

California Dreaminâ??: Hollywoodâ??s Filmic Class Consciousness Represented in Parasite, Harlan County, U.S.A., and Hoffa (1992)

Description

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The imbalance of power created through the exploitation of the working class, and the attempts by individuals to overcome the vast economic disparity between the working class and the capitalist class are represented in the films, *Parasite, Harlan County, U.S.A.,* and H*offa* (1992). Director Bong-ho through the film *Parasite*, provides social commentary on globalization in contrasting two families, in an upstairs/downstairs, upper class-lower-class, framework. The Parks represent the upper-class capitalists, surviving on the labor carried out by the Kim family who are indicative of the lower working class. *Hoffa* (1992), on the other hand, creates a vivid, compelling portrait of large-scale class warfare, from angry confrontations between the Teamster labor union truck drivers and management from the 1930â??s through the Red Scare and into the violent 1970â??s. Barbara Koppleâ??s 1976 documentary, *Harlan County, U.S.A.,* provides an intimate look at a striking Eastern Kentucky labor union, United Mine Workers, coal miners and their violent fight with bottom-line-minded capitalist corporations, corrupt public officials, and gun-wielding anti-strike thugs. Through a comparison and contrast of these three films, two narrative films and one documentary film, similar characteristics from the respective opposing parties form a classist ideology.

In contrast to traditional class systems, Poststructuralism and Marxism see class as a constantly shifting set of relations that can be quite subjective. In â??All That Hollywood Allows: Film and the

Working Class,â?• Linda Dittmar posits, â??Film theory and identity politics are not inherently resistant to class analysis, but they have tended to function this way, even if inadvertently.â?• In contrast to traditional class systems, Poststructuralism and Marxism see class as a constantly shifting set of relations that can be quite subjective. All three films, *Harlan County, U.S.A., Hoffa*, and *Parasite*, create very fluid narratives pitting working class against working class as well as capitalist class against the working class.

In â??A Marxist Analysis of Class Consciousness in Bong Joon-hoâ??s Parasite,â?• Shatabdi Mishra postulates â??The Communist Manifesto, written collaboratively by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, saw the history of the world because of class strugglesâ?¦ The working class who sells their labour as a commodity to sustain and support the economy have been reduced to mere objects that live only to be exploited and taken advantage of by the capitalists.â?• In *Harlan County, U.S.A*., and *Hoffa*, the capitalists have not only their private goons, but they also have regular police confronting and attacking the union members fighting for better pay and safer working conditions. In addition, the wealth gap and allocation of resources are much wider as the upper class has public servants such as the bailiffs, judges, and police ensuring that the non-striking workers are given free access to the Eastover Mining Company coal mines. These situations augment the class oppression as the workers must continue working suffering more serious conditions to receive disability benefits. In *America on Film*, Benshoff refers to this as an implied critique of capitalism. (p.188)



Choi Woo-shik, Song Kang-ho, Jang Hye-jin, and Park So-dam in *Parasite*. Madman Films

Parasite delves into self-alienation and auto-destruction and provides an element of social learning. After the release of *Parasite*, the South Korean government announced plans to financially support 1,500 households living in semi-basement apartments, similar to the ones depicted in the film. In addition, *Parasite* provides class analyses on the South Korean government representation of South Korean capitalism, Native Americans (through the Parksâ?? son), and its relationship to American corporate capitalism, while vividly and humorously showing clashes between the working class. After the Kims have sabotaged the maidâ??s livelihood with the Parks through overt acts misrepresenting the maidâ??s health to Mrs. Parks, the Kims discover the former maidâ??s husband has been living in an underground bunker below the Parks home. An all-out battle ensues for control of who will remain in

the service of the Kims.

In, â??All That Hollywood Allows: Film and the Working Class.â?• Dittmar argues, correctly in my opinion, â??all films are available for class analysisâ?¦. Working-class people in particularâ?¦ are often made the butt of jokes, a cause for distaste, or objects for admiration, but rarely initiators of in-depth debate concerning social justice or the possibility of social change.â?• Without a doubt the Kims are made the butt of jokes due to some odiferous smell the Park family finds offensive. Yet, the plight of the Kim family became a catalyst for social change. James R. Hoffa was a catalyst for the Teamsters and became an agent for social change. Consequently, Hoffa became an object of admiration exemplified by the roadway as Hoffa is being transp



Harlan County, U.S.A.

â?? a film by Barbara Kopple

In *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, Kopple seems to capture both sides of the working class as some are a cause for distaste (the gun thugs) while others were objects of admiration as they spoke for the camera on the importance of collective bargaining and the need to strike for better pay and better working conditions. Kopple also captures footage, at the height of the feminist movement, of a press conference given by Norman Yarborough, President of the Eastover Mining Company (owned by Duke Power). The first question posed to Yarborough asked what Yarborough thought of the role the minersâ?? wives play in the strike. Kopple pushes the camera in for a three-quarter profile, extreme close up capturing the emotionality of the moment. Yarborough boldly grins with his eyes cast downward before answering with a sexist tone, â??They certainly played a big role. Iâ??d hate to think my wife would play this kind of role.â?• The reporter followed up with a â??Why?â?• Yarborough continued, â??Thereâ??s been some conduct that I donâ??t like to think that, that our American women wouldnâ??t have to revert to.â?•

An almost seamless jump cut with the camera captures the four Eastover Mining Company representative sitting behind an ornate meeting table at the height of the feminist movement. All four men are dressed in coat and tie with untrustworthy looks on their faces as a second question is posed from behind the camera, â??Is it a fact that the Duke Power Company maintains housing for its employees that has no water and no indoor plumbing?â?• As Yarborough begins answering with a

â??Yes.â?• Kopple cuts to show the what appears to be a predominantly male, press pool with several cameras and high-key backlighting. Yarborough continued with, â??We were attempting to move our people,â?• Kopple captures a cameraman moving into the center of the frame as Yarborough continues answering the question. Kopple cuts back to another close up of Yarborough, center-frame with highlights in his eyes as Yarborough is positioned almost as though he is looking into the camera. Yarborough proceeds with shifting eyes. â??And these are our people. Theyâ??re my people. And weâ??re going to upgrade our people into trailers. Upgrade our people into better housing. Better conditions. In all directions. Because theyâ??ll make us better people when we are able to do this.â?•

The next scene Kopple shows a cramped street with several dogs and children with cars parked alongside a one lane street before showing a young boy in an open lot with strewn trash, abandoned front end of a truck amidst ramshackle houses. A voice narration reinforces the Marxian premise of class struggle by telling the audience there are two classes of people in Harlan County (the haves and the have nots), â??Itâ??s a feudal system, I think. There is a very rich class of people and then thereâ??s the coal miners.â?• Kopple continues showing b-roll footage of the area with residents calling children, carrying sticks in an area reminiscent of a landfill. â??And then there are the people on relief and thatâ??s about it in Harlan. They want to keep it this way. The wayâ?¦â?• Kopple reveals the voice that has been narrating with an extreme closeup of Houston Elmore, UMW (United Mine Workers) Organizer. â??The way they keep it this way is by keeping a monopoly on the labor market. They do that by keeping other competitors or industries that will be competitive for the labor. They keep them out.â?• While the end seems to justify the means in *Harlan County, U.S.A.,* an ideological conflict is uncovered. The situations are very fluid with hegemonic negotiations showing concessions being earned then negated and absorbed into the dominant ideology. Per Marxism and its â??superstructureâ?• all the elements of culture and ideology are determined by a given societyâ??s economic base.â?• The corporate capitalists espouse that by moving the coal miners into new trailers they themselves will become better people. Meanwhile Kopple records and reveals the over determinist, internalized, populist ideologies of Harlon County citizens commenting on unions as communists and as inflationary drivers.

With *Parasite* Mishra argues â??how Marxist class consciousness enables the characters in the film Parasite to challenge the status quo and the hegemony of the capitalist class. The characters in the films rise their level of class and try to subvert the growing oppression that not only alienates them from others, but also from their own self. *Parasite* is a satire on the dominant class; it shows how the characters mask their identity in the film to infiltrate into the lives of the Park family by donning a â??newâ?• identity to reclaim their position. Such a situation shows up the bleak condition of humanity, of the class, and the society in general. The rich become richer, and the poor becomes even poorer.â?• The Kims seem to reinforce the pessimistic notion that upward economic mobility is the new normal. (Maestu, Week 6). In addition, the Kims suffer from imposter syndrome and strive to perform in a capitalist world to subvert their growing oppression that not only alienates them from others but also from themselves.

In â??They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation,â?• Peter Hitchcock argues, â??Mostâ?¦critics visibly wince at the mention of working-class representation as a significant component of cultural analysis (â??too sociological,â?• â??too political,â?• some may say, while others might offer more interesting but no less dismissive assessments: â??too realist,â?• â??too easy,â?• â??too coarse,â?• or simply â??too lateâ?•) â?¦. The difficulty is not intrinsically about processes of adjudication but more about the elusive and unstable nature of class itself, the

consciousness of which provides its own forms of historical intervention.â?• (pg. 21) In the film, *Hoffa*, Director Danny DeVito, weaves an historic fictional narrative beginning in the 1930â??s, of James R. Hoffa. Hoffa, a rank-and-file member of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters who moved from organizer to National President, arguably became one of the most influential and powerful union leaders in the history of the American labor movement. Harold Myerson in â??What did Hoffa Want,â?• claims â??Itâ??s â?¦Hoffa himself, whose ego, brilliance, rage, and willingness to employ violent and corrupt means transformed an entire sector of once marginalized workers into a blue-collar middle class for several decades while simultaneously casting unions into a public opprobrium from which it has taken labor decades to recover.â?• In keeping with Hollywood filmic tradition both *Hoffa* and *Parasite* punished those who transgressed middle-class morality or civil law. Audiences, on the other hand, related with those who fought against the system.

While the films in some ways support a critique of class, in other ways the films support a capitalist, imperialist, and classist agenda. *Hoffa* does this through his involvement with mob money to finance the teamsterâ??s retirement funding. This approach has its seed in the social problem films, such as *Public Enemy,* from the 1930â??s. *Parasite*, in juxtaposition, uses the Park family, representative of the capitalist class, and the conniving Kim family, representative of the oppressed, scheming to overtake the capitalists Parks in their own home. The Kims are Bong-hoâ??s parasites lying their way into high class jobs and then leaching money from the wealthy Park family. *Harlan County, U.S.A.,* uses corporate capitalism as its oppositional force to the coal minersâ?? strike in Harlan County. Classism and the struggles that occur within the working class continue to evolve and often enable white patriarchal capitalism to exploit the working class in a manner that seems one-sided. While concessions are given, the concessions are soon replaced by the other class.

The films are reflective of the socioeconomic conditions of the time in which they were produced and the time in which they are set. *Harlan County, U.S.A*., uncovers the intersectionality of a civil rights labor struggle with the coal industry dating back to the 1930â??s. As Benshoff states on page 179, â??As per basic Marxism, American culture has consistently produced images that reflect its capitalist economic base, and its motion pictures are certainly part of this dynamic.â?• *Hoffa* follows this trend of the 1950â??s film that circumvent class oppression by showing how Hoffa overcame rather easily, this economic stratification through his rugged determination and his aptitude for numbers. *Harlan* reveals the role of feminism, as Kopple produces a seminal documentary on the Eastover strike of 1973.

Meanwhile, *Parasite* satirizes the vast socioeconomic differences in present-day South Korea. In â??Parasite A House Divided,â?• Amy Taubin references her interview with Bong-ho at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival. Bong-ho said *Parasite* â??was set in the present day and that there are neighborhoods in Seoul where poverty is even direr than in the neighborhood in the film where Ki-taekâ??s family lives. And that the actual gap between the rich and the poor is as unbridgeable as he showed it to be.â?• What Bong-ho didnâ??t say is that the film is also rooted in Postcolonial criticism as the appearance of the housekeeper and her stow-away husband hint towards indentured servitude. So even though the working class believes it has made it, in Korean life, it is a social construct embedded within false consciousness.

Per Marxian theory, as the concept of class is always evolving it is more easily identified by a relational set of characteristics at any point in time. In *Harlan County, U.S.A*, Kopple captures this evolutionary element through the filmâ??s diegetic soundtrack. Kopple uses music to create an ethereal aesthetic related to the labor movement in Harlan County. In *Hoffa*, DeVito uses flashback through the eyes of

Bobby Cairo. The mise-en-scen of Bobbyâ??s flashbacks provide a sense of surrealism and create a feeling of the dream state where any set of relational characteristics can come together at any moment in time to create class. Furthermore, the ending of *Parasite* creates false consciousness in Ki Wooâ??s hallucinatory, dream-like voice over narration of his ambitious pursuit of success and attaining the class, and home, of the Park family. Seemingly, for fleeting moments the working class imagines itself migrating into a socioeconomic middle-class. But, despite all the efforts of the working class, over time the working class is still the working class.

After watching the savage representation of class warfare in these three films, it is wholly plausible â?? advisable â?? that individuals are better off pursuing that which makes them happy instead of chasing after an illusory American Dream.

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