



## DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH OF SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE FILM *PARASITE* (2019)

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### ABSTRACT

Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) is not merely a story about economic disparity, but a critique of the illusion of success within modern capitalism. While previous research has largely highlighted types of signs (icons/indexes/symbols), this study aims to uncover the hidden meanings behind these signs using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework: Denotation, Connotation, and Myth. Through a qualitative descriptive approach, this study analysis key narrative objects such as the Scholar's Stone (*Suiseki*), "The Line," and "The Plan." The analysis reveals that the Scholar's Stone is not merely a symbol of hope, but a false "Myth" of meritocracy. Mr. Park's "Line" represents the connotation of invisible class segregation, while the failure of Ki-taek's "Plan" deconstructs the myth that poverty can be overcome simply through hard work. This study concludes that *Parasite* operates by dismantling the cultural myths that have long lulled the working class into complacency.

**Keyword:** Roland Barthes Semiotics, Myth, Class Disparity, Parasite Movie, Denotation Connotation.

### INTRODUCTION

Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) has made history as a global cinematic phenomenon, winning the *Palme d'Or* and becoming the first non-English language film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. This success is inextricably linked to the film's incisive narrative, which visualizes brutal class disparity with elegant execution. As a cultural text, *Parasite* is rich in visual signs such as house architecture, stairs, and smell that reflect social and economic meaning.

To understand this ideological dimension, an analytical tool capable of dismantling the belief systems operating behind the signs is required. This is where Roland Barthes' semiotics becomes highly relevant. Barthes transcends the formal logic of signs and brings semiotics into the realm of cultural criticism through the concept of "Myth." In Barthes' framework, signification occurs in two orders. The first level is Denotation, which is the literal or objective meaning of a sign. The second level is Connotation, where the sign is imbued with subjective cultural and emotional values. The culmination of this process is the formation of Myth, a mechanism by which dominant culture transforms unjust historical or social conditions into something that appears "natural," "normal," and "taken for granted" (Roland Barthes, 1972).



In the context of *Parasite*, myths work to obscure the reality of class exploitation. For instance, the disparity in fate between the Park and Kim families is often naturalized through abstract concepts such as "competence," "plans," or professional "lines." The film demonstrates how everyday objects such as the landscape stone (*suisseki*) regarded as bringing good fortune or the heavy rain perceived as a blessing are actually mythological constructions that lull the lower class with false hopes of social mobility (Dianiya, 2020).

Previous studies indicate that Roland Barthes' semiotic approach is frequently employed to analyze films as cultural texts that convey social and ideological meanings. Dewayani and Azwar (2024) examined the representation of gender equality in *Barbie* (2023) using the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, and found that the film criticizes patriarchal constructions through issues such as stereotyping, objectification, marginalization, and emotional oppression. Similarly, Sinaga et al. (2025) analyzed social inequality in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* by focusing on visual elements, settings, and symbols, revealing that class disparity is portrayed as a structured and recurring social reality. In addition, Putri et al. (2022) studied *Aladdin* (2019) and demonstrated that denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings interact to construct moral messages and cultural values within the film. Overall, these studies highlight the effectiveness of Barthes' semiotic theory in uncovering ideological meanings and social criticism embedded in films as visual communication media.

Therefore, this study aims to complement previous semiotic analyses by shifting from "what does this sign mean?" (Peirce) to "what lie is this sign concealing?" (Barthes). This article will analyze how *Parasite* employs narrative and visual objects to construct the Myth of Meritocracy and the Naturalization of Poverty in South Korea, as well as how the film systematically destroys these myths in its final act, revealing that the social ladder the Kim family seeks to climb is merely an illusion within a rigid capitalist structure.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Roland Barthes' Semiotics: Denotation, Connotation, and Myth

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding how cultural meanings are constructed and naturalized within texts. Barthes (1972) distinguishes between two orders of signification. The first order, denotation, refers to the literal, surface-level meaning of a sign—the direct relationship between the signifier and the signified. It is the level at which meaning appears objective, factual, and seemingly neutral. The second order, connotation, emerges when cultural, emotional, and ideological values are layered onto the denotative meaning. At this stage, a sign acquires affective and symbolic dimensions informed by social norms, historical contexts, and collective beliefs (Asmira Sinaga et al., 2025).



The culmination of these processes is the formation of myth, which Barthes defines as a system of communication that transforms historically specific values into universal, naturalized truths. Myth functions ideologically: it disguises power relations and socio-political structures by presenting them as inevitable or common sense. Within the context of film analysis, Barthes' theory enables scholars to reveal how everyday objects such as gifts, food, architecture, or domestic tools can become carriers of ideological meaning. Rather than viewing these elements as mere narrative details, Barthesian semiotics interprets them as cultural signs that reproduce, question, or disrupt dominant social myths. This study adopts Barthes' model to examine how Parasite constructs and dismantles the myth of social mobility embedded within contemporary capitalist ideology (Azzahra et al., 2024).

### **Semiotic Approaches in Film Studies**

Semiotics has long been recognized as a productive analytical tool in film studies because cinema itself is a system of signs composed of images, gestures, objects, camera movements, sound, and spatial arrangements. Earlier research frequently employs Charles Sanders Peirce's triangular model of representamen, object, and interpretant to classify cinematic signs as icons, indexes, or symbols. Such studies, while valuable for mapping how signs operate within narrative structures, often remain descriptive, focusing on categorization rather than ideological critique (Kruk, 2025).

In contrast, Barthesian semiotics offers a more critical interpretative depth. By addressing how signs participate in the construction of cultural meaning and ideology, it enables researchers to look beyond the visual surface and uncover the socio-political messages embedded within cinematic texts. This is especially relevant for films dealing with issues of class inequality, capitalism, and social stratification (Asmira Sinaga et al., 2025).

Existing scholarship on Parasite has highlighted its rich visual symbolism, such as the vertical spatial hierarchy of the Parks' house, the semi-basement living conditions of the Kim family, and recurring motifs of smell, food, and architecture. Many studies underscore how these visual cues represent inequality, but fewer have analyzed how these signs are ideologically charged and how they normalize or critique social myths. A Barthesian approach thus fills this gap by examining Parasite not only as a story that depicts inequality but also as a cultural text that communicates, circulates, and ultimately subverts the myth of upward mobility (Kemalasari et al., 2021).

### **Social Mobility and the Myth of Meritocracy in Capitalist Culture**

Social mobility is a central promise of modern capitalist societies, often framed through the ideology of meritocracy the belief that success is attainable for anyone through hard work, discipline, and personal ambition. Sociologists such as Bourdieu (1986) argue that this notion functions as a cultural myth: a narrative perpetuated to legitimize existing class structures while



obscuring the systemic disadvantages faced by lower-class individuals. Meritocracy thus shifts the burden of failure onto individuals rather than the social system, creating a powerful ideological tool that maintains the status quo.

In contemporary South Korea, where *Parasite* is set, this myth becomes even more pronounced. The country's rapid economic development has fostered strong cultural emphasis on education, competition, and achievement. Yet income inequality, housing precarity, and limited mobility reveal stark contradictions between the national narrative of success and the lived reality of ordinary citizens. *Parasite* reflects this tension by constructing characters who are deeply influenced by, and ultimately trapped within, the myth of rise-through-effort (Azzahra et al., 2024).

Key symbolic objects in the film such as the Scholar's Stone, the concept of "the line," and Ki-woo's imagined "plan" derive their significance from this ideological context. Each object serves as a vehicle for the myth of social mobility, promising hope while concealing structural barriers. The stone appears as a symbol of luck and prosperity but functions as a deceptive cultural artifact that obscures systemic inequality. "The line" drawn by Mr. Park represents the invisible yet rigid boundaries separating classes, naturalized through norms of politeness and spatial cleanliness. Meanwhile, Ki-woo's plan, presented in the film's closing sequence as an aspirational fantasy, exposes the tragic nature of the myth: no amount of planning or effort can overcome a system designed to maintain class hierarchy (Nie, 2024).

In this sense, *Parasite* does not merely depict economic disparity it interrogates how capitalist societies manufacture myths that sustain inequality. By applying Barthes' semiotic theory, the present study interprets these symbols as mechanisms through which ideology operates, revealing how the film actively deconstructs the cultural narrative that upward mobility is universally attainable.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to interpret the cultural and ideological meanings embedded in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019). The film serves as the primary data source, with units of analysis including significant scenes, dialogues, symbolic objects, and visual elements such as spatial arrangements and character interactions. Data were collected through repeated close viewing of the film, allowing the researcher to identify recurring motifs related to class, mobility, and inequality. The analysis follows Roland Barthes' semiotic framework by first identifying signifiers and their denotative meanings, then examining their connotative associations within Korean socio-cultural contexts, and finally uncovering the myths or ideologies that these signs naturalize, such as meritocracy, social boundaries, and the illusion of upward mobility. Interpretation was strengthened through engagement with relevant scholarly literature and by ensuring consistency between symbolic elements across different parts of the film. This method

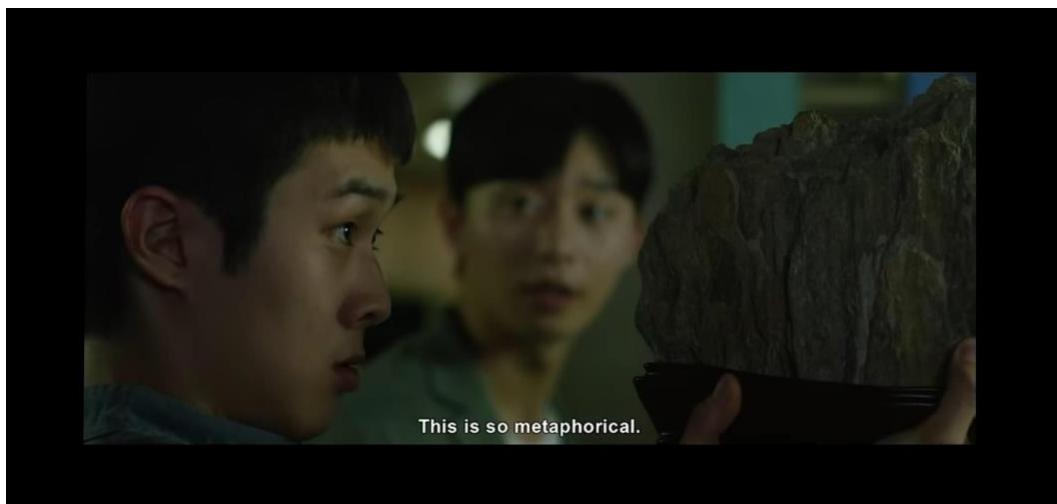


enables a holistic understanding of how Parasite constructs and deconstructs cultural myths through everyday objects and narrative motifs (Moleong, 1989).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study applies Roland Barthes' semiotics not merely to identify isolated signs in Parasite, but to uncover the multi-layered significations that construct and ultimately deconstruct the film's ideological critique of class. According to Barthes, signification unfolds through two levels: denotation, or the literal meaning of a sign, and connotation, the culturally embedded meaning derived from collective associations. These two levels culminate in myth, an ideological formation that naturalizes historical inequalities as though they were innate or unavoidable. Through Barthes' framework, the film's symbolic objects and recurring motifs are revealed as carriers of cultural ideology subtle, yet powerful instruments that shape the characters' perceptions of social mobility. The following discussion presents an in-depth deconstruction of four major narrative elements in Parasite (Kemalasari et al., 2021).

### 1. The Scholar's Stone: From Talisman of Luck to Ideological Burden



(Pict 1: Scholar's Stone)

The Scholar's Stone enters the narrative as a seemingly auspicious gift from Min-hyuk, traditionally associated with prosperity and intellectual refinement. However, through Barthesian analysis, the stone transforms from a decorative object into a symbolic critique of meritocratic ideology.



### a. Denotative Level

At its most literal level, the stone is a heavy, polished viewing stone with no practical value for a poor family struggling to afford food and shelter. It exists purely as an aesthetic object.

### b. Connotative Level

Ki-woo's comment "It's so metaphorical" encapsulates the stone's shift from material object to symbolic signifier. It becomes a representation of the social status Ki-woo desires: academic success, elite cultural capital, and upward mobility. The stone signifies a bridge toward the upper class, not through labor or structural opportunity, but through association with an already privileged friend. Its aesthetic value becomes conflated with social legitimacy.

### c. Myth: The Mirage of Meritocracy

In Barthes' terms, the stone constructs a powerful myth: the belief that owning or mimicking elite symbols can unlock upward mobility. This myth depoliticizes poverty by framing success as a matter of individual will or symbolic alignment rather than structural constraints. The stone becomes fetishized as a magical conduit to a higher class, concealing the reality that economic instability is produced by systemic inequality. The myth collapses symbolically during the flood sequence, where the stone supposedly solid and "wealth-attracting" proves useless, even deadly. It floats amidst sewage, signalling the emptiness of its promised power. Later, when the stone is used as a weapon against Ki-woo, the film suggests that internalized myths of meritocracy do not merely fail the poor they actively harm them.

## 2. The Smell: Naturalizing Poverty as Biological Stigma



(Pict 2: Mr. Kim's smell)



The motif of smell operates as one of the most potent markers of class in *Parasite*. Mr. Park's repeated comments about the Kim family's "subway smell" elevate a mundane sensory detail into a cultural and ideological boundary.

#### **a. Denotative Level**

The odor originates naturally from the Kims' damp semi-basement environment poor ventilation, mold, and inexpensive detergent produce a musty scent typical of crowded urban housing.

#### **b. Connotative Level**

For the Park family, the smell becomes more than bodily odor; it signifies inferiority, rudeness, and an encroachment into elite domestic space. Mr. Park links the smell to public transportation spaces associated with the working class. In this sense, the smell is connoted as "otherness," a bodily marker that reveals and reinforces the social distance between classes.

#### **c. Myth: Inequality as Nature**

Here operates what Barthes calls the myth of naturalization. Instead of interpreting the smell as evidence of structural inequality poor housing conditions, low wages, inadequate infrastructure Mr. Park perceives it as an inherent trait of the poor. This depoliticizes class disparity by framing poverty as a matter of hygiene or personal failing, rather than a product of socio-economic systems. The disgust the Parks express becomes a moral justification for class segregation: if the poor are "naturally" dirty, the rich are "naturally" entitled to distance themselves. The smell thus becomes a biological stigma an invisible but rigid line that defines who belongs "above" and who remains "below."

### **3. The Rain: Bourgeois Aestheticization vs. Subaltern Catastrophe**





*(Pict 3: Heavy Rainfall)*

The heavy rainfall sequence exemplifies the radical inequality of lived experience under capitalism. The same weather event is interpreted as beauty by one class and devastation by another.

#### **a. Denotative Level**

The rain is a meteorological phenomenon water falling in large quantities.

#### **b. Connotative Level**

For the Park family, the rain connotes purity, freshness, and picturesque scenery; it clears the air for their garden party. For the Kim family, the rain connotes contamination, overflowing sewage, homelessness, and total loss. These divergent connotations reveal how class shapes not only material realities but also emotional and aesthetic perceptions.

#### **c. Myth: The Innocence of Privilege**

Barthes describes the ability of dominant classes to transform reality into an aesthetic object as a form of myth-making. Mrs. Park's cheerful remark that the rain was a "blessing" exemplifies this myth of privileged innocence. Her interpretation erases the suffering of the Kim family and reframes the disaster as a minor inconvenience. This "theft of reality," in Barthes' terms, allows the wealthy to exist within a protected bubble of aesthetic pleasure while ignoring the disproportionate impact of environmental and economic crises on the poor. The scene exposes how privilege shields the upper class from consequences that the lower class cannot escape.

#### **4. Stairs and Architecture: The Illusion of Vertical Mobility**



*(Pict 4: Stairs)*



Architecture in Parasite is not a passive background; it is an ideological map of class. The recurring vertical movements ascending to the Parks' hilltop residence and descending to the Kims' semi-basement form the backbone of the film's spatial symbolism.

#### **a. Denotative Level**

The stairs are literal architectural structures connecting different elevations of the city.

#### **b. Connotative Level**

Movement upward signifies aspiration, respectability, and the fantasy of becoming "fully human" within capitalist logic. Downward movement signifies failure, degradation, and return to invisibility. The Parks' airy, minimalist mansion connotes openness and elegance, yet it hides a secret bunker beneath its polished floors, metaphorically suggesting that elite comfort is built on hidden labor and suffering.

#### **c. Myth: The Rigidity of Class Hierarchy**

In capitalist rhetoric, the social ladder is accessible to anyone willing to climb it. Parasite, however, reveals this ladder as structurally one-directional: the poor may climb temporarily, but the descent is inevitable and punishing. Bong Joon-ho's visual emphasis on long, winding stairs highlights the exhausting, endless efforts required for the poor to merely approach privilege. The myth of mobility collapses entirely when the Kims' journey downward after the rain stretches into an impossibly long descent symbolizing the vast, systemic gap between classes. The bunker's presence further illustrates the hierarchy's hidden violence: the poor must remain unseen so that the wealthy may maintain their illusion of safety and sophistication.

Across these four elements, Parasite systematically dismantles the cultural myths that sustain capitalist ideology. The Kim family does not fail because they lack discipline, intelligence, or ambition; they fail because they place faith in symbols stones, certificates, polite speech, clean clothing that cannot overcome structural barriers. Barthes' concept of false consciousness becomes central here: the belief that adopting elite aesthetics will enable upward mobility. The film's ending, where Ki-woo imagines buying the Parks' house only to be returned to the semi-basement in the next shot, presents the shattering of this myth. The visual contrast between dream and reality asserts the impossibility of upward mobility under existing systems. Parasite thus emerges not only as a story about inequality but as a profound critique of the myths that lull oppressed classes into hope, expectation, and inevitable disappointment.

## **CONCLUSION**



Using Roland Barthes' semiotic model, this study concludes that Parasite functions as a powerful cultural text that exposes how contemporary capitalist societies manufacture and sustain myths of social mobility. Through the layered analysis of key narrative elements the Scholar's Stone, bodily smell, the rain, and architectural structures the film reveals how ordinary objects and spatial arrangements naturalize class hierarchy by transforming structural inequality into something that appears personal, natural, or morally justified. The stone embodies the myth of meritocracy, the smell naturalizes the stigma of poverty, the rain illustrates the privilege-based "theft of reality," and the vertical architecture demonstrates the impossibility of upward movement within a rigid social order. Ultimately, Parasite shows that the working class is not merely trapped economically but ideologically, persuaded to believe in symbols, plans, and aspirations that the system itself renders unattainable. The final image of Ki-woo envisioning a future he will never achieve underscores the film's central argument: that hope, within this unequal structure, becomes a tragic myth that perpetuates rather than resolves the cycle of class oppression.

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