



Existence is a Location: “The Others” in the Form of Conceptual Metaphor

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Volume 11.2 (2023) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2023.591 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

Abstract

The need for a safe, stable, and suitable place of residence is fundamental for human beings. Nevertheless, having such a place, particularly in a city, remains unattainable for too many people. This study aims to examine how “the others” are metaphorically represented in contemporary South Korean films that portray city dwellers struggling to find a place of residence in urban areas and fighting for their existence. The multimodal analysis of conceptual metaphors enabled us to comprehend how the metaphor of EXISTENCE IS A LOCATION emphasized the significance of physical space for one’s being. Furthermore, the vertical movements in visual representations, such as GOOD IS UP, BAD IS DOWN, connect to more abstract meanings of precarious existence, social hierarchy, and otherness.

Keywords: otherness; conceptual metaphor; multimodal metaphor; precarious existence; housing instability



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Existence is a Location: “The Others” in the Form of Conceptual Metaphor¹

Park Morgan Mok-Won

Introduction

Having a safe, stable, and suitable place of residence is a fundamental need for human beings. Nevertheless, having such a place, particularly in a city, remains unattainable for too many people. Despite the historical role of cities in bringing people together, the truth is that many urban residents face challenging living conditions. In August 2020, a record-setting heavy rainfall occurred in the South Korean capital of Seoul, exposing the inadequate housing situations of city dwellers living in semi-basement apartments. Since the advent of modern times, cities have served as a gathering point for anonymous crowds referred to as “strangers” by Bauman (2008, p. 88) who are not like us. The stratification of city residents is a reality in which they are ranked based on the extent to which they disregard the existence of other strangers (Bauman, 2008, p. 89). In other words, the individuals at the lower end of the socioeconomic hierarchy in urban areas are frequently unnoticed and categorized as *others*. The term *otherness* refers to individuals who are situated beyond the margins of dominant cultural representations and the social symbolic order

(Plate, 1999, p. 4). *Otherness* serves as a means of social exclusion in discourse, whereby certain social actors are relegated to the margins, ignored, or placed in the background (Park, 2021).

This present study aims to examine the metaphorical visualization of the concept of otherness in films that feature city dwellers struggling to find a place of residence within a city and, in turn, fighting for their existence. Films, as a medium of multimodality, produce, invent, and portray others in various visual forms; multimodality is a term that refers to “the combination of different modes of communication and representation, employed in a variety of aesthetic and functional contexts in contemporary media culture” (Sachs-Hombach & Jan-Noël, 2019, p. 183). By analyzing multimodal metaphors, this study investigates the depiction of otherness and its metaphorically representation in the context of urban dwelling as depicted in a selection of five contemporary South Korean films: *The things she can't avoid in the city* (2008), *The House* (2011), *Parasite* (2019), *Sinkhole* (2021), and *Homeless* (2022).

To investigate conceptual metaphors, WordNet has been utilized as a tool. WordNet is a lexical database that organizes English words based on their meanings and groups them together. Additionally, WordNet establishes superordinate-subordinate relations that link more general concepts to increasingly specific ones. Therefore, WordNet can be utilized to determine the degree of cross-domain mapping in each comparison (Sorm, 2018, p. 72).

Conceptual metaphors

Metaphor has been widely recognized as a fundamental conceptual tool utilized by human beings to comprehend and interpret the world around them (Forceville, 2016). Humans have a tendency to systematically conceptualize particular phenomena in terms of the use of other related phenomena, resulting in a diverse range of linguistic manifestations representing a single conceptual metaphor. An illustration of this phenomenon can be found in the conceptual metaphor GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN, which is commonly manifested in linguistic expressions such as *things are looking up* and *I am feeling down*. These linguistic expressions can be rephrased as *things are improving* or *things are getting better*, and *I feel depressed* or *I feel unhappy*, respectively. It is important to note that language is merely one mode of expression for metaphorical cognition, among several others.

The conceptual correlation between GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN is not solely limited to written or verbal communication, but extends to multimodal discourse, including visual arts. Theories of visual cognition propose that individuals are able to swiftly recognize the contents of an image by drawing upon a cognitive model of it (Schilperoord, 2018, p. 16). As a multimodal text, film is meaningfully structured by a range of semiotic modes and is a dynamic, yet formally confined artefact that follows in chronological and linear order. Depending on the context, film

may elicit various communicative intentions (Wildfeuer, 2014). Despite the prevalence of nonverbal metaphors, they have not received the same level of empirical investigation and rigorous analysis as language-based metaphors (Steen, 2018).

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) asserts that metaphors are processed by cross-domain mapping, which establishes sets of correspondences between distinct mental domains by mapping clearly depicted concepts onto less accessible ones. Forceville (2009, p. 28) further note that it is through human physical interaction with the world that humans become familiar with it to such an extent that resulting knowledge structures can, in turn, be mapped onto abstract concepts. This process creates conceptual metaphors that are embodied in two ways: via embodied cognitive primitives that structure frames in frame-to-frame mappings and via primary metaphors that anchor human metaphoric systems in embodied experiences. The embodiment of cognitive primitives and primary metaphors facilitates the embodiment of abstract concepts.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) identified three distinct types of conceptual metaphors: orientational, ontological, and structural metaphors, based on the particular construal of the metaphor. Orientational metaphors, such as GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN, establish a link between spatial orientation and more abstract meanings. These metaphorical orientations are not arbitrary but are instead grounded in our physical and cultural experiences, and they fundamentally shape

our perception and experiences. The physical basis for personal well-being, such as happiness, health, life, and control, are primarily characterized as UP and are associated with GOOD, while the opposite is associated with BAD.

Ontological metaphors enable us to conceptualize a range of experiences, including events, activities, emotions, and ideas, as entities that we can be extracted or interpreted in our own terms. For instance, increasing prices can be understood metaphorically as an entity, as demonstrated by the expression, *Inflation is lowering our standard of living*. The conceptual metaphor INFLATION IS AN ENTITY allows us to refer to, identify, compare, and comprehend the experience of *inflation*.

Structural metaphors go beyond orientational and ontological metaphors in that they enable us to use a highly structured and clearly defined concept to structure another concept. For example, the RATIONAL ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor conceptualizes a rational argument in terms of physical conflict, which allows us to understand it more readily. The metaphorical framework is based on the assumption that animals and humans both fight for food, but humans use more sophisticated techniques in their conflicts. Other example expressions could be: *Your claims are indefensible; He attacked every weak point in my argument*.

In the context of multimodal metaphor another significant aspect is incongruity. This occurs when a certain unit of an image's representational meaning displays a property that is unusual or atypical

in the context of the situation it depicts (Sorm, 2018, p. 17). These distort operations may involve an object's size or the size of its attributes, changing its shape, altering the material it is made of, or adjusting its location in a given scene, among other possibilities (Schilperoord, 2018, p. 26).

BAD IS DOWN: “The others” in the semi-basement apartments

The House (2011), a film directed by Kim Wang-Geol, presents us with a stark portrayal of the challenges faced by the urban poor amidst skyrocketing real estate prices. The film is a non-verbal short production that heavily relies on visual narrative to convey its message, and therefore does not feature any audible dialogue. The cinematography is presented in monochromatic tones, using blank and white shades to create a sketch-like effect. The opening scene features a serene music accompanied by ambient city sounds including the rush of passing vehicles and distant car horns. Figure 1 depicts wide-angle shots of buildings, with a man visible through a window in the central building. The salience is given to the apartment building in the middle. To the left is a building that appears to be under construction, with exposed frames and stacked bricks, which is a typical scene in a bustling city. To the right is another multi-story building, shown partially. In the left captured scene of Figure 1, the man on the first floor looks down at pedestrians on the street below. Between the two given scenes, he visited a real estate agency and found out that the deposit for his

rental home has significantly increased. In the subsequent scene, a semi-basement floor is added, with a window at ground level and a door that is partially underground. The man, who unable to afford the rising rents, is forced to move from the first floor to the partially underground unit.

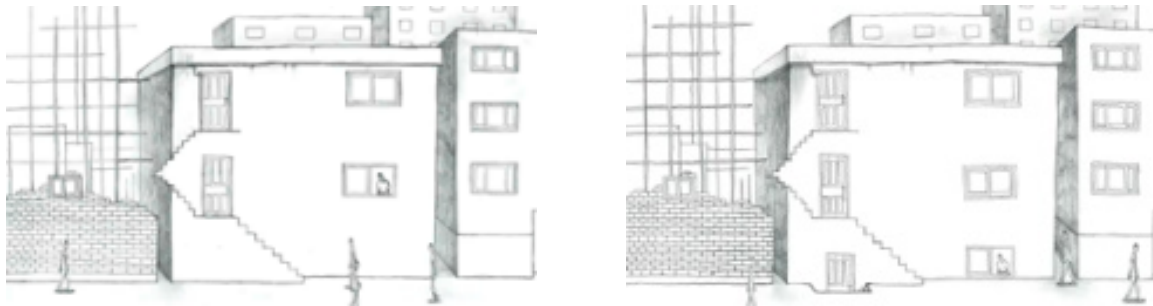


Figure 1. Long shots of the building in *The House* (2011)

Figure 2 comprises close-up shots of the middle-aged tenant at the window. He gazes down at the street on the left, while people resembling him walk the street and cars pass by. These individuals appear indifferent to one another, with their gazes focused straight ahead as they walk. In contrast, on the right side, the man is now seen at ground level through the window, with the wheels of cars and people's legs at his eye level. Having been relocated to a street-level apartment, the tenant has to look upwards to observe the outside world, instead of looking downwards as before. The tenant appears dispirited, with his head bowed in despair. *The House* (2011) remains relevant even a decade after its release, as its narrative continues to connect the literal downward movement of a house and its resident to worsening housing conditions.



Figure 2. Close-up shots of the man in *The House* (2011)

The habitability of subterranean spaces for human habitation is a matter of ongoing debate among architects and urban planners. In general, such spaces are not deemed suitable for residential purposes. The film *Parasite* (2019), directed by Bong Joon-Ho, presents a vivid portrayal of an impoverished Kim family who are confronted with the daily struggle of making ends meet. The title of the movie itself alludes to “the others” who live in semi-basement levels, referring to the lower social class that exploits and benefits from upper social class. The Kim family resides in a semi-basement apartment, and due to the apartments’ subterranean nature, they must look upward through their window as illustrated in Figure 3. Furthermore, semi-basement apartments are particularly susceptible to flooding during the rainy season; when it rains, water accumulates inside the house.



Figure 3. Window and flooding in Parasite (2019)

Parasite (2019) also pinpoints that the window to the ground allows outsiders to easily peer into the living space. The window, through which we observe the world from the perspective of the house, highlights the disconnect between those who are able to observe societal changes and those who remain invisible to the rest of society. In other words, passerby, symbolizing the larger society, are unable to discern the struggles and changes that “the others” are experiencing. Besides, through the window, car exhaust fumes and disinfectant smoke can easily infiltrate the apartment, and due to the limited amount of natural light that can enter the semi-basement, the Kim family keeps the lights on at all times. Such living conditions can exacerbate issues with dampness, and unpleasant odors that are commonly associated with underground living spaces.

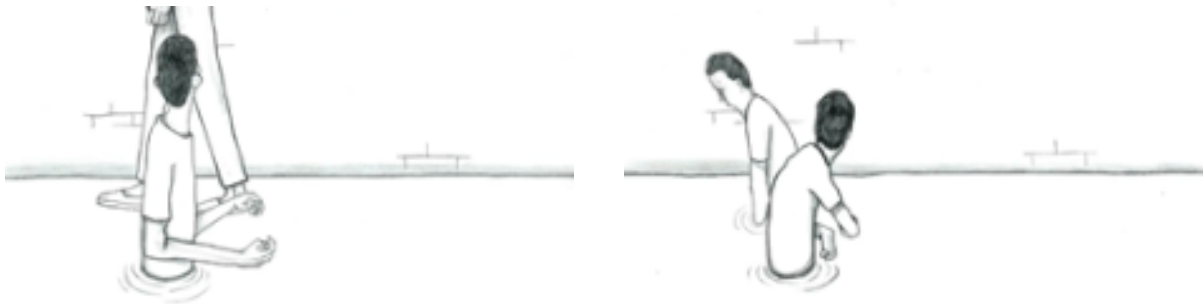
Both *The House* (2011) and *Parasite* (2019) embed the orientational metaphor of DOWN for BAD by connecting negative elements such as invisibility, dirtiness, and darkness to semi-basement apartments. The films employ the vertical movement of the man and his apartment to illustrate how “the others” are forced to move down the social hierarchy and become invisible to society. The tenant in *The House* (2011) appears to be marginalized and isolated, left to cope with the deteriorating state of his living conditions on his own, while the Kim family in *Parasite* (2019) also struggles greatly.

Furthermore, the vertical image of a house serves as a metaphorical representation for the hierarchical structure of society. The verticality of the house is used to convey the idea that the higher one's social position, the more elevated and prestigious their residence will be. The VERTICALITY of the house is then mapped onto the HIERARCHY of our society. Thus, the structural conceptual metaphors of HIERARCHY IS VERTICALITY and SOCIETY IS HOUSE can be comprehended, allowing us to understand the relationship between social status and physical elevation.

EXISTENCE IS A LOCATION: “The others” simply do not exist

As a consequence of the soaring real estate prices, the man depicted in Figure 4 finds himself without a home and is left on the streets. In this image, the man has only his upper body on the ground while people indifferently pass by him. The man's body appears to be firmly entrenched in the ground with his height only reaching up to the knees of the people passing. The ground beneath him seems to be in a liquid form, resembling a swamp that suck him in, making it difficult for him to extricate himself from this situation. The man looks up to the nearest passerby for help, but the people passing by simply ignore him as if he were an inanimate object, rendering him invisible as an “other”. On the right side, the man's posture has changed; his shoulders are

slumped, and his arms are awkwardly bent forward. His upper body remains on the ground as another man, who looks identical to the evicted tenant, flows in the watery ground, moving past him with indifference, with no interaction between them.



*Figure 4. Man's upper body on the street in *The House* (2011)*

In Figure 4, two distant groups of people can be observed: those standing above the ground and those whose bodies are partially submerged in the ground. The former can be interpreted as representative of society's indifference or lack of awareness towards the man in need. The latter belongs to the same disadvantaged group as the man, but no exchange or interaction takes place within this homogeneous group. It can be argued that the man is marginalized or othered by both those representing the broader society and those who share his disadvantaged status.

The man's body continues to sink to the floor. On the left in Figure 5, only the man's head remains above the ground, it is tilted towards the ground in a resigned manner. As his struggle for survival comes to an end, only ripples are visible in the subsequent scene, signifying the disappearance of the human figure. Then, the tranquil music starts to play, suggesting a sense of normalcy despite the man's tragic fate. Finally, even the ripples disappear, as if no one had been there. This portrayal of the man's complete disappearance can be seen as an instance of society othering a human being.



Figure 5. Man's head on the street in *The House* (2011)

The ontological metaphor of EXISTENCE IS VISIBILITY is embedded in *The House* (2011), in which the source domain is VISIBILITY and the target domain is EXISTENCE. In order to maintain their existence, those who are marginalized or considered as “the others” need to occupy a physical space. However, the tenant who inhabited substandard living conditions is constantly exposed to perilous circumstances, rendering them overlooked and invisible to those who reside above street level and relegating them to the status of “the others”. As a result, he receives no assistance and descend further towards the brink of nonexistence. The act of existing is likened to a visible object that becomes apparent once it comes into view.

Similarly, in the film *Sinkhole* (2021), the orientational metaphor of DOWN for BAD is also utilized as a metaphor, as the working-class residents of an apartment building descend beneath ground level and into a sinkhole, representing their downward spiral into a dire situation. Director Kim Ji-Hoon's disaster film centers around an average man's home in Seoul. The man has worked

for eleven years to obtain the house, but in less than a minute, it catastrophically falls beneath the earth's surface, engulfing the entire apartment and its occupants. The heavy and incessant rainfall that follows exacerbates the situation, leaving the trapped residents with no hope of rescue, as shown in Figure 6. While those above ground presume the occupants to be deceased, those who have plunged into the sinkhole desperately seek aid that never arrives, reinforcing the “othering” of these marginalized individuals.

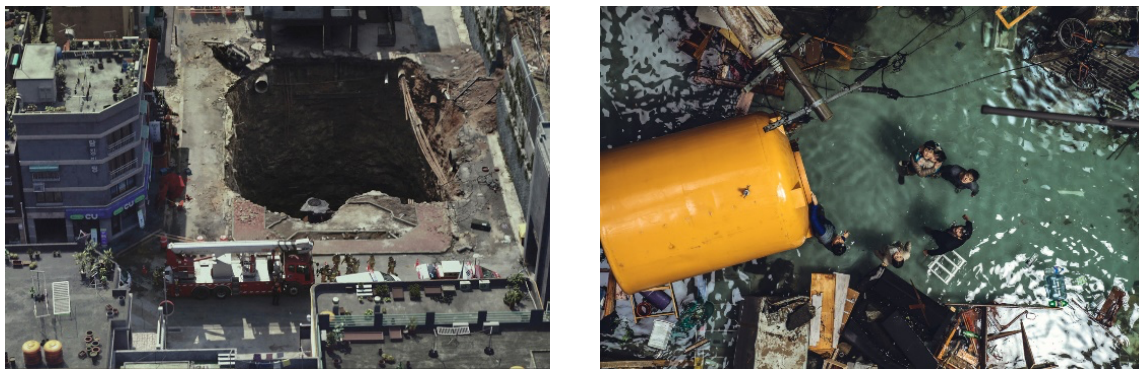


Figure 6. Sinkhole and people in *Sinkhole* (2021)

The collapse of the building could have been prevented if safety inspections had been conducted. Despite the presence of cracks and defects in the building, the residents did not request it fearing that the price of their house would be affected. It shows an ironic contrast between the rising property values and falling sinkholes, both of which have no ending.

The House (2011) and *Sinkhole* (2021) serve as examples of the notion that existence is closely tied to a physical location, as the residents of the apartment buildings must occupy a certain space

in order to be considered as existing. This illustrates the ontological metaphor of EXISTENCE IS A LOCATION, with EXISTENCE as the target domain and LOCATION as the source domain. By mapping aspects of the source domain onto the target domain, we are able to use our understanding of physical location to conceptualize the abstract and complex concept of existence or being. In other words, our perception of our own existence and that of others is inextricably linked to the physical location we occupy. Furthermore, maintaining their existence in both films is tied to maintaining their location “up here” or above ground. This leads to the sub-conceptual metaphor of MAINTAINING EXISTENCE IS MAINTAINING LOCATION UP HERE, which reinforces the importance of physical location in our understanding and perception of existence.

GOOD IS UP doesn't always work

While the orientation metaphor of UP for GOOD and DOWN for BAD may commonly be associated with positive and negative connotations, respectively, this orientational conceptual metaphor is not universally applicable. This is evidenced by *The things she can't avoid in the city* (2008), which features a house suspended in mid-air, as illustrated in Figure 7. Directed by Park Jee-Youn, her animated film depicts a woman who resides in a city undergoing demolition. To avoid losing her home, her house is lifted into the air by a tower crane. She then has to climb the

crane to reach her home, which is suspended in mid-air. This unique scenario challenges the conventional orientation metaphor of GOOD IS UP, as the woman's elevated location is not a positive one.



Figure 7. House hanging in the air in The Things She Can't Avoid in the City (2008)

The image of her house precariously swinging in the air, suspended from the crane, is a potent multimodal metaphor for the protagonist's uprooted and unstable life. It highlights the ontological metaphor of EXISTENCE IS A LOCATION, as her survival depends on occupying a physical location. The sub-conceptual metaphor of MAINTAINING EXISTENCE IS MAINTAINING LOCATION UP HERE is also evident, as she had to place herself "up here" to exist. However, it is important to note that the ground of her house is shaky. Depicting a house as floating in the air is incongruent with our typical understanding of the purpose and function of a house. Human beings build houses and take root in the world, and houses are meant to be grounded and have stable structures that provide a sense of security. By challenging our conventional notions of what it means to have a home and a sense of place in society, the film emphasized the protagonist's rootless existence.

Another example that the conventional orientational metaphors do not apply can be observed in

the film *Homeless* (2022), directed by Lim Seung-Hyeun. The film follows a young couple who fall victim to a real estate scam, causing them to lose their entire savings and become homeless. The husband earns a living by providing delivery service on his scooter, while the wife distributes flyers carrying their newborn baby. However, their efforts prove to be futile as finding an affordable place to live becomes seemingly impossible. Eventually, they are left with no choice but to carry their belongings and spend the night in a sauna.

There are two versions of the film's poster, as presented in Figure 8. In both cases, a miniature model house is placed on top of the heads of the protagonists. The man on the left rests his chin on his hand, gazing plaintively into the distance, while the woman on the right appears to be looking imploringly towards the viewer. The vivid colors of the background contrast with the facial expressions of the young couple.

The presence of a house situated above one's head may not necessarily evoke a positive connotation. On the contrary, its metaphorical significance may be negative owing to its atypical small size and impossible location. The typical object associated with a small size on one's head would be a crown, a symbol of victory. Thus, this visual incongruity not only creates a sense of strangeness but also serves as an ironical interpretation. The miniature house situated atop the protagonists' heads may also be subject to a cultural interpretation. In Asian culture, the body part with the greatest cultural value is the head, often associated with reverence and respect. The placement of an object over the head in such cultures may be interpreted as a symbol of that object's greater value relative to human beings, and consequently, may be perceived as a burden or cause of headache, rather than a source of comfort or security.



Figure 8. Posters of *Homeless* (2022)

In both *The Things She Can't Avoid in the City* (2008) and *Homeless* (2022), metaphorical meanings could be conveyed by incongruities; The house is either positioned in an unusual manner or depicted in an abnormal size. The conceptual metaphor of EXISTENCE IS A LOCATION implies that being in a specific location is necessary for existence, and that existence is unstable or uncertain if one is not in the right place.

Conclusion

This study has focused on analyzing the multimodal instantiations of conceptual metaphors used to address the topic of house and resident in South Korean contemporary films. By uncovering the underlying conceptual metaphors, we could gain a deeper understanding of how meanings are

constructed and communicated through different modes of representation. The findings of the study have underscored the richness and complexity of cinematic storytelling and the crucial role of orientational, structural, and ontological metaphors in shaping our perception of those around us, particularly “the others”.

The concept of housing stability goes beyond the basic need for shelter. Many people are forced to live in inadequate and precarious housing conditions due to various economic, social, and political factors. In some cases, people may even be pushed to live in underground spaces that were not designed for human habitations, such as basements that were originally meant for temporary shelters, warehouses or parking lots. Despite efforts to improve housing situations, there are still too many individuals and families around the world who struggle with poor living conditions, putting their quality of life and even their survival at risk.

This study sheds light on the issue of housing precarity and its impact on urban residents, which are unfortunately only too familiar, universal and relatable in contemporary cities worldwide. From Berlin to Dubai, New York to Madrid, and Lisbon to other cities across the globe, inadequate and precarious housing conditions especially in urban areas continue to affect many people. As Plate (1995, p. 5) suggests, while it is inevitable to have some differences, these differences must be non-hierarchical, and should not create a distinction between a primary subject and secondary

object. Treating others as invisible objects only leads to exclusion and marginalization. His message about the importance of avoiding objectification of “the others” and imagining relations between others remains relevant today. It is essential for every person to approach others with caution and respect, without reducing them to mere objects or assimilating them into one's own identity. By doing so, we can foster meaningful connections and construct a more inclusive and equitable society.

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ENDNOTES:

- ¹ This paper is written during the author's Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the Department of Philology of the University of Seville. This study is funded by the Next Generation EU for the Ministry of Universities in Spain.