



Focus 87 - 5 ESSENTIAL TRUTHS FROM 'PARASITE'

A note to us, European Academics and Policy Makers

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18 May 2020 - DOI: 10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5641.F87



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Abstract

This article is a note to European academics and policy makers involved in world affairs. It uses the South Korean movie 'Parasite' (Joon-ho, 2019) as an analogy to make a few comments, with a slight emphasis on Bangladeshi realities.

The movie in analysed through Aristotle's Poetics (2013) and the concept of Art as Mimesis, 'the recreation of the world according to its Essential Truths' (Kearney, 2002, p. 131). We theorised five Essential Truths from the film:

1. **On intelligence** – <u>comfort thwarts lucidity</u>

2. **Rainstorms only look beautiful from comfortable distance** – <u>the</u> <u>harmonious revolution is a myth</u>

3. Aristotle's Tragedy is Essential Truth - <u>mighty Nature, might-less</u> <u>humans</u>

4. **I, too, would be a nice person**... - <u>context-free 'freedom of choice' is a</u> <u>myth</u>

5. How easy It Is To Be Fooled! – <u>delusion is a liability</u>

<u>Keywords</u>

Parasite, Capitalism, Aristotle, World History, Development, Development politics, Bangladesh, Bangladeshi elections



A note on the movie's title. We believe it sends the wrong message. For it is never the poor who encroach on the rich – it's the opposite. The blessed few are the parasites, always have been, because for them to enjoy a great deal more resources than they produce, the great mass of not-blessed-few must produce a great deal more than they consume. We will henceforth refer to the film as 'Penelope Cruz's favourite Movie'.

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ONE

If you have flown with Air Emirates recently, you may have noticed on the film menu a section featuring Penelope Cruz. You may have noticed Cruz's favourite movie right now: South-Korea-produced 'Parasite' (Joon-ho, 2019). You may have watched it. We couldn't recommend more.

In this movie, an economically unfortunate family unit of four very bright human beings (middle-aged parents and young adult brother and sister) develops a scheme to encroach on a very well-to-do household by occupying various [lucrative] serving positions. The scheme is merit-based insofar as all the new servants are extremely qualified for each position. It is also utterly illegal and amoral: it involves heartless deception of the well-to-do parent unit – and the heartless ousting of previous servants, one of which (the previous governess) is soon to figure in a poignant plot twist.

'Parasite' has proved tremendously popular around the world. Although Penelope Cruz doesn't expand on why this is her favourite movie, we can try to guess. We believe the movie's hangs on two feats: Keeping It Real, and Keeping it Simple.

First, the movie Keeps It Real. In the language of Aristotle's Poetics (as interpreted by Kearney, 2002, pp.131-145), 'Parasite' achieves perfect *Mimesis: 'the re-creation of reality according to its Essential Truths'*. The great personal abilities of the ruthless deceivers, matched by a repulsive lack of socio-economic success, reflects the situation faced by the bulk of the human population on this earth. As do the amoral attitudes sheer poverty routinely demands of those impacted by it. On the other hand, the naïveté of the privileged is astounding – and poignantly



relatable: after all, duly considering the world's misery for even a minute is exhausting. Just don't do it. The well-to-do mother is gullible to the extreme, as are so many of us who can afford not to have a clue. When a monsoon rainstorm episode unfolds, the unfortunate have their dwellings destroyed; the well-to-do rejoice with the 'refreshing episode' and are inspired to do a great party on the lawn. Again, all of this strikes, because all of this 'recreates Essential Truths'. In this case, essential truths that are systematically repressed because of their sheer brutality.

South Korea is very well-positioned to create this type of 'Truth-In-Capitalism' blockbusters. It knows the paradoxes and absurdities of socioeconomic existence - successful and unsuccessful and everywhere in between like few other nations do. As a small, poor, powerless country, it was recently partitioned, according to the wishes of superpowers halfway across the world (and on an entirely arbitrary basis), along the 38° 'N' parallel. The senseless division of a tight national unit in two blocks - one Communist and one Capitalist - persists to this day, also because it reflects the duality between neighbours China and Japan. So even as South Korea is very rich today, it can never forget what it means to be utterly poor – nor the advantages and disadvantages of being poor in socialism versus being poor in capitalism. It knows the Russian concept: a small truth [Pravda in Russian] is opposed by a *lie*; a *Big Truth [Instina*] is opposed by another *Big* Truth (e.g. Yurchak, 2005). Systematically entertaining radically different worldviews fosters lucidity, the ability to perceive Essential Truths conventionally unseen. A phenomenon probably heightened by the periodic threat of world war that keeps everyone on their toes.

But 'Parasite' is awesome also because it Keeps It Simple. It is indeed because the movie Keeps It Simple that it is so widely understood. The visuals are uncomplicated; the film is quiet. We can focus on the central message. The plot is straightforward; it occurs in familiar settings. The members of the well-to-do family are largely one-dimensional: utterly privileged and utterly clueless (the husband is also a class bigot). The other characters, the economically unfortunate family and the ex-governess with her husband, are developed just enough to add a few further paradoxes: yes, even in economic despair, there are moral choices to be made; yes, different persons deal with despair differently; yes, bigotry is acutely offensive; yes, the best will be sacrificed.

Universal truths in simplified format: the recipe for a universally acclaimed





TWO

Academics often have a hard time Keeping It Real, and an even hardest time Keeping It Simple. Yet these are the greatest ambitions of the effective communicator. So here are Five Essential Truths from 'Penelope Cruz's favourite Movie'. A note to European academics and policy makers.

1. On intelligence

The gullible, naïve, completely oblivious well-to-do mother, so clueless of the real challenges in human existence, is but a reflection of us all. In more ways than one.

First, all of us living protected, comfortable existences by definition lack the infinite 'extra' capacities demanded by poverty and its zillion injustices. This is true of all well-to-do citizens across the world. Every inch we take for granted must be fought for to the bone by our brothers and sisters, and this perennial fight demands more cognitive capacities than those we can afford *not* to develop.

Jared Diamond (1997, pp15-17) notes it in his awesome Guns, Germs and Steel: 'citizens' of non-writing cultures are necessarily much more intelligent than those trained in writing, because the lack of written technology demands the memorization of infinitely more information, as well as constant and infinitely varied associations amongst all that information in everyday living. Stephen Pinker reinforces in his *How the Mind Works* (a book entirely dedicated to metacognition): 'street smarts' involves infinitely more (neurons and) neural connections than 'book smarts' (Pinker, 2019). Managing 'earthly' life involves more brain work, more cognitive development, more intelligence. Now. Writing technology in general, and deep academic knowledge in particular, do confer more abstract knowledge - hence more *power* – to their holders. But only because said holders benefit from millennial technology and information gathering not of their own making. Thinking the specific academic is more intelligent than the specific 'street-smarter' is like thinking the hydrogen atom in a star is more capable than the hydrogen atom in an interstellar dust cloud. The star atom is involved in an immensely powerful construction, and performs nuclear fusion with relatively small effort. The hydrogen atom in the cloud is bombarded by random energy flows of various kinds



and from all directions, not to mention all the other atoms and various particles. It doesn't perform nuclear fusion, because it's way too busy surviving. A task immensely more difficult at all events.

When nothing works, the level of mental energy (aka intelligence) required is awesome – even as end results are often poor. On the other hand, when all one has to do is follow a plan...you know.

So all of us comfortable thinkers, who get to write and read articles on Penelope Cruz's Favourite Movie, are necessarily less intelligent than our less fortunate sisters and brothers. But further. Us rich-white-western citizens, European Academics and Policy Makers included, do not even make it to second place. For not only are we often clueless of the challenges faced by our own exploited classes, but also of the challenges faced by bulk of the world – the so-called 'Developing World'. All else being equal, a Bangladeshi thinker is necessarily much more intelligent than a Norwegian thinker. For the Bangladeshi thinker can never settle for understanding 'universal' [western-originated] ideals regarding life - and regarding how a socio-political-economic should ideally function – alone. In purely academic terms, she or he must apprehend radically different languages, radically different civilizations, radically different worldviews - and be at ease in at least two of these. But further, no Bangladeshi can escape the gazillion ways Beautiful Western Theory fails to materialize in the Real World of Local Facts. The Bangladeshi thinker, academic, policy maker must excel both at opposing theoretical systems and at computing an infinity of paradoxes largely invisible to the Norwegian thinker, academic, policy maker.

Essential Truth number 1: comfort thwarts lucidity.

2. Rainstorms only look beautiful from comfortable distance.

In the movie, the same rainstorm that looks so romantic and inspiring when seen from the sophisticated well-to-do home utterly floods/ destroys the humble abode of our anti-heroes. The news of floods and destruction do pop up on TV up at the well-to-do's, but aren't paid attention to. For all eyes are on the big party that is now to take place on the refreshed lawn. And guess who has a whole lot of work to do to ensure it's a dazzling success?

Such is life, and the point is not to blame anyone. In Portugal, once a retrograde fascist regime, we were taught in childhood: it's not 'picturesque',





darling; it's called *poverty*. The mistake is easy to make. And one would never ever dream of how offensive taking a selfie would be.

More generally speaking, monsoon rainstorms feed nature, recycle water, clear the air, and generally perpetuate life. They are also extremely violent and chaotic, with massive destructive potential. They can look good from a sheltered place – in either Time or Space. Things are different in lived experience.

The technological war to tame the effects of floods is immemorial, but lest we forget: the flood is the rule of nature; the irrigation system is the exception. In fact (e.g. Diamond, 1997, Chpt 10; Christian & McNeill, 2004, pp. 223-234), all the world's first 'great civilizations', from Mesopotamia to Peru, all irrigationbased, all 'emerged' in desertic areas. The 'civilizational motivation' was the desert; every irrigation system 'developed' through endless cycles and death and misery. Only in hindsight does the process look smooth, not to mention advantageous to those involved. Similar earthly examples abound - the emergence of photosynthesis for instance, and the astronomical 'Oxygen Holocaust' (e.g. Christian, 2014) that came with it. European history sticks to the norm. To mention one detail alone, the UK's now symbolic 'Enclosure Act' of 1801, barring peasants from access to traditionally shared lands - thus robbing them of their means of subsistence and forcing them into urban migration. The untold deaths, the hunger and sickness, the countless miseries that ensued were all part of the Great Scheme of Things. After all, land reform is sine qua non to urbanization and Industrialization. The rainstorm fulfilled its purpose. Still, it only looks beautiful from a comfortable distance.

There's a reverse side of coin here. It can be argued that we European academics and Policy Makers often suffer from what Francis Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 2011, p.15) calls 'Historical Amnesia'. In his words: '*Most people living in rich, stable developed countries have no idea how Denmark itself got to be Denmark—something that is true for Danes as well. The struggle to create modern political institutions was so long and so painful that people living in industrialized countries now suffer from a historical amnesia regarding how their societies came to that point in the first place.' The amnesia becomes a problem when we analyse current rainstorms with a magnifying glass. These of course abound, as the bulk of humanity is still on its 'Developmental Path'. Anyone daring to look closely is shocked by the violence, the absurdities, the 'corruption', etc. It's*





easy to judge and look for specific culprits, someone to blame for all this injustice. It's easy to forget that the rain unfolds beyond anybody's particular will, and that managing a rainstorm is, well, impossible for individuals.

Of course, we Europeans have a duty to assist in tackling rainstorms. Irrigation systems must be built; the tools available to us are more advanced than those available to our ancestors. Complacence, conformism, acceptance are no options. Exactly because we Europeans went through the Industrializing rainstorm, we now have the duty to use our knowledge and experience. As long as we remember what the experience is actually like.

Essential Truth number 2: the harmonious revolution is a myth

3. Aristotle's Tragedy is Essential Truth

In Penelope Cruz's Favourite Movie, immense violence and tragedy ensue. By which we mean violent deaths all over, and the profoundest repercussions for the few survivors. It's just horrible – and it strikes, because it recreates Essential Truths. The final scene portrays a dream by a helpless boy: 'One day I will be rich, buy this [well-to-do] house, and live happily ever after'. The world's tragedy is only cognizable through hope.

It can be argued that Europeans have all the background needed to fully make sense of the world we live in. After all, we made it. Once. We did free ourselves from many intellectual chokes; we developed universalist visions; we even envisioned humanity's [earthly] salvation based on citizen equality and mutual understanding. Marx was European; China is Marxist. The Modern State, now imposed all over the globe, was developed on European lands. We could go on. The point being that we must, absolutely must, use our universalizing background to try and improve the world. And we all know this very well.

Aristotle's *Poetics* is from a different European school – the one at the basis of all others. The work discusses the nature of Human Art, the types of artworks, and the rules for the most 'well-formed' artwork. Aristotle argued that humans, unlike the rest of creation, have an instinctive desire for knowledge. We're imbued with a ceaseless search for answers. We're the only ones who know they will die. As Dostoevsky pointed out, we're also the only sinners of all existence. We're the only ones facing life's absurdities. Thus only we can develop Art – which, according to Aristotle, quests for a specific type of knowledge: that of Essential



Truths. The quality of a work of art hangs on the degree to which *Mimesis*, the 'recreation of the world according to its Essential Truths', is accomplished. A good work of art involves a great *Mimesis* from the artist. It also arouses in the audience great *Catharsis*, the intellectual-emotional appeasement felt before the recreation of an Essential Truth.

For Aristotle, the greatest form of Art of all was theatrical Tragedy. Tragedy, according to him, 'mimics' the greatest Essential Truths – <u>the astounding power of 'Nature', matched only by the astounding powerlessness of the Human</u>. The rules of a well-formed Tragedy are complex. The plot overcomes any specific personality. The Tragedy unfolds 'through necessarily connected events' but also 'contrary to expectation'. *Hubris*, arrogance, is the worst. *Harmatia*, a mistake that is condemnable but also entirely understandable, if not forgivable, dictates the final mayhem. Ultimately, ignorance and impotence must lie at the heart of the matter. If all such conditions are met, the Tragedy accomplishes the greatest *Mimesis*. It also awakens the greatest *Catharsis*: it floods the audience with what Aristotle considered to be the most powerful sensations humans can experience. These are 'Awe' when faced with the mind-boggling powers of Nature, and 'Sympathy' when faced with fellow humans fighting such powers.

One could argue that a short summary of *Poetics*, and of equivalents from other civilizations, should be mandatory policy amongst media outlets around the globe. For the world is not short on rainstorms and tragedies, yet it certainly falls short on Awe and Sympathy. Of course, we cannot dictate the structure and philosophy of mass communication. But we can refuse to give in, and focus on Essential Truths instead. Let us be guided by a full conscience of the overwhelming injustices of the world, and a full conscience of the eye-popping life struggles faced by our fellow humans. As we ambition to make the world a better place, we can actively choose to see it in the light of 'Awe' and 'Sympathy'.

Essential Truth number 3: Mighty Nature, Might-less humans

4. I, too, would be a nice person...

At one point in the movie – inspired by alcohol – someone does mention how 'nice' the utterly conned well-to-do mother is. But the audience lacks the time to engage in that train of thought. 'Yeah, yeah, yeah. I, too, would be 'nice' if I had all that money!' Hm. Moving on, then.



That statement is both entirely true and partly true. It's entirely true that 'being nice' – always 'doing the right thing', for instance – is a socio-economic luxury afforded to few. In *The Democracy Sourcebook* (Przeworski, 1999, p.12) we can read: the threshold for 'the miracle of democracy' to last within a collective is 6000\$ yearly GDP per capita. Below that symbolic number, no one can afford to 'do the right thing'. It's not about 'right', it's about 'real'. Bottom-up, voters' political 'freedom' is severely hampered, if not made impossible, when citizens lack the necessary material comfort [aka independence] to make 'detached choices'. Top-down, 'freedom' is hampered by a chronic lack of capital to invest and redistribute: for instance, sheer citizen poverty means a whole lot less 'do-the-right-thing cooperation', which means that maintaining control and coordination becomes extremely hard.

On the other hand, the statement is also only partly true. In the movie, the anti-hero family mother and the governess, equal in economic position, have different values, different conceptions of honour and fairness. They make different moral choices, even as both their actions are morally questionable. So in the developing world, Iran (4,091\$ GDP per capita, 2021; Data Commons[b], 2023) is not Bangladesh (2,457\$ GDP per capita, 2021, Data Commons[a], 2023). The same can be said, albeit in a different ethical realm, of China and India. India and Bangladesh are both strong democracies insofar as democratic values are deeply rooted in each nation's values system. This is all the more impressive when one considers the tragedies faced by each country. If anyone entertains the slightest doubt about Bangladesh's top-down commitment to democracy, we suggest reading Blowing in the Wind by Shamsad Mortuza (2023). The work is a collection of social commentaries on Bangladeshi life published in the Bangladeshi 'Daily Star' - and instantly Googleable (!). One learns eye-popping, mind-boggling, soul-drenching dysfunction in bureaucratic management, in the healthcare sector, in the police sector, all across civil society, and everywhere in between. One reads, time and again: it's the leech 'go-betweeners' that profit from ever deficient bureaucratic policies; it's the incompetence of ill-prepared and economically shaky sociopolitical agents; above all, it's the sheer despair and hard lives of the bulk of the population. In other words, the problem lies in the fog of war of kaleidoscopic, most often informal socio-political and economic relations. These are hard to legislative and even harder to control. They just unfold despite the best intentions of any





individual involved – be she or he a voter, a policy maker, or both.

And now, as General Elections approach in Bangladesh, once again a level of violence is indeed expected – but not because anyone wishes it so; much less because policy makers 'plan it'. What is at stake is not the nation's 'general policies' (Bangladesh is faring well enough in macroeconomic terms) but the material well-being, if not survival, of voters. In the *fog of war*, wherein basic material security is seldom guaranteed by 'the state' or 'the economy', personal allegiances and 'patronage structures' are still key factors in the perennial struggle for material security. Such is the price, it seems, of upholding democracies among huge and destitute populations.

None of this means, of course, that anyone is to lack the ambition for a better tomorrow. Bangladeshis certainly don't – and for good reason: the nation's overall statistical trend is extremely positive. Bangladeshis know that today is way better than yesterday, that tomorrow will be better than today, and the day after that probably better still. The fight goes on; no one's backing down. So, too, European academics and policy makers have the duty to contribute as much as possible to a better tomorrow in Bangladesh and elsewhere. The fight for Democracy couldn't be more real. In so doing, however, definitions of right and wrong must be a little expanded – encompass a whole lot of absurdities and paradoxes and tragedies we're just not used to. Only when we understand what's really at stake can we understand specific actions.

Essential Truth number 4: context-free 'freedom of choice' is a myth

5. How easy it is to be fooled!

Yes, how easy it was to fool the well-to-do parent unit (and their young daughter). Almost ridiculously easy, really. For the economically unfortunate knew perfectly well what the well-to-do would think, when they would think it, and what they would consequently do. All one needed was to pull the right strings. It worked like a charm. And it could have gone on for quite some time. Also because, on their part, the well-to-do simply had no clue.

As Roger Pane once noted: 'Any observant local knows more than any visiting scientist. Always. No exceptions', (in Clear, 2023). Of course, no one likes to think they are being fooled. Much less respected academics and mighty policy makers. Yet we Europeans, perhaps more than any others (except North



Americans?) would probably gain from coming back to Socrate's basic words of wisdom: *I Know Only That I Don't Know*. Lest we forget, self-questioning is healthy and breeds lucidity. It's good for us.

It's incredibly easy to be fooled. We're not the shrewdest thinkers around, by any measure. We're comfortable, we're well-to-do, we're naïve. We are plagued by amnesia, by illusion, by ignorance. We think perhaps a bit too highly of ourselves and of how *nice* we are?

Clearly, we're gullible. When we hear of violent deaths or disappearances in Bangladesh, we often take information at face value, without checking. 'Violence in Bangladesh' appeals to our prejudices, not to mention the righteous image we have of ourselves. We're far too rapid to take action (action we believe is of our own volition but that was in fact strategically planned by others), and we often look, well, foolish as a result (e.g. Somoy, 2023). For we may not understand Bangladeshis, but they certainly understand us. So we often become paws in Bangladesh's internal *fog of war* and related struggles.

Because morality often gets in the way of such procedures, we're often best conned by those less morally inclined. All else being equal, Islamists are better at disinformation than democrats.

On the other hand, we're also clearly well-intentioned. We know, for instance, that Bangladesh is one of the west's very best friends worldwide. We can read statistical charts, and we're aware of all the accomplishments. We know Bangladesh used our economic assistance packages in a fight for the greater good. We know that in an increasingly Asian-centred world, we must cherish our allies. Our new, 400 billion \$ worth (Lynch, 2023) development package to Bangladesh speaks much louder than our words or EU Parliament Resolutions (European Parliament, 2023).

We wish Bangladesh well. Overall, we know that Bangla interests coincide with our own. We're just often lost in distant realities we do not understand. A problem with a relatively simple solution: work harder and start understanding further.

Essential Truth number 5: delusion is a liability





THREE (CONCLUSION)

This article was supposed to be a lot shorter than it is. Penelope Cruz's Favourite Movie Keeps It much Realer and Simpler than this text. Nothing is ever as envisioned, it seems that delusion is an integral part of academic life. We do hope the articulation in five Essential Truths allowed us a measure of clarity in our thoughts: (1) humility as starting point; (2) myth-busting as first basis; (3) Awe and Sympathy guiding enquiries; (4) full picture as final goal; (4) humility again, to complete the cycle. Perhaps starting over – if we're lucky, starting over indefinitely?

A note to self – European, academic, citizen with ambitions to be useful: when trying to understand the world out there, work harder, understand further. Even then, remember you still have no clue. Lest we forget, it's impossible to get the full picture. The proverbial 'digging deeper' is not something you can finish. Self-deception is not something you can beat. Ignorance is definitely not something you can overcome.

Still. Understanding is always a collective endeavour, if we're lucky. Europeans are definitely amongst the earth's currently lucky few. We have all the experience; we enjoy a universalist cultural background; we even still enjoy a great measure of material power in world affairs. We can use all these assets for the greater good, indeed we must. As the French say: 'After the Criticism Must Come the Outstanding Statement'. We're so good at criticizing the world out there (not to mention, each other). We have it in us to contribute to better alternatives instead.



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