deeply corrupt or simply ineffectual.”\(^{28}\) Choi’s remarks, that South Korea is not truly autonomous and is unable to cope with many of its social issues due to U.S. interference is echoed by Choi Jinhee [Ch’oe Chinhŭi] who observes that “throughout the film there are many allusions to the U.S. presence in Korea or interference with Korean social issues.” The question of international (and primarily U.S.) interference in Korean affairs is a theme which can be applied to all of Bong’s works.\(^{29}\)

It isn’t a difficult connection to make. From the cartoonishly evil scientists who callously intend to lobotomize mourning father Gang-du to keep him from exposing their invention of a virus to force the Korean citizens to co-operate with them, to the on-the-nose inclusion of a chemical weapon named “Agent Yellow”, harkening back to the damage done by American forces during the Vietnam War, the American military are presented as a foreign, hostile force.\(^{30}\) The English

\(^{25}\) Noh, 261.


\(^{27}\) Chung & Diffrient, Chapter 6, section “A Contextual Framework, paragraph 4.

\(^{28}\) Taylor, Brandon “The Ideological Train to Globalization: Bong Joon-ho’s *The Host* and *Snowpiercer*”, *Cineaction* (98, 2016), 44

\(^{29}\) Choi, Jinhee, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, 2010), 56

The Host is a film in which a poor, broken family are forced to come together in order to eliminate a disaster not of their own making. At the climax, the very thing they fought to save, Hyeon-seo, is lost to them and although the creature is killed and the family gains a new member in the form of the orphaned child Hyeon-seo met in the monster’s lair, this blockbuster, filled with Hollywood filmmaking ingredients denies its audience the expected Hollywood ending. Hyeon-seo is still lost, the people responsible are left blameless, free to continue to make the same mistakes and the creature’s death is depicted as a necessity, rather than a satisfying act of vengeance. Like the shooting of the rabid dog in To Kill a Mockingbird (Robert Mulligan, 1962), it is just as much an act of mercy as it is of protection for the people of Seoul. Bong seemingly confirms this reading of the monster, “[i]t has a malformed, asymmetrical body, so it feels pain

all the time.” As noted by Lee Young-cheol “[t]he thing called koemul [monster] did not choose to become a monster by its own volition,” and this pain and injustice of nature, is a theme Bong’s films will continue to explore.\footnote{Paik, 433.}

\section*{2.2 Snowpiercer (2013): The Engine is Not Eternal}

It can hardly be seen as surprising that with Bong’s first foray into developing a film with the specific intent of being screened in the American market the themes observed in the The Host are even more prevalent and center stage than ever before.

\textit{Snowpiercer}, based on the French graphic novel \textit{Transperceneige} takes place in a near-future where humanity, in a failed attempt to counteract the worsening effects of climate change have frozen the planet, rendering it uninhabitable for humankind.\footnote{Lee, Young-cheol, 71.} The few survivors that remain are all crammed into the highly technological train \textit{The Snowpiercer}. The train is divided into two clear sections: front and back. The passengers in the front live in luxury, having bought their

\footnote{Jacques Lob, Benjamin Legrand, Benjamin, Lob, Jacques & Rochette, Jean-Marc Rochette, \textit{Transperceneige} (Casterman, Brussels, 1982)}
tickets for the train, whereas those in the tail section live in squalor and darkness, having forced their way onto the train in desperation as the world froze around them.

Critic Andrew Carew describes the design of the film as “each carriage feels like a new level in a videogame,” as protagonist Curtis, a tail-section passenger and unofficial second-in-command to elderly leader Gilliam leads an insurrection on the front section, fighting their way through the train one car at a time.35

Snowpiercer is the first film written by Bong which denies the viewer the ability to simply view it as an “action-packed thrill-ride”. Whereas all of Bong’s works contain a plethora of subtext worthy of interpretations, Bong’s trademark use of Hollywood style and tropes allowed a spectator disinterested in engaging with Bong’s politics to ignore it. Snowpiercer does not allow this by comparison. If The Host is a film made by a Bong frustrated with South Korea’s ties to the imperial superpower the United States of America, then Snowpiercer is a film made by an angry Bong.

The Host and Snowpiercer can be viewed as two halves of a whole. The Host is the cautionary tale of what complacency in the disregard for the natural world continuously emphasized by neoliberal governments around the world may result in, and Snowpiercer is the envisioned extreme endpoint of said disregard. Much as with The Host the English-speaking characters of the upper class are cartoonish caricatures, swearing, spitting and acting erratically throughout. However, their power and position within the train’s hierarchy is still maintained, unquestioned by their peers.

In Snowpiercer we see Nam Lee’s aforementioned “Leitmotif of Misrecognition” applied on a wide scale. While Curtis and the tail section passengers are shown to be fed up with their perpetual poor treatment at the hands of Minister Mason, the second-in-command to operator of the train, Wilford, they are never shown reflecting on the true cause of their strife. In the world of Snowpiercer, the countries of the world made the questionable decision to attempt to solve a man-made crisis with another man-made object: CW-7, a chemical which was dispersed throughout the atmosphere. It is never directly stated, but one can assume that a project as

complicated and resource intensive as launching a chemical agent into the atmosphere could only be accomplished by the richest nations on earth. The opening narration of the film goes as far as mentioning that multiple environmental groups as well as developing nations protest the release of CW-7, yet ultimately have no say in the matter.

The implication of this is that, those who occupy the front section of Wilford’s *Snowpiercer* are those who could afford the exorbitant price of tickets for the cylindrical Ark. Despite the capitalist fixation brought on by the industrial revolution being the primary instigator of the environmental disaster both present in *Snowpiercer*’s past and our possible future, those who benefitted from said system: industrialists, engineers, politicians and the recipients of “old money” self-brand themselves as being of an upper class. In spite of money no longer being a factor within the train’s ecosystem.

Even in a world without banks and corporate presence, those who had power within the extinct system are allowed to occupy the upper-class. The old-world system, our system is the actual antagonist, with Wilford and Mason as its manifested representatives. Repurposing Minjung Noh’s observations on *Parasite* we see the universal spread of this: “they [the passengers of the *Snowpiercer*] are unconsciously agreed upon “rules of game” among the participants of the system and misrecognized to be given or natural condition of the world.”

Wilford and Mason both whenever confronted with potential dissent and dissatisfaction with the current social structure of the train return to this belief of “preordained positions”. The notion that those within the system all fulfill a role decided for them without their input, which they are unable to escape no matter how hard they try, since those above them have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, is a powerful and poignant one, further recalling Noh’s argument of capitalism as religion. In 2016, Anna Fifield wrote an article for *The Washington Post* in which she spotlighted the fact that an increasing number of Koreans in their 20’s and 30’s are finding themselves desperate to escape the current Korean social climate. Fifield’s damning article highlights a number of Korean social issues through the brief character portraits made, ending the text with the assertion that one of the biggest issues is that the previous generations of workers are unaware of the issues facing young Koreans. “My parents think I don’t try hard

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* Noh, 255.
enough,” Fifield has a frustrated worker saying, reaffirming the Korean rat-race as “a hell without an exit.”

Nam Lee writes reminiscent of Fifield’s article that “[t]he train in the film has been mostly interpreted as symbolizing capitalism, particularly neoliberal capitalism; however these articles give a new perspective, a new possible interpretation of seeing the train as Korean society itself.” Both of these readings, the transnational and the localized, Korean interpretation can co-exist and, in fact support each other. Snowpiercer’s diversity, especially among the tail section passengers can in itself be seen as a microcosmic reading of the current climate situation we are all faced with. This reading is supported by the ethnically mixed origins of the tail section passengers, indicating that no one, despite nationality can escape environmental destruction.

The nightmarish world of Snowpiercer is also one where terms which were once biological have now taken on a mechanical meaning. Frequently throughout the narrative man-made objects such as cigarettes, bullets and engine parts are referred to as having “gone extinct”, in some cases warranting reactions of wonder similar to what one could assume seeing a Dodo or Tasmanian Tiger would elicit today, when they are re-discovered. In a world where the only thing more savage and unforgiving than the remnants of neoliberal capitalism is the raging ice and snow outside of the train, all the miracles of engineering and luxuries of our contemporary society are slowly eroding like rocks on a muddy slope. It is only a matter of time before it all comes tumbling down in a chaotic, all-consuming landslide.

This is, of course what eventually does occur in Snowpiercer. Throughout the film, South Korean engineer and developer of the Snowpiercer’s security systems Namgoong Minsu [Namgung Minsu] is shown observing the world outside, eventually explaining his theory to his daughter Yona, that the world outside is slowly warming up, possibly rendering it inhabitable for humanity again.

As the tail section passengers pass into a train car repurposed as classroom, we are shown how much like Minjung Noh’s assertions of capitalism as religion the world of Snowpiercer’s upper class truly is. The children are from an early age being taught to revere Wilford as a spiritual figure.

38 Lee, Nam, 124.
Much like how the film utilizes the term “extinct” to refer to depletion of manmade items, phrases commonly associated with piety and worship such as “benevolent” and “sacred” are frequently applied to Wilford and the *Snowpiercer* itself. Meanwhile, the rhetoric surrounding the tail section passengers are reminiscent of how capitalism often depicts poverty: as a self-inflicted, moral failing inherent in those who are subjected to it.

However, no matter how much pompous rhetoric and songs of him and his engine’s power is repeated to the passengers, once Curtis and those who have survived the journey reach the man himself, they are met by a frail old man, not a divine being. Wilford reveals to Curtis that Gilliam, the man who saved him from the savagery of the tail section’s initial years, was always a part of the system, a willing participant in the oppression of the tail section passengers in order to assure humanity’s continued survival. Curtis, who mere minutes earlier admitted to Namgoong Minsu that he used to engage in cannibalism at the beginning of the freezing of the world, until Gilliam converted him to a more righteous path, is distraught by this. This awareness, causes Curtis to realize that Namgoong, who has in secret been plotting to force his way off the train, is right: the only way to truly break the cycle of oppression is to derail the train and the system it perpetuates. Thereby the query at the center of the film, defined by Peter Y. Paik as “is the world worth existing when its self-sustainability means no other than the eternal return of the same negative?” is answered by the two men: no, it is not.39

This final act of sacrifice, Namgoong and Curtis shielding Yona and the young Timmy: the boy whose kidnapping instigated the revolution, from the blast of the Kronole, can be viewed as Curtis’ overcoming of the “Leitmotif of Misrecognition”. Throughout the film he has alluded to his shame over his past actions, telling Yona he doesn’t want to remember a time before he met Gilliam, the faint scar on his arm, proving that he could not sacrifice his own arm to feed others, as Gilliam did for him. Yet here, he finally comes to the realization that his actions are part of the ecosystem of the train, another part of a much larger machine, maintained by the system Wilford and Mason perpetuate, and chooses the path of destruction. Even if those who survive, incidentally only Yona and Timmy, have little chances of surviving in a frozen world, at least this way they are allowed to be makers of their own destiny, no longer mere cogs in a capitalist relic.

39 Paik, 499.
Where *Snowpiercer* examined the complacency of the industrialized nations of the world and their citizens’ (unwittingly or not) role in the damage being done to the ecosystems of our planet, Bong’s penultimate project as of writing, instead places the mirror in front of the average viewer. Whereas the destruction of our planet’s various ecosystems is a topic so vast, one’s role in it can be difficult to parse, the inhuman brutality of the global meat industry is a subject an individual audience member can be expected to more thoroughly be able to identify their own role within through a fictional narrative.

*Okja* centers on Mija, a teenage girl whose grandfather is one of 26 farmers from around the world bequeathed with a genetically engineered “Super-Pig” by the global conglomerate The Mirando Corporation as part of breeding program and contest. Mija believes that her grandfather has been saving the stipend he receives for the pig, named Okja, so that the two can buy her permanently, rather than keep her only as long as the contest lasts. When Mirando’s representatives come to retrieve Okja, Mija’s grandfather reveals that he was unable to purchase the pig and Mija sets off to get her friend back at all costs.

Okja’s premise is reminiscent of a Korean agricultural *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) and Lee Young-cheol appraisal of *Okja* is that the film “is the most mature of [Bong’s] three
films which directly discuss nature, while turning [the story told in] *The Host* on its head.”  

What Lee is referring to is not only that the “monster” of the film is not the antagonist, but that unlike in *The Host*, where the monster is being hunted to retrieve a loved one, here Okja *is* said loved one. Along with this, there is also the aspect of the river creature in *The Host* being a byproduct of illegal dumping of chemicals, whereas Okja is the result of a laborious attempt to create a new commercial meat product. While Lucy Mirando presents these Super-Pigs as being a newly discovered species, it eventually revealed that they are genetically engineered.

There is also, much like *The Host*’s “Agent Yellow”, a connection to America’s war in Vietnam. The pastel-favoring villain of the film Lucy Mirando, makes her dissatisfaction with her family’s corporate legacy known from the first scene of the film in which she refers to her grandfather as a “terrible man” accompanied by playful laughter. She also later, as her control on the Super-Pig launch is slipping, elaborates on her father’s business decision of manufacturing “the napalm that makes everybody’s skin fall off” during the war. While the Mirando corporation is clearly a global enterprise; the 26 nations which the Super-Piglets are sent to being homes to Mirando’s branch offices, the American origin of the company is important. Despite Lucy’s attempts to rework the company’s image, Lee Young-cheol remarks on the eventual failure of the Super-Pig program as “Okja is Lucy’s napalm bomb.”

*Okja* is described by Simon Ward as “[a] film about consumerism and friendship, about communication, nature and inherent value versus monetized value.” Scholar Alf Rehn similarly summarizes the film as “[i]t questions notions such as the power of corporations, the ethics of capitalism, and the notion that all things can be owned.” This is an apt summary of not only this film, but all of Bong’s films to some degree: the conundrum of power and authority equating to the right to commit actions which will negatively impact others. In *The Host* the reason why the Han River is polluted is not merely due to American arrogance, but more specifically due to said arrogant mortician not seeing *value* in protecting the Han River. In *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, a frustrated professor seeking tenure values his own peace and quiet over that of a dog’s life and in

40 Lee, Young-cheol, 73.
41 Lee, Young-cheol, 73.
43 Rehn, Alf “The Curious Case of Children and the Corporation: Capitalism, Corruption and Contested Childhoods in *Okja*”, *M@n@gement*, (vol. 22, iss. 3, 2019), 534.
Snowpiercer, the capitalist developed nations of the world prioritized financial growth and capital interests over ecological ones, leading to the eventual destruction of both.

This is made no more apparent than at the climax of the film, in which chipper Lucy Mirando has been cast out from her company and replaced by her callous, business-minded twin sister Nancy. Nancy makes no qualms about only caring about business, immediately dispensing with Lucy’s pageantry and orders all the pigs slaughtered and put out on the market immediately. Her ruthlessness at business is referred to earlier by Lucy, who remarks that Nancy was responsible for dumping so many chemicals into a lake that it “blew up”. Nancy, however is never depicted as reflecting on these past misdeeds, even proudly stating without any qualms that they are simply businessmen and that “we do deals and these are the deals we do.”

One can see the film’s act of resolution; the buying of Okja by trading her for the gold pig statue Mija’s grandfather intended as a dowry gift for her, as the ultimate allegory of this relationship between monetary and sentimental value. The living wonder which is Okja is only as valuable as the inanimate object, granted value by a man-made system, she can be traded for. Without Mija ascribing a greater emotional value to Okja beyond that of Nancy Mirando’s recognized financial value, Okja is without hope. As are all ecological assets which pass through the neoliberal capitalist system. Unless there is greater emotional incentive to preserve something than there is financial motivation to exploit it, the object will be exploited.

In the end, Lucy and Nancy are despite Lucy’s attempts to prove otherwise, two sides of the same coin. Lucy, while verbally espousing the Super-Pig-program’s ecological benefits: their low carbon footprint, the requirement of less feed and increased output of marketable meat product, is committed to her own corporate interests over that of the Super-Pigs, Mija or any of her employees. One can observe Nancy as the old type of conglomerate, in a world before SNS platforms and before politicians committed to policies in 240 characters or less, while Lucy is the new, aware company strategy. She is attempting to achieve most of the same financial goals, but with a colorful, friendly presentation. This dichotomy is made no clearer than the mere fact that Bong cast actress Tilda Swinton as both sisters, making the similarities in the two undeniable.

Alf Rehn does however not fully exonerate Mija as being guilty of partaking in the injustice of the film either. “Mija can also be read as the egotistical villain of the piece – a child that is prepared to put her own desires of potentially saving tens of thousands of other children from
starvation.” Elaborating that “[i]n such a reading, Mija is something akin to a millennial, who protests corporate greed by Ironically hashtagging the images they’ve taken with their iPhone X and put up on Instagram – feeling fully justified but failing to see the big picture.”44

Indeed, this reading is applicable to the members of the Animal Liberation Front as well, who are portrayed as well-meaning and sympathetic, but still traditionally disorganized and bumbling in the way Bong often depicts authority figures. Also, Mija’s story while ending in a somewhat happy manor, having saved her best friend and another Super-piglet which Okja hid in her mouth, is not a grand triumph. Nam Lee’s “half-victory” is once again present, as Mija’s saving of Okja is not a salvation for the rest of the Super-Pigs.

Early in the film, Mija’s grandfather explains Okja’s fate to Mija by drawing lines on a picture of a Super-Pig, outlining the cuts of meat. He explains that Okja’s destiny is to be eaten, and through the buying of the gold pig statue he gives Mija as a substitute, an intended dowry present, implies that her purpose is to become a bride someday. Both beauty and beast’s place in this world is, much like the passengers of The Snowpiercer preordained.

Mija manages to reject this conservative view of her and Okja’s destinies, saving her friend and the piglet from the butcher’s rack, but as Lee Young-cheol states “the birdsong which played over the end credits of Barking Dogs Never Bite is heard again. But I have a hard time getting rid of the sight of the Super-pigs which couldn’t be saved from my head.”45 A feeling which Bong likely intended for the viewer to be left with.

Because were Okja a Hollywood production, we can assume that the leaked video of Okja’s abuse would be enough to get the entire Super-Pig project scrapped and the Super-pigs freed, but in Bong’s world? All it requires is a slight reduction in price. “If it’s cheap, they’ll eat it,” Nancy Mirando assures her aide. Bong’s challenge to the viewer is no doubt to ask themselves just that: would they?

44 Rehn, 534.
45 Lee, Young-cheol, 76.
2.4 Shaking Tokyo (2008): Even Sunlight is a Barrier

At first glance, including this film in a section otherwise occupied by three works which share both larger budgets, runtime and more overt science fiction elements may appear perplexing. Indeed, the short film, which focuses on a Japanese man who due to societal pressures has become a *hikikomori*, a person who elects to shut themselves off from society nearly entirely and stay inside their own living space, does not present itself as taking place in a world with themes of Sci-Fi. However, at the heart of its narrative stands a force of nature: the earthquake, and the power said force holds over the population where it occurs. The main character, explains through narration, how he has successfully managed to go years without as much as making eye contact with another human being, only to be forced to do just that when a pizza-delivery girl faints on his doorstep as an earthquake strikes during a delivery.

*Shaking Tokyo* is arguably Bong’s most optimistic work discussed in this piece, possibly due to its shorter 29-minute runtime and it taking place in a location which one can assume Bong is less politically involved in than South Korea or even the United States. Bong has however claimed that Tokyo is one of the locations he has visited the most times since beginning his filmmaking career.\(^{46}\) A noteworthy aspect of *Shaking Tokyo* is how it shares a lot of narrative similarities

\(^{46}\) Jung, Ji-youn, *Shaking Tokyo* interview segment.
with the film *Castaway on the Moon* (*Kim-si P’yoryugi*, Lee Hae-jun, 2009), a film about a businessman who’s failed suicide attempt and subsequent stranding on a small island in the Han River catches the eye of a shut-in, whose curiosity eventually forces her to leave her apartment to investigate.

Both works not only center on shut-ins breaking their self-imposed isolation to make contact with another person who also suffers societal dissatisfaction, but both also have a fascinating relationship to nature in metropolitan areas. In *Castaway on the Moon*, the businessman upon waking up on the island, finds himself with a new lease on life in this primal existence, implying that much like the young people mentioned in Anna Fifield’s article, the man has fought for years to maintain a position within the capitalist system only to eventually question what is the point of it all?

In *Shaking Tokyo* however, the main character upon deciding to finally break his exile from the outside world, finds purpose in his task of locating the pizza girl after having found out that she too has decided to become a hikikomori, just as he has begun to reject it.

The concrete world of Tokyo is portrayed as an alien place as the man crosses his threshold, the light spread across the wooden step to the outside shot as a physical barrier his feet do not dare cross. Once outside, the film is continuously overexposed, the white light giving the surroundings a disorienting, alien quality. Along with the blinding light of the world outside, the protagonist is met with the realization that his house is covered in vines. Nature is reclaiming the neglected façade, along with the bicycle he has left by the wall to the house, rendered useless by the plants.

As the man runs down the street, making his way to the woman’s house, the streets are shown as entirely desolate, as neglected as his house and yard. Just as he reaches the house he has been looking for, only for her to rebuff his attempts to coerce her out of the house, another earthquake strikes and the streets are filled with people. No matter how much humanity attempts to distance itself from nature, and themselves as in the case of the hikikomori, it is human nature to seek companionship in others, and nature will make itself known.

The girl, who has multiple tattoos in the form of buttons with commands similar to those found on a TV-remote, can be viewed as a automatization of the workforce. When she faints on the

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47 Fifield, “Young South Koreans call their country ‘hell’ and look for ways out”
hikikomori’s doorstep, he “reactivates” her by pressing a Power-button on her thigh, and when they meet again at the end, he accidentally touches a newly tattooed button marked “love” on her arm, seemingly freeing her from the compulsion to hide in her apartment.

What is particularly amusing about *Shaking Tokyo* is that its lone Sci-Fi-element was a mistake of sorts. As the hikikomori is navigating the desolate streets of Tokyo, he sees a robot, delivering pizza much like the girl had been doing mere days before. The robot was according to Bong, intended to be a mere cameo which was present in all three of the shorts in *Tokyo!*, but by the time Bong was finished editing his contribution Carax and Gondry had opted against including it in their segments. Yet it truly does fit into the desolate Tokyo landscape which the short portrays. Because while the second quake is shown forcing the citizens out into the street, they all eventually retreat back into their own houses, implying that automatization of society is making people complacent in their own replacement. Our couple is the lone exception, seemingly having found courage and affection through environmental intervention. One could even go as far as arguing that Bong is painting human emotion itself as a force of nature, one that should be embraced, not shunned. A reading which will become relevant again as it pertains to *Mother*.

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48 Jung, Ji-youn, *Shaking Tokyo* interview segment.
3. Implicitly Ecological Films: All Tracks Lead to Misery

![Image of a man on a phone outside a window]

3.1 *Barking Dogs Never Bite (2000): A League That Reeks of Death*

From the offset of *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, the connection Bong’s works will come to have with nature moving forward is made apparent. Tenure-seeking professor Yoon-ju [Yun-ju] is on the phone, staring out at the trees outside of his window. As his colleague clarifies that he will most likely need to bribe the dean of the university if he wishes to advance, Yoon-ju questions his professional aptitude. He explains how what he really wishes to do is hike and take a nap in the mountains. His fantasy is interrupted by the barking of a dog, and so the quest to find and rid himself of the canine is instigated.

At the heart of *Barking Dogs Never Bite* is not only the comically absurd *Tom and Jerry*-esque struggle of a man who blames his powerlessness on a neighbor’s dog, but the budding seeds of all the major themes which would come to define Bong’s work. Not only is Yoon-ju’s war on his neighbor’s dog ridiculous, but his inability to identify just which dog is barking so incessantly further proves the potential issues which can occur in contemporary Korean society when nature is so disconnected from the workplace and daily life.
Barking Dogs Never Bite presents a society in which the very presence of nature is seen as a hindrance from progress. Yoon-ju’s wife, Eun-sik [Ŭn-sik], is pregnant and displeased with Yoon-ju for the majority of the film. She eventually buys a puppy herself, much to the vexation of her husband. When Yoon-ju’s carelessness results in him losing the dog, his wife tearfully explains that she bought the puppy with her severance pay, intending to give him the rest to secure his position with. Barking Dogs Never Bite presents pregnancy; the process of creating life itself, as an obstruction from progress. Something which if one wishes to prosper in the workplace, one should avoid entirely, and if you choose not to? Then resignation may still be imposed on you.

Yet, not only is this portrayal indicative of Korean society’s continuous issues with declining birthrate, but also can be viewed as a representation of Bong’s view on humanity’s requirement for natural connection.49 The owner of the actual culprit-canine, who’s dog Yoon-ju eventually manages to throw off a rooftop, is so devastated by the loss that she is hospitalized and passes away from it. Similarly, Eun-sik refuses to believe Yoon-ju’s claims that he did not get rid of their dog on purpose until he has reunited the two.

This reading is further emphasized by an early exchange with the apartment complex’s janitor, who when made aware of Yoon-ju’s frustration with dogs not supposed to be allowed in the building simply, counters that tenants constantly ignore that rule. It is simply human nature to seek companionship. This same janitor does however not refrain from eating one of these pets if given a chance, as the viewer is eventually made aware of.

Lee Young-cheol assessment of the film is that “Barking Dogs Never Bite is a very bad movie in which ordinary good people face hardships and bad things go well. It’s simply like that until the end credits begin to roll.”50

Lee’s assertions also apply this to the very group of people Yoon-ju associates with in order to achieve tenure. “Yoon-joo’s league reeks of their manufactured death,” a stance which is supported by the film’s final scene in which Yoon-ju is seen situated in a dark classroom, finally a tenured professor, while Hyun-nam [Hyŏn-nam], the films’ secondary protagonist who has been attempting to identify the dog killer, is seen hiking in the woods with her friend Jang-mi

50 Lee, Young-cheol, 63.
[Chang-mi], jobless but more content than at the beginning of the film. As observed by Lee “Bong Joon-ho swapped and repeated the structure of the introductory scenes” in which Yoon-ju is longing for the woods and Hyun-nam is in a dirty subway station. While not verbally asserted, the implication is very much that despite finally achieving the goal which he has been striving to make a reality throughout the whole film, Yoon-ju’s new position has not satisfied him. Ignoring nature, making an enemy out of something as innocent as a dog will not result in long-term satisfaction, and as the end credits begin, the sound of dogs barking is replaced with birdsong, offering the audience the calm denied to Yoon-ju.

3.2 Memories of Murder (2003): The Land is Forever Scarred

Memories of Murder begins with the shot of a child examining a straw of wheat, before standing up and looking down the dirt road which separates two vast fields. A tractor slowly approaches him, carrying a surly looking man along with the driver. The film’s initial shots are so simple and the setting so harmonious that unless the viewer is aware of what the film is about, the reveal that there is a corpse of a rape victim hidden in the drainage ditch next to where the child is playing will elicit shock in the audience.

The plot centers on two detectives: local detective Park [Pak] and Seoul detective Seo [Sŏ], and the clash which occurs when their vastly different approaches to detecting collide on South Korea’s first confirmed serial killer case. Seo represents American style police work, as seen in
TV-shows from overseas, whereas the corrupt and bumbling Park has no qualms of assaulting suspects and coercing confessions out of evidently innocent citizens.

As the investigation ramps up however, Park’s lack of control on the situation is shown and the impact it has on case and his surroundings is made apparent. Even such a simple action as a tractor refusing to stop, destroying the sole footprint which is presumably from the killer, can be viewed as a clash between nature and industry. The farmer, refusing to stop, valuing his time, his industry above the concerns of the detective, causes potentially irreparable damage to the detective’s investigation.

The true core of the narrative of *Memories of Murder* is the constant battle of control as it applies to human nature. Once it becomes clear to the detectives attempting to solve the case that each murder is committed concurrently with rain, the struggle to track the killer becomes more structured, yet complicated. The portrayal of the killer, although he remains unidentified, is that of a person who is a slave to his impulses, unable to refrain from murdering women when specific conditions are met. A monster driven by a perverse obsession with killing and bound to uncontrollable weather patterns and the need to request a certain song on the radio before his murders.

This fearful portrayal of human nature also extends beyond the psyche of the killer himself and into the environment around the characters. Through voyeuristic, first-person camerawork we are made aware of the fact that the killer relies on foliage to conceal himself from his prey, hiding behind trees and crouching in fields while he anticipates the kill. The murderer through this choice takes on a more forceful affect, recalling the monstrosity of such killers as Michael Myers in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), who is described by his doctor, Sam Loomis as being “purely and simply evil.”

Also, whereas *The Host* and *Snowpiercer* are films in which the conflict is set in motion due to exploitation and pollution of nature, *Memories of Murder* is a result of a different type of pollution: human bodies. Lee Young-cheol explains it as “every time a murder occurs in Hwaesong, nature is polluted twice.”51 Not only does the killer commit literal dumping of foreign elements in fields and forests, but he also defiles the environment itself with his actions,

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51 Lee, Young-cheol, 66.
and much like Gang-du looking out over the dark riverside, the audience may find themselves wondering “what lurks out there among the trees and in the grass?”

The assumption that nature will conceal the crimes of men is echoed in a scene in which a pervert sneaks out into the forest at night in order to satisfy himself to women’s lingerie. The detectives (incorrectly) assume that the man’s odd, perverse behavior must implicate him in the murders as well. When in fact he is merely another man who relies on nature to obscure his perversions. This scene once again plays into Nam Lee’s leitmotif of misrecognition. The detectives are unable to separate one compulsion from another, far more threatening.

The danger of succumbing to one’s primal urges is at the heart of Memories of Murder. At the end of the film, Detective Seo, is on the brink. A girl he has befriended in the town has become the latest victim and even with an inconclusive DNA-test from an American laboratory in hand, he still has to be persuaded by oafish country detective Park as to not execute their prime suspect.

Ultimately, the film furthers Bong’s vision of nature as a force which should not be disregarded, not merely because of its enate power and influence on us, but because how it can be used or misused. In Snowpiercer it is misused to render the world uninhabitable for humanity, and while Memories of Murder does not portray anywhere near that level of environmental destruction, the actions of the serial killer in Hwaseong permanently stained the ground on which he committed his murders.

Nothing can emphasize this more than the final scene in the film, in which a now-retired Park realizes that he, on a business trip, is driving by the site of the murder depicted in the opening of the film. He stops and visits the drainage ditch once more, hunching down and looking in the hole. When he emerges, a child, a girl this time, is staring at him. It is revealed that girl saw another man looking into the ditch not too long ago and that when she enquired what he was doing the man responded that he was revisiting a place where he did something many years ago. Nostalgia brought both men back. The girl’s response to the question of what the murderer looked like is also a telling warning, he simply looked “ordinary” (P’yŏngbŏmhada), implying that anyone can become a monster under the right circumstances. As Park stares, distraught into the camera, the notion that the ground is forever stained by the deed which once took place there.
is solidified. No matter how many years pass, nature is scarred by the act that it was once witness to.


*Mother* is the story of an elderly woman who desperately fights to prove her mentally challenged adult son’s innocence in the death of a local high school. On paper this plot is not uniquely “Bong” in premise, but has seen many iterations throughout the years. What is unique about *Mother* however, is that rather than the eventual release of her son being a triumphant victory, it is in fact a betrayal of justice. Her son, Do-joon [To-jun], is guilty of accidentally killing the girl, and the mother despite eventually coming to this realization, still frames another disadvantaged man for the death, and also becomes a murderer herself by eliminating the only witness to what really happened.

Lee Young-cheol’s assessment on how *Mother* fits into Bong’s relationship with nature, is that it more than any other of the director’s films is about a character succumbing to her natural instincts. The choice of having such a rare occurring role as a mother be the protagonist in the film is certainly a sign of this. Indeed, as Lee points out “mothers are rare in the films of Bong Joon-ho. Before *Parasite*, *Mother* is the sole film in which a mother is an important character.”

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52 Lee, Young-cheol, 76.
The power of the force that is motherhood is one Bong clearly does not wish the audience to miss. Not only is the title of the film in both English as well as in the native Korean the word “mother” (written as 마더 [madŏ] in hangŭl), but the titular character is never given any other name. Her title, the instinctual force that drives her is a more powerful designation, even more so when one takes into account that in Korean society it is not uncommon for a parent to be referred to as “parent of (Child’s name).

Nam Lee assesses *Mother* as being “an exemplary film that shows how life in the democratized but neoliberal capitalist Korea has driven the socially weak to the brink of madness and moral collapse.”\(^53\) Not only does the Mother, in an attempt to get the junk collector’s confession, who she suspects as being the real culprit, fail to recognize the real killer, but she herself becomes the very thing she is trying to exonerate her son from having been accused of being. She thus uses mankind’s most primal discovery: fire, to burn the shack to the ground, making the man’s murder look like an accident. The Mother, unlike detective Seo in *Memories of Murder*, is unable to withstand her instinctual urge to kill. The connection Nam Lee makes to the neoliberal capitalist system’s culpability in the desperation of the mother is also visible in the Korean title of the film being *Mother* [madŏ], rather than the Korean word 어머니 [ŏmŏni]. By selecting the title of the film as being the English word, rather than the native term, Bong is placing the title within a broader, transnational context. It can also be viewed as a direct commentary on Hollywood-films. One can assume that much like *Okja* most likely having a much less grim ending had it been an American production, *Mother*, were it made in Hollywood, would *not* allow the mother to succeed in the framing of an innocent man to exonerate her son. Yet, Bong does allow for this moral ambiguity, because his films are not made with the intent to comfort their audience.

Not too long after having been reunited with her son, he gifts her the acupuncture needles she dropped in the junk collector’s house, having found them when he was inspecting the ruins. The Mother, suddenly reconfronted with her malicious actions, opts to perform a form of lobotomy on herself, using the needles to remove all memory of the incident. As the film closes, the mother dances carelessly in a field of grass to music which only exists within her

\(^{53}\) Lee, Nam, 104.
warped mind. The serenity of the surroundings are reminiscent to the opening of *Memories of Murder*. As she dances, one can ask oneself if the procedure worked. Can a person really remove their most vile act from their mind completely? And is killing the memory of one’s misdeeds not the same as committing another murder? Either way, just like in *Memories of Murder*, the field is tainted by the presence of the Mother and her violent actions.


A young woman takes refuge from the water which is still flooding into the *banch’iha*; the subbasement apartment she shares with her parents and brother, climbing up to the elevated toilet. Sewage sprays uncontrollably from the rim of the lid. After a weak attempt to stop the flow, she relents, sits down and pulls out a packet of cigarettes from a ceiling panel, lighting it meekly. She knows that for all that has happened that night, with this as the crescendo, there is nothing she can do to improve their situation, so she might as well sit back and let nature take its course. At least that way she can enjoy a cigarette.

This scene, which takes place at the end of *Parasite*’s second act, is not merely the final event in the film’s escalation of conflict, but is also an example of a character breaking Nam Lee’s cycle of misrecognition. The daughter of the financially struggling Kim family, Ki-
jung [Ki-chŏng], has until this point in the film been portrayed as an intelligent and cunning young woman with a cynical view of the world around her. She has nevertheless never indicated any inclination of considering defeat. In this moment however, that all changes. While her father, Ki-taek [Ki-t’aek] and her brother, Ki-woo [Ki-u] struggle to salvage what remains of their meager living space, Ki-jung finally concedes and allows the situation to play its course. Because regardless of her intelligence, artistic talent and drive, she is powerless to stop the forces of nature or the capitalist system which put her family in this position.

*Parasite* is the story of the poverty-stricken Kim family, who through a series of cunning maneuvers manage to achieve employment in the home of the wealthy Park family. Dong-ik [Tong-ik], the patriarch of the household is a successful entrepreneur in the tech sector, while his wife is a homemaker. As the Kim family grows comfortable in their new positions however, it is revealed that the old housekeeper Moon-gwang [Mun-kwang] who the family conspired to have dismissed has her husband Geun-sae [Kŭn-se] living in a bomb shelter under the house, which the Parks are unaware of, and when it becomes apparent that the four new hires of the Park household are more than strangers it results in a catastrophe which will harm all three families permanently.

Parasite shares element with all of Bong’s previous films to some degree, its plot being centered around lack of mobility in Korean society is reminiscent of *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, *The Host* and *Mother*. The eventual burying of Moon-gwang’s body at the climax of the film, along with the obsession with Americanisms recollects *Memories of Murder’s* pollution of nature with the victims of the serial killer, as well as conversations between the detectives about the supposed superiority of American detectives. Even the rainstorm which destroys the subbasement apartment shares elements with *Memories of Murder* as well as *Shaking Tokyo*, nature as both a malevolent force as well as an element which causes otherwise distant people to emerge from their dwellings to seek out others, if only to confirm that they are not the only ones experience tragedy.

However, despite its title creating parallels to that of *The Host*, which English title is also a biological term; a parasite being entirely helpless without a host to feed on, it can be argued that *Parasite* is actually the more grounded, localized companion piece of *Snowpiercer* more
than any other of Bong’s films. While the theme of parasitism can be applied to all three films, where in *The Host* it is applicable to the American military, in *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite* it is more directly targeting the increasingly disproportionately wealthy upper-class of the neoliberal capitalist system.\(^{54}\)

As Nam Lee writes “[o]ne of the major consequences of the deregulation policies is the increasing instability of laborers: unemployment and partial employment have increased. These unemployed and underemployed people constitute a population of *surplus humans* within the system.”\(^{55}\) These “surplus” people, are those who are shut out of participating in the market, and therefore unable to impact their situation or that of those around them. In *Snowpiercer*, it takes the form of a multi-cultural group of climate refugees forever deigned expendable due to their inability to purchase a ticket within a financial system which no longer functions. And in *Parasite* it is a family who, despite their drive and (especially in the case of the women) talents are not allowed to live up to their full potential.

The contrast visible between the situation the two families the film focuses on presents itself as a direct continuation of themes of climate present in *Snowpiercer*. The second act of the film is punctuated by a horrific scuffle at the Park mansion, set to the backdrop of a torrential rainstorm. As the Kim family seem to be at their lowest moment, the conflict escalates further by the announcement that the Parks are on their way home, having been unable to complete their weekend camping trip as intended.

For the well-off Park family, living in a mansion built by a famous architect, a rainstorm means a cancelled birthday outing for their young son followed by roleplay love-making on the couch. For the basement-dwelling lower-class Kim family it is a catastrophic event which leaves them destitute and dispossessed, sleeping on the floor of a gymnasium with others in the same situation. The well-off Park family are so far a way from this reality that they are not

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\(^{55}\)Lee, Nam, 127
even aware of how vast their own basement is, not to mention the fact that their old housemaid is dying under their very feet after being pushed down the stairs.

In fact, the flooding of the basement itself can be seen as a microcosm of *Snowpiercer*’s microcosm. *Snowpiercer* is described by Nam Lee as being a microcosm for of the current state of neoliberal capitalism, meaning that it by default is also a microcosm of how these forces impact our planet. Ergo, a system in which the developed nations of the world cause the majority of the damage to the environment, while many of those which climate change stands to affect the most are communities in impoverished nations. Be it temperatures rising to the point of rendering areas currently populated as uninhabitable or extreme shifts in precipitation either flooding or dehydrating vast amounts of land, man-made climate change stands to impact the earth’s most vulnerable populations.⁵６

This rings true in both *Snowpiercer* as well as in *Parasite*, both in which disregard for climate in favor of short-sighted financial gain wreaks havoc on “surplus humans”. In *Parasite* the Kim family’s position is essentially preordained to them by the neoliberal, capitalist system, which limits the family’s ability to impact their situation as well as world around them. The film’s opening scene makes it clear to the audience that the Kim family are so poor that wi-fi, a near-necessity for engaging with the financial sector in any way, is a resource they must leech off of others for. The film deliberately frames them as the titular parasites, only for it to subsequently force the audience to confront that portrayal as they are made aware of the full scope of the Kims’ struggle.

This intended connection between *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer* is further clarified by examining the house in which the Park family lives. Not only is the family name of the architect who built the house the same as the security expert of *The Snowpiercer*: Namgoong, implying a familial connection, but the house exhibits similar traits to the front section of the train. Curtis and the tail section passengers are awestruck by the garden-car and the aquarium they pass through on the way to the front, having only eaten protein blocks made from cockroaches themselves. The implication is clearly that there is a familial connection between these two structures. This reading is emphasized further by the fact that much like

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⁵６ “Climate change and disaster displacement”, UNHCR.  
how the front sectioners in *Snowpiercer* have seized all of the natural resources for themselves, the only green and luscious area in the film is the garden contained in the Park family’s yard. As observed by Nam Lee “[b]oth the material things – such as houses and windows – and nature, which is supposed to be free for everyone, have different meanings according to where you belong in the social hierarchy.”

Minjung Noh when discussing capitalism as a modern-day religion of the masses as it pertains to *Parasite* bluntly states that “[c]apitalism is not a religion of salvation,” and the sequence of the flooding basement and subsequent relocation to the gymnasium is evidence of this. A common belief within capitalist systems is to attribute wealth as a sign of personal accomplishment and worthiness. As explained by Wendy Brown “neoliberal nationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities – even money is not an issue – and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*.” This can be argued to also indicate that the accusatory logic of capitalism, that a person’s failure to succeed is due to some inherent moral failing, has spread from merely the financial sector into all aspects of modern living.

This is also visible in the attitude the passengers in the back of the Eternity Train maintain, as written by Jeong Seung-hoon: “they [the tail section passengers] are controlled under so-called cruel optimism: the double bind typical of liberal-capitalist societies in which people are attached to the desire for upward mobility, social equality, and so on, though these become unachievable fantasies that impede their flourishing.” At the outset of the film, father Ki-taek is shown to be enthusiastic despite the family’s dour situation. He holds an enthusiastic attitude toward work and is grateful once their financial situation begins to improve. However, after the family’s subbasement home is flooded, he admits to Ki-woo that he is done planning for what comes next. The best plan is having “no plan at all,” he explains, finally recognizing that the system is rigged. He and his family are all pawns, caught in a rock-and-a-hard-place-situation, in which the neoliberal forces of capitalism have

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57 Lee, Nam. 147.
58 Noh, 254.
Christian Gregory

convinced him not to blame the system itself for his misfortune, but rather questionable personal financial decisions and volatile social trends, and nature; the ever-unpredictable force to which neither wealthy nor destitute can control.

The Park family is never depicted as antagonistic, the closest it ever gets to this is Mr. Park, much like Wilford and Minister Mason before him, proclaiming the importance of everyone (in this case Ki-taek) staying in their preordained position. Yet Ki-taek, who is at the end of the film aware of how much the Parks abhor his stench, cannot counteract this. His position is what gives him his musky odor.

Nam Lee’s “Leitmotif of Misrecognition”, which is present in all of Bong’s films is never more central to the plot, yet as subtle as it is in Parasite. Unlike The Host, Snowpiercer and Okja, with Parasite Bong opts out of having an antagonistic figure such as Lucy Mirando, Wilford or the scientists and military officials in The Host, represent the social injustice or the capitalist system indirectly oppressing the Kim family. Instead, the eventual realization that the system itself is the antagonist allows for a far more powerful revelation. One which may explain the film’s wide appeal across national markets. In this case a faceless system becomes more identifiable than a villainous individual.

Mr. Park’s confession that he finds Ki-taek’s smell repugnant and his classist assertions to his wife that those who ride the subway smell “a certain way” are certainly unflattering, but not nearly as callous and explosive as from a Nancy Mirando or Mason. No rather than allowing the audience to shield their own complacency in the system disenfranchising the Kim family by casting blame on a malevolent actor, Bong here allows the system itself to be fully vilified. Park’s fortune is what would be classified as self-made, but without employees, most of whom likely ride the subway to work, he would be no better off than Ki-taek or the basement dwellers in his house.

Nam Lee asks what “is implied by the fact that both Korean and American audiences claim that the film portrays a microcosm of their own society?” as it pertains to Snowpiercer, and the question can effortlessly be reapplied to Parasite. The film’s transnational appeal certainly implies that a several different audiences from a multitude of cultures see something in the film which connects and relates to them.
As climate change becomes a less and less debatable theory and more established fact, the world is seeing annual reports of record temperature spikes and an increase in severe environmental phenomenon such as fires and floods. These issues disproportionately affect impoverished communities and developing nations without the resources to cope with them.\footnote{McCarthy, Joe, “Why Climate Change and Poverty Are Inextricably Linked”, Global Citizen, 20\textsuperscript{th} of February, 2020 \url{https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/climate-change-is-connected-to-poverty/} (Accessed 24\textsuperscript{th} of May 2022)}

In the case of South Korea, the 2020 Korean monsoon season was one of the country’s most intense and longest on record, and a report by \textit{The Korea Herald} cites climate change as the likely cause. “Experts say the unusually long rainy season is an effect of climate change as global warming caused air in this part of the world to get warmer and hold more precipitation, resulting in extreme downpour.”\footnote{Ko, Jun-tae, “This year’s monsoon ties record for the longest streak at 49 days”, \textit{The Korea Herald}, 11\textsuperscript{th} of August 2020. \url{https://www.koreaherald.com/common/newsprint.php?ud=20200811000643} (Accessed 23\textsuperscript{rd} of May 2022)} Heavy downpour has always been a factor on the Korean peninsula, one which should be accounted for when designing housing.

The Kim family are not those who built a subbasement in an area and country prone to immense seasonal downpour. Nor are they part of the class which obsession with corporate expansion and ever-increasing fiscal growth which possess the power to impact the environment, yet they are some of the first to face the repercussions of these decisions. Mrs. Park further widens the gap between the two families by commenting on how clear the sky is due to the rain. She is completely unaware that for Ki-taek, sitting in the front seat of the car, the storm has cost him nearly everything, finally shattering the illusion of self-blame within him.

The willingness to cast blame on oneself rather than on either society or random misfortune is according to Bong a deeply Korean habit. Says Bong: “In Korean society there is a tendency to personalize social misfortune rather than viewing it as a social responsibility.”\footnote{Jung, Ji-young, \textit{The Host} segment interview.} Also stating the example of the 1995 tragedy of the Sampoong Department Store collapse, in which an entire department store in Seoul collapsed due to structural failures. Elaborates Bong: “Social problems are interpreted as personal faults. At the time of the collapse of the
Sampoong Department Store as well, it was an incident that resulted from shoddy construction and social irregularities, and yet there were parents who were filled with regret, saying, ‘I’m so foolish, my child went to earn money and suffered this accident.”

The casting of Bong’s regular collaborator Song Kang-ho in *Parasite* serves as a poignant example of just how much Bong’s willingness to depict the inhumanity of unfettered capitalism has evolved during his career. Song begun by portraying a corrupt lackey of the dictatorial regime, attempting to catch a murderer, before playing a father whose daughter is kidnapped and subsequently killed by a monster. He then took on the role of a father who successfully saves his daughter by sacrificing himself (Ko Ah-sung [Ko A-sŏng] also plays both Hyeon-seo and Yona in these films) for her chance at escaping the antiquated hell of the train, before finally taking the role of a man who loses his daughter again, only to become a murderer himself. Song’s characters go from tool of the system all the way to a wanted criminal who is himself pushed to the verge of madness at the realization of the system’s inescapable injustice.

Beyond this, Lee Young-cheol’s observation that murder is a form of pollution is repeatable in *Parasite*. As Ki-taek’s letter to his son explains, once the house was vacated by the Parks, he buries Moon-gwang in the garden, explaining that he’s heard “that tree-side burials are trendy.” What was once the most villainous act of an unseen antagonist, has now become the regrettable actions of a helpless protagonist. The unseen villain of *Parasite* is too big to ever be punished, because a system cannot be punished. And Ki-jung and Ki-taek have become well aware of this throughout the film, while Ki-woo, who is shown to still aspire to succeed within the system and free his father by purchasing the house, has yet to fully understand that the system is fixed for people like him to fail. As the film ends, Ki-woo and his mother are forced to return to the subbasement, with Ki-taek in hiding in the bomb shelter. The explosive anger that has been brought about has done nothing but cause pain to all three families. Moon-gwang and Geun-sae are dead, as are Mr. Park and Ki-jung. Rather than seeing each other for what they are: people existing within a broken system, they all damage

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64 Jung, Ji-youn, *The Host* interview segment.
each other instead. Entrepreneur, budding artist, debt-riddled cake shop owner, none remain unscathed.

At the heart of Parasite is the story of three families who all fail to recognize each other for what the other is. A rich family which has more than they need, a symptom of an increasingly flawed system, a poor family which is assumed to be guilty of their own damnation to the subbasement they live in, and lastly a couple who have done what is necessary to survive. The latter families are symptomatic of the inevitable result of neoliberal capitalism. The Kims and Moon-gwang and her husband view each other as the enemy, the ones who are trying to deprive the other of the little that they possess, but this is the illusion which weakens them. The very thing which hinders them from “taking the train” like Curtis.

Bong’s ability to not only mesh these socio-political issues and ecological themes into approachable, Hollywood-like productions which can be consumed as both blockbuster-narratives as well as subversive, thoughtful cinema is likely why Parasite became as successful and recognized as it did.

In the wake of Parasite winning the Best Feature Film-Academy Award, U.S. President Donald Trump criticized the film’s victory. Referring to it as just “a movie from South Korea, what the hell is that about?” directly following this with a seeming admission to not having seen the film.65 Trump, as former leader of “The Vatican of Capitalism” may have actual reason to be concerned, because although unlikely, there is a slight implication packaged with Parasite’s widespread appeal: namely that viewers may not be as unaware of their situation as it may appear. Given that less than five years after Snowpiercer’s release, the South Korean government announced plans to begin experimenting with artificial rain in order to combat air pollution, it would not be the first time Bong’s films correctly hinted at future events.66

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5. Conclusion

While it presented limited discussion for this thesis, one of the most poignant statements one can make about the relationship between humanity and nature as it pertains to Bong’s films actually comes from Mother. As the mother cries, attempting to clean up the blood of the junk dealer she has murdered to protect her son, she cries out for her own mother. This scene is a clear reminder to us in the audience of not only what we may be capable of to protect the ones we love, but also that no matter how old we get, we are still all still our parents’ children and therefore still some semblance of a child. None of us are infallible, and when pitted against one another, as is the case in the hyper-competitive reality within neoliberal capitalism, the outcome will inevitably have devastating ramifications. Both for humanity and the natural world surrounding us.

While Parasite is inherently more of an implicitly ecological film, featuring neither exaggerated environmental destruction as in Snowpiercer or the emergence of new life due to humanity’s arrogance and assumption of dominance over the natural world itself as in Okja, it utilizes the same cautionary tale-methods of storytelling. The story of the Kim family, forever trapped within an ecosystem of poverty and exclusion from competition are not the makers of their own destiny that the free market neoliberal capitalist system would claim that they are. Instead, everything from education to employment to housing are all essentially decided for them by the system and its most powerful actors.

The flooding of the Kim family home can be effortlessly perceived as an allegory of multiple scenarios worth discussing. First, it can be examined from the perspective of what the future holds for those at the mercy of a system with a continuously expanding wealth gap. By expanding the reading one step further it is also an applicable allegory for how while the destitute have little impact on the environmental destruction which is causing continued climate change, they are also those who will feel its impact most swiftly and harshly. The Kim family did not build their subbasement, nor are they likely to have chosen it as a home for convenience, but for financial reasons. Yet as the torrential rains fill its rooms, they are still those who face the prospect of homelessness, while the financially successful Park family sleep comfortably in their
mansion. This despite the fact that Dong-ik’s tech company stands to have a greater impact on the environment than the Kim’s can ever conceivably have.

*Parasite*’s worldwide attention is not merely a sign of Bong’s talent as a filmmaker, but can also be seen as a sign that there may be a spreading awareness of the helplessness and imbalance inherent within the neoliberal capitalist system which the developed nations of the world have embraced. That despite the film’s climax leaving the true perpetrator of the tragedy: the system itself, unpunished, that the audiences of the world have, much like Ki-woo and Ki-jung, realized that they were never at fault for their own misfortunes.

Bong Joon-ho is a filmmaker whose work is commonly associated with a variety of subtexts including criticisms of neoliberal capitalism and globalization. Yet his propensity for injecting environmentally aware themes in not only his Sci-Fi-plots, but in all his films is remarkably underexplored. His clear cautionary message that the ills we do toward each other and the world around us will have lasting, devastating consequences equally so. Loss due to human arrogance in the name of profit has *always* been an essential part of Bong’s films and these losses are by definition ecological in nature. Be it the killing of dogs, the extinction of nearly all life on the planet due to a manmade climate disaster or the loss of an aspiring artist in Ki-jung’s murder at the end of *Parasite*, Bong’s cinema is one which stands as a reminder of what our avarice can lead to. As Minjung Noh observed, capitalism is not a religion of salvation, and the Bong Joon-ho’s films certainly support that statement.67

The purpose of this thesis was to explore these areas, yet more remains to be examined. Not only could every observed reoccurring theme made in this thesis have been elaborated on, each film further explored, but Bong’s short films as well as his produced works such as *Antarctic Journal* and *Sea Fog*, should also be examined. Then there is the unknown element of the future. As of writing, Bong’s next project is seemingly another international Science Fiction film adapted from an upcoming novel, and to end this essay similarly to what Lee Young-cheol stated of *Parasite*: “how these themes will continue to unfold in Bong Joon-ho’s films I can’t know. But I assume that Mickey7 will continue down a similar path.”

67 Noh, 254.
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