

On Movie Messages  
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I'm hearing impaired and can't discern the dialogue in movie theaters, so I'm limited to streaming on my laptop. If there are current movies I want to see, I have to wait until they come out in video. I plug a cord from my cochlear implant into the laptop and, with some help from captions—everything is captioned on video, including English language films—I hear quite well.

Two movies that got big media hype this past year were screenwriter and director Quentin Tarantino's "Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood" and a South Korean film, "Parasite," and I was curious to see what all the hoopla was about, so I was waiting for the two movies to become available for streaming. (It just now hit me that "Parasite" is captioned and I could have seen it in theaters, but I don't even think about going to theaters these days.) I was particularly looking forward to seeing "Parasite" because I was highly impressed by a 2003 film by its director Bong Joon-ho, "Memories of Murders," which at this writing is free on YouTube.

In recent days, I've seen the two movies. The filmmaking in both was superb—the acting, direction, sets, cinematography, and editing, all top of the line. However, I found the screenplays—Tarantino wrote his and Bong co-wrote his—shallow and contrived and, with "Parasite," the social messages were objectionable to me. The artistic merits of both movies were beneath my standard these days.

I never engaged "Once Upon a Time," never believed the story. It came off to me as, more than anything, being about Tarantino and the movie's two lead actors, Leonardo DiCaprio and Brad Pitt, making a movie—at its core, a vanity project--and I really don't care about any of those three. I was ready to turn it off ten minutes into it, but given all the ballyhoo about it, including a Best Picture nomination at the Academy Awards, I kept hanging in there

waiting for the reputed good stuff to happen, but it never did. I suppose it was 45 minutes before I pulled the plug. It's unusual for me to quit on a movie, and I've liked some of Tarantino's other efforts, but this one, while obviously ambitious, was . . . sophomoric and benign are words that come to mind.

“Parasite” got a bigger reaction from me, which is not to say I liked or respected it—I didn't. It is about two Korean families, one of them poor—the Kims—and the other rich—the Parks. The Kims parasitically (thus the film's title) infest the Park's lives by posing as unrelated household workers. Mainstream critics swooned over the social messages in “Parasite”; it insightfully reveals class disparities, they enthused. Bong, who comes out of a socially advantaged circumstance and was at one time a left-wing activist (come to think about it, as evidenced by this movie, he still is), was quoted as saying:

In today's capitalistic society there are ranks and castes that are invisible to the eye. We keep them disguised and out of sight and superficially look down on class hierarchies as a relic of the past, but the reality is that there are class lines that cannot be crossed. I think that this film depicts the inevitable cracks that appear when two classes brush up against each other in today's increasingly polarized society.

Ranks and castes are invisible to the eye? Class lines that cannot be crossed? Inevitable cracks appear when two classes brush up against each other? Really? Those sound like graduate school seminar pronouncements, not mature insights. I suspect that what Bong knows about social classes comes from leftist tracts he has skimmed or heard about, discussions with his friends, and what he could pick up from looking out of car windows. In any case, I especially found his portrayal of lower class people in “Parasite” to be off-base and—unintentionally, to be sure—condescending, degrading, and irresponsible.

Bong acknowledges his didactic intent as a filmmaker: “I make genre films, but I try to convey messages about society through these broken codes.”

For people of different circumstances to live together in the same space is not easy. It is increasingly the case in this sad world that humane relationships based on co-existence or symbiosis cannot hold, and one group is pushed into a parasitic relationship with another. In the midst of such a world, who can point their finger at a struggling family, locked in a fight for survival, and call them parasites? It's not that they were parasites from the start. They are our neighbors, friends and colleagues, who have merely been pushed to the edge of a precipice. As a depiction of ordinary people who fall into an unavoidable commotion, this film is a comedy without clowns, a tragedy without villains, all leading to a violent tangle and a headlong plunge down the stairs. You are all invited to this unstoppably fierce tragicomedy.

In my opinion, there is a word for what Mr. Bong said in the two quotes in this paragraph: blather.

“Parasite” ends with the college-age son of the poor Kim family vowing to someday buy the nice house the rich people, the Parks, formerly lived in (the Parks were either murdered or driven out the house by their encounter with the Kims). In all his wisdom, Bong knows for a certainty that the son buying the house will never happen:

In a 2019 interview, filmmaker Bong Joon-ho explained the ending of the movie [“Parasite”] and debunked the notion that Ki-woo [the young man] actually might ever be able to become rich enough to buy the house . . . “It was being real and honest with the audience. You know and I know--we all know--that this kid isn't going to be able to buy that house.”

Bong Joon-ho may know that, but we all don't know it. I, for one, don't know it. My parents and I lived in poverty in the second floor of the family we rented from in the worst part of the city. As

a kid, I dreamed of someday owning a nice house—not the house of particular rich people I envied, just a nice house--and indeed, this lower-class kid was able to buy a nice house. I consider it irresponsible of Bong to propagate the false notion that poor people can never do something on their own within the current social/political circumstance (what Bong calls capitalism) --buy a nice house, rise above their station in life, contribute meaningfully to the society, whatever it is.

I watched the 2020 Academy awards show (infomercial?) on television. After “Paradise” won the Best Picture at the Academy Awards, I offered this comment to a *New York Times* article reporting its victory:

I got the point, reiterated time and again, from the Academy Awards show that they are more than entertaining us; they are educating us. Their best picture of the year, “Paradise,” is billed as being about class distinctions. Let’s see, what did I learn about the lower classes from that film? That they take money for folding pizza boxes and don’t bother to do it right. They get working people fired and take their jobs. They lie about their credentials and qualifications and tutor young girls (whom they seduce) and presume to do therapy with troubled children. They cower in basements and steal food after they fail at businesses and default on loans. They trash the homes of other people and hide under tables when the people return home, smelling like radishes in the process. And they tie people up, smash them in the head with large rocks, and stab them to death, including teenage girls.

Because of space limitations, I left a lot of details out in my comment. One example, the lower-class people found out that the Park’s housekeeper, whose job they wanted, was severely allergic to peaches, so they sprinkled peach scrapings on her to evoke violent physical reactions in her and get the Parks to think she had tuberculosis and fire her; unconscionably cruel. Another, the lower-class Kim parents countenanced their children using the “F” word

every other sentence, as if low social status parents do that; they don't.

I'm not up to going into details about the gratuitous violence in "Paradise" in this context, all of which is initiated by lower class people, except to note that the Kim parents were quite the murderous duo: father Kim stabs the Park family father to death, and mother Kim impales the husband of the ex-housekeeper with a skewer; although her act was at least understandable, because he had just stabbed her teenage daughter to death. I guess these murders are to be taken as examples of the "inevitable cracks," as Bong calls them, that result when two social classes "brush up against each other." Spare me.

I'm trying to figure out how the rich Park family contributed to the so-called cracks. The Park kids were both very nice, and the parents, from first scene to last, were dignified, polite, and trusting, and they never once felt drawn to butchering a fellow human being. But then again, in this movie's depiction, no matter why they are rich—including sacrificing to get an education, working hard and productively, and managing their money wisely—their very existence as rich people is enough to compel lower-class people who come into contact with them to commit deceitful and murderous behavior. This is what won this year's Oscar for best picture of the year, and got Bong Oscars for Best Original Screenplay and Best Direction.

The portrayal of lower class people in "Parasite" offended and disgusted me, and thus my *Times* comment. Four people gave it a "recommend," but nine people gave recommends to the reply to my comment by one Scott Schaffer from New York City:

@Robert Griffin it seems as though you missed the point of the movie.

My reply to Mr. Schaffer

And the point of the film was what exactly, Scott? Don't leave me hanging.

got one recommend but unfortunately no response from Scott. I'll go to my grave not knowing the point that Scott and his nine recommends got that escaped me.

After my brief encounter with the contemporary motion picture industry's contributions to our lives, I'm happily back with The Criterion Channel's old classic movies and a few carefully chosen current movies that are available on streaming. I wrote a recent thought for this site (January, 2020) on one 2019 movie I liked a lot, "The White Crow," which got zero mention at the Academy Awards despite being, in my view anyway, intellectually, artistically, and morally everything "Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood" and "Paradise" aren't.