



Cinema Across Cultures: Understanding Differences Through Film

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Abstract

This research explores how *Parasite*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *The Intouchables* use cinematic techniques to convey cultural differences and invite viewers to engage with unfamiliar perspectives. The chosen films come from three different cultural contexts: *Parasite* from South Korea, *In the Mood for Love* from Hong Kong, and *The Intouchables* from France. This topic is important because films do not only tell stories through plot, but also present culture through environment, behavior, language, sound, wardrobe, visual style, and imagery.

I used a qualitative comparative film case study approach. The analysis was organized around four shared categories: environment, communication and social rules, visual techniques, and character perspective. These categories were applied consistently across the three films to compare how each constructs cultural difference and may invite viewers to engage with unfamiliar perspectives.

The findings show that the three films convey cultural differences in various ways. *Parasite* presents Korean class inequality through housing, social hierarchy, and family survival. *In the Mood for Love* presents Hong Kong's social restraint through silence, wardrobe, shared living spaces, and repeated visual patterns. *The Intouchables* presents French class differences, disability, race and friendship through humor, direct communication, and contrasting social environments. Overall, this research suggests that cinema can potentially facilitate intercultural understanding by presenting cultural differences through emotionally and visually accessible forms rather than presenting them as the same.

Keywords

Intercultural Understanding; Cultural Difference; Film Analysis; Visual Storytelling; Audience Empathy; Cross-Cultural Cinema

Introduction

Film is an important field for exploring how cultural perspectives are represented and made accessible to viewers. Film does not only tell stories, but also presents culture through environment, behavior, language, sound, wardrobe, and visuals. I am interested in this question because films can make unfamiliar cultures relatable while still preserving the details that make each culture unique.

My personal experience also connects to this research question since I have lived and studied across different cultural environments including Korea, China, and France throughout my childhood. This has led me to often experience how people from different backgrounds can misunderstand each other, even when they are trying to communicate. At the same time, I have also seen how stories and shared emotional experiences can help people understand perspectives that are different from their own. This made me interested in how film can act as a bridge, connecting cultures without erasing the differences between them.

The main concepts explored are cultural differences and understanding, narrative perspective, and audience empathy. Although cultural differences and understanding might seem like similar ideas, cultural differences refer to the specific values, behaviors, social expectations, and environments that shape the characters' lives. On the other hand, cultural understanding indicates the audience's ability to recognize and interpret perspectives different from their own. Narrative perspective and potential audience empathy are important because they help explain how films position viewers to engage emotionally with characters whose cultural backgrounds or social situations may be unfamiliar.

The main research question guiding this study is: **How do *Parasite*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *The Intouchables* use cinematic techniques to convey cultural differences and invite viewers to engage with unfamiliar perspectives?** This study argues that the three films convey cultural differences



through distinct uses of environment, communication and social rules, visual techniques, and character perspective, while potentially inviting viewers to engage with unfamiliar perspectives without presenting different cultures as the same.

Literature Review

Cinema may facilitate cross-cultural understanding by allowing audiences to enter unfamiliar cultural situations, emotionally connect with characters, and interpret perspectives different from their own. Deardorff's (2006) article defines intercultural competence as more than simply learning facts about another culture. She argues that understanding another culture also involves being able to interpret different perspectives and communicate across cultural differences. This framework can help explain how films may encourage engagement with characters from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds. Green and Brock (2000) explain why stories can affect audiences emotionally. Their concept of narrative transportation suggests that audiences can become absorbed in a story through attention, imagery, and emotion. This provides a framework for considering how narrative engagement may support viewers in interpreting characters from cultures different from their own. Gao et al. (2024) focus on cross-cultural film understanding and cultural distance. Their study shows that audiences may experience foreign films differently depending on factors such as setting, translation, non-verbal expression, visuals, music, plot, theme, and ending. This is relevant to my research because it demonstrates that cultural distance can influence how foreign films are interpreted.

While these sources provide frameworks for understanding audience engagement and intercultural interpretation, other research examines how films construct cultural meaning through cinematic form. The potential for audience empathy may come not only from narrative content, but also from visual and non-verbal details that guide viewers toward possible cultural meanings.

Films convey cultural differences not only through dialogue, but also through visual details, non-verbal behavior, environment, wardrobe, time, and cinematic style. Kiaer and Kim (2022) argue that foreign-language film viewers can become "multimodal translators" (p. 2), interpreting cultural meaning through both verbal and non-verbal elements. This connects with *Parasite*, where hierarchy, politeness, social class, posture, and social interaction may not be fully communicated through dialogue or subtitles alone. Sutandio (2020) argues that visual signs, cinematography, and mise-en-scène in *In the Mood for Love* support the theme of restraint. Tight spaces, wardrobe, repetition, and visual symbols can therefore position viewers to perceive the characters' emotional and social restrictions. Nakama (2009) connects Wong Kar Wai's films to temporality, memory, identity, and Hong Kong's cultural uncertainty. This is relevant to *In the Mood for Love*, which uses time, repetition, nostalgia, and memory to create a culturally specific representation of 1960s Hong Kong.

Research focused on the individual films provides further support for these ideas. Lim's (2019) interview with Bong Joon-ho connects *Parasite* to family, class, and environment. Bong explains that class is a theme that "penetrates our times" and discusses his own experience tutoring in a wealthy home. He also emphasizes his attention to environment and spatial design, which is reflected in the film's use of the Park house, the Kim family's semi-basement, stairs, and underground spaces. Ridgeway-Diaz et al. (2020) further connect *Parasite* to repression and hidden social tensions, providing a framework for interpreting the film's class anxiety and conflicts beneath everyday family life.

Wigley's (2025) interview with Wong Kar Wai supports interpretations of restraint, silence, hidden emotion, and visual storytelling in *In the Mood for Love*. Because Wong discusses the film retrospectively, the interview also provides insight into the director's approach to visual and emotional restraint. Fişek (2018) examines *The Intouchables* through race and class in contemporary French society and discusses how interpretations of the film can differ across cultural contexts. This is especially relevant because it demonstrates that cultural representation does not automatically produce the same response among all viewers.



Existing research therefore provides several useful but separate approaches to understanding the relationship between cinema and cultural difference. Deardorff's (2006) framework provides a way to define intercultural understanding, although this study applies the concept to film analysis rather than testing intercultural competence among actual film audiences. Green and Brock's (2000) concept of narrative transportation provides a framework for considering emotional engagement, while Kiaer and Kim (2022) demonstrate the importance of verbal and non-verbal interpretation. Gao et al. (2024) provides audience-based evidence that cultural distance can shape the reception of foreign cinema, although their study focuses on *Silenced* rather than the three films examined here.

At the same time, research on *Parasite*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *The Intouchables* generally examines the films individually rather than comparing how different cinematic forms construct cultural difference. Existing studies therefore tend to examine audience response, intercultural understanding, or individual film techniques separately.

This study addresses that gap by bringing these approaches together through a comparative textual analysis of three culturally and generically distinct films: *Parasite*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *The Intouchables*. It compares how the films use environment, communication and social rules, visual techniques, and character perspective to construct cultural difference and potentially invite viewers to engage with unfamiliar perspectives.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative comparative film case study approach to analyze *Parasite*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *The Intouchables* as culturally specific works. Rather than using numerical data or measuring audience responses, the study focuses on how each film constructs cultural meaning through environment, communication and social rules, visual techniques, and character perspective.

The three films were selected as deliberately contrasting cinematic cases rather than as equivalent representations of three national cultures. *Parasite* is a South Korean class thriller that uses social space and family conflict to explore inequality; *In the Mood for Love* is a Hong Kong art-house romance that uses restraint, repetition, and visual style to represent social expectations; and *The Intouchables* is a French comedy that approaches class, race, disability, and social difference through humor and friendship. Their differences in genre, tone, and cultural context make them useful for comparing how distinct forms of cinema represent cultural difference through environment, communication and social rules, visual techniques, and character perspective. *The Intouchables* is also treated as a more contested cultural representation because its depiction of race, class, and disability has produced different interpretations across cultural contexts.

The analysis was organized around four shared categories: environment, communication and social rules, visual techniques, and character perspective. These categories were applied to all three films so that similarities and differences could be compared consistently. Environment was used to examine how spaces reflect social structures; communication focused on dialogue, silence, humor, body language, and social expectations; visual techniques included framing, camera movement, wardrobe, sound, and spatial contrast; and character perspective examined how the films represent experiences such as class pressure, restraint, disability, race, and social belonging.

Scenes were selected when they met at least one of three criteria: they clearly represented a cultural or social difference, revealed conflict between characters or social groups, or significantly developed the representation of a character's social position or perspective. Six primary focal scenes were examined in detail: three from *Parasite*, two from *In the Mood for Love*, and one from *The Intouchables*. Additional scenes were used as supporting examples when they reinforced patterns identified in the focal scenes.



Each focal scene was examined using the same process. First, I identified the cultural or social issue represented in the scene. Second, I analyzed the cinematic choices used to construct that representation, such as setting, framing, sound, costume, dialogue, or performance. Third, I considered how these choices shaped the representation of the characters and their relationships. Finally, I compared the findings across the three films to identify similarities and differences in how cultural experiences were represented.

This method allows the films to be compared systematically without treating their cultural contexts as identical. It also keeps the findings focused on what can be demonstrated through textual film analysis: what the films represent, how cinematic form constructs that representation, and how those choices may invite viewers to interpret unfamiliar perspectives.

Results and Discussion

This research shows that *Parasite*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *The Intouchables* convey cultural differences through environment, communication, visual techniques, and character perspective. Although the three films come from different cultural backgrounds, they each make culture visible through everyday details and cinematic form. Cultural difference is not only expressed through national identity, language, or setting. It is also expressed through characters' movement within their environments and their responses to social expectations. The films do not erase the differences between Korean, Hong Kong, and French societies. Instead, they preserve cultural specificity while presenting emotional experiences that viewers may recognize or engage with.

Across the three films, cultural differences are presented in ways that may make unfamiliar perspectives more accessible to viewers. *Parasite* presents Korean class inequality through housing, family survival, education pressure, and formal social behaviors. *In the Mood for Love* presents Hong Kong social restraint through silence, costume, tight spaces, and repeated visual patterns. *The Intouchables* presents differences involving class, race, disability, humor, and friendship within French society. Rather than directly explaining each cultural context, the films invite viewers to observe how culture shapes the characters' lives.

In *Parasite*, the Kim family is a lower-income family living in a semi-basement apartment, while the Park family is wealthy and lives in a modern mansion. Much of the film's conflict comes from the Kim family entering the Park household through service jobs, which exposes the class gap between them. *In the Mood for Love* develops emotional connection through Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan, married neighbors in 1960s Hong Kong, after suspecting that their spouses are having an affair. Their relationship is shaped by social pressure, reputation, and emotional restraint. In *The Intouchables*, Philippe is a wealthy disabled aristocrat, while Driss is a working-class caregiver from a different racial and social background. Their friendship becomes the main way the film explores class, disability, race, humor, and understanding.

Environment & Cultural Differences

Environment is one of the most important ways the three films communicate cultural differences. In all three films, setting is not just a background. It becomes a social system that shows who has power and who is restricted. The settings reveal cultural values and social divisions.

In *Parasite*, the environment is central to the film's portrayal of Korean class inequality. The Kim family's semi-basement apartment immediately establishes their social position. The apartment is partly underground, cramped, and exposed to the street (figure 1a).



Figure 1a – The Kim family’s semi-basement window positions the household below street level (00:04:46).

The family looks outward through a low window, meaning they are physically close to public dirt, insects, smoke, and flooding. This environment shows that poverty is not only an economic condition, but a daily physical experience. By contrast, the Park family’s house is spacious, elevated, private, and luxuriously designed. The rich home is separated from the street and from the instability outside. Bong Joon-ho’s interview (Lim, 2019) supports this because he directly connects *Parasite* to family, class, and environment, explaining that class is a theme that runs through contemporary life and that he is highly conscious of spatial design in his films.

The vertical structure of *Parasite* is especially important. Characters are often moving upward or downward: up the hill to the Park house, down to the Kim apartment, and even farther down into the hidden bunker.



Figure 1b – The Park family’s elevated house visually associates wealth with height and separation (00:12:32).



Figure 1c – The hidden bunker extends the film’s class hierarchy further underground (01:06:59).

This vertical movement visualizes class hierarchy. The wealthy family lives above, the poor below, and the hidden man in the bunker exists even lower, almost erased from society. The film therefore conveys cultural differences through the environment rather than direct explanation. International viewers may not know every detail of Korean housing inequality, but the visual contrast between the semi-basement and the mansion offers a clear visual representation of this social division. The film uses architecture to make the Korean class structure visible.



The environment also shapes how the characters behave. In the Park house, the Kim family must perform politeness and professionalism. They must hide their real family relationships and adjust themselves to the expectations of the wealthy household. However, in the semi-basement, they speak freely, argue openly, and reveal their desperation. The change in environment affects their performance of identity. This supports the idea that cultural differences are not only shown through objects or locations, but through how people adapt themselves to social spaces.

In the Mood for Love has an environment that works differently. Instead of showing class through vertical space, Wong Kar Wai uses narrow interiors, corridors, rented rooms, and shared neighborhoods to show social restraint. The film is set largely in cramped apartments and hallways where privacy is almost impossible. Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan live close to each other, and their shared spaces create social pressure. Neighbors are always nearby, and the proximity affects the characters' behavior in being less expressive. Their emotional connection develops in a world where they cannot openly express their feelings.



Figure 2a – The narrow shared interior reflects the characters' limited privacy and social restraint (00:24:42).

Sutandio's (2020) analysis argues that *In the Mood for Love* uses cinematography and mise-en-scène to support the idea of restraint. The article specifically identifies cramped and shallow spaces, wardrobe, and repetition as visual signs that communicate emotional limitations. This is clearly visible in the film's use of narrow hallways and small rooms. The characters often pass each other in spaces so tight that they almost touch, but the social rules around them prevent emotional or physical openness. The setting therefore communicates both desire and limitation at the same time.

The Hong Kong environment of *In the Mood for Love* also conveys cultural differences through social pressures from the community. The characters are not individuals acting only according to personal desires, but are part of a social world where reputation matters. The rented rooms, shared meals, and crowded apartment structure create an environment in which private behaviors can easily become public. This context invites viewers to interpret the characters' restraint as partly shaped by the social environment surrounding them. Their restraint is not only personal, but it is shaped by the social environment around them.

In *The Intouchables*, the environment conveys cultural difference through the contrast between Philippe's wealthy Parisian mansion and Driss's working-class neighborhood. Philippe's home is elegant and quiet and associated with inherited wealth. Driss's environment is crowded, noisy, and shaped by family responsibility and economic pressure. The film uses these contrasting spaces to present differences in class, race, and social opportunity within French society. Unlike *Parasite*, which gradually turns class conflict into thriller and tragedy, *The Intouchables* often uses comedy and warmth to show how these different social worlds interact.

The mansion in *The Intouchables* becomes a meeting point between two different social worlds. Philippe belongs to an elite environment of art, music, wealth, and formal care. Driss enters this space as someone who does not fully follow its rules. His directness disrupts the formality of Philippe's world, which brings energy and honesty into it. The contrast encourages viewers to consider both spaces differently: Philippe's mansion may appear comfortable, while being emotionally limiting. On the other hand, Driss's



neighborhood may appear chaotic, but it is also connected to family, survival, and identity. Fişek's (2018) article on *The Intouchables* examines the film through race and performance in contemporary France, showing that the film's meaning depends partly on how audiences interpret Driss's performance across different cultural contexts.

Across the three films, the environment becomes a way of translating cultural differences. *Parasite* uses the environment to show Korean class hierarchy. *In the Mood for Love* uses cramped interiors to show Hong Kong's social restraint. *The Intouchables* uses contrasting French social spaces to show class, disability, and race. These environments make different forms of social pressure visible, potentially making unfamiliar cultural perspectives more accessible to viewers.

Communication & Social Rules

Communication is another major way the films convey cultural differences. The characters do not only communicate through what they say. They also communicate through silence, politeness, humor, body language, and indirectness. These forms of communication reveal the social rules of each culture.

In *Parasite*, communication is shaped by hierarchy. The Kim family must speak differently when interacting with the Park family than when speaking among themselves. They must appear respectful, professional, and controlled, even when they are manipulating the situation. Korean honorific speech and social hierarchy are important here because they structure relationships between employers and employees, older and younger people, and people of different social status. Kiaer and Kim's (2022) work on Korean film explains that foreign language film viewers often become "multimodal translators" because Korean cultural meanings are not always fully translated through subtitles. They argue that Korean films contain verbal and non-verbal meanings that may be difficult for English-speaking viewers to interpret without cultural context.

The film's class critique is not only in the plot but also in small moments of conversations or politeness. For example, the Kim family must lower themselves socially when interacting with the Parks, even when they are secretly controlling the situation. Their politeness is strategic, but it also reflects a real social structure. The scene presents class difference as not only a matter of wealth, but also of who must constantly regulate their behavior.

The concept of smell in *Parasite* also functions like communication, even though it is not a spoken language. Mr. Park repeatedly comments on Mr. Kim's smell, describing it as something that crosses a line. This becomes one of the most painful forms of class communication in the film. Body odor marks the poor body as socially unacceptable, even when the poor character is performing his job correctly. Mr. Kim understands that he is being judged not only for his work, but for something attached to his living conditions and class identity. This presents the emotional consequences of class difference through an everyday indicator.

In the Mood for Love presents communication in an even more indirect way. The film is built around what characters cannot say. Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan rarely express their desires openly. Instead, their emotions appear through pauses, glances, repeated meetings, and silence. This form of communication reflects a social world where reputation and restraint shape behavior. The characters know that acting openly on their feelings would make them resemble their unfaithful spouses, so they define themselves through self-control.

Wong Kar-wai's BFI (2025) interview is useful because it frames *In the Mood for Love* as a film of desire and restraint, where meaning often appears through what is hidden or unsaid. The film's dialogue is often minimal, and many of its most important emotional moments happen without direct confession. For example, when the characters rehearse how their spouses may have started the affair, they are also rehearsing their own possible relationship. Their role-playing blurs the line between investigation and desire. They speak indirectly because direct speech would break the social boundary that holds them back.

In the Mood for Love shows that sound is therefore not empty. It is a cultural and emotional form of communication. The film invites viewers to read silence as pressure, longing, fear, and self-control. For



international viewers, this indirect form of communication may provide access to a social perspective that is culturally unfamiliar. Instead of presenting love through open confession, the film presents it through restraint. Meaning therefore emerges not from direct explanation, but from pauses, gestures, repetition, and what remains unsaid.

In *The Intouchables*, communication is more direct and often humorous. Driss speaks directly to Philippe and does not treat him with the careful politeness that others use around him. At first, this directness appears inappropriate within Philippe's formal upper-class environment. However, it becomes the base of their friendship. Driss's humor allows Philippe to be seen as a person rather than only as a disabled man who must be treated with care. This communication style may encourage empathy through contrast.

The film's use of humor raises questions. Driss's performance can seem liberating because he refuses stiff social rules, but it also risks relying on racial and class stereotypes by presenting him mainly through energy, humor, and physical confidence. This is why *The Intouchables* is important: it does not only show cultural difference as something positive and easily resolved. It also shows that audience understanding can be complicated. Viewers may feel empathy for Philippe and Driss while also questioning how race, class, and disability are represented. Fişek's (2018) discussion of race and performance helps support this point because the article argues that the film's reception depends on different cultural histories of race and performance.

Together, the films show that communication reveals culture in different ways. *Parasite* uses politeness and class-coded language. *In the Mood for Love* uses silence and indirect emotion. *The Intouchables* uses humor and direct communication. Each film shows that social rules influence not only what characters express, but also what they suppress.

Visual Techniques & Viewer Positioning

Visual techniques are central to how the three films position viewers in relation to unfamiliar cultural perspectives. The films do not depend only on dialogue or plot alone. They use framing, camera movement, color, wardrobe, repeated musical themes, and spatial contrast to make cultural differences emotionally relatable.

In *Parasite*, one of the most important visual techniques is vertical framing. The film repeatedly organizes characters through height and depth. The Parks are associated with elevated areas, sunlight, open rooms, and clean interiors. In contrast, the Kims are associated with low areas, darkness, disorganized rooms, and closeness to the street. This contrast visually establishes class inequality before it is directly discussed. The visual structure makes social inequality feel physical.

The controlled camera movement in *Parasite* also shapes how its class structure is revealed. Bong Joon-ho's style often feels precise and organized, which matches the film's careful social structure. The camera guides the audience through spaces in a way that reveals how the house works. The Park house appears open and beautiful, while hiding secrets as the discovery of the underground bunker changes the meaning of the house. What first appears to be a symbol of wealth becomes a layered social structure, with hidden poverty right underneath luxury.

This visual revelation recontextualizes what has already been shown. The wealthy family does not know what exists underneath them, just as they do not fully understand the lives of people who serve them. The editorial by Ridgeway-Diaz et al. (2020) supports this idea by discussing repression in *Parasite*, especially the idea that what is hidden or blocked from awareness eventually returns. In the film, the repressed social reality is not only psychological but spatial. The bunker is the hidden underside of class society.

In the Mood for Love's visual techniques work more through repetition and obstruction. The film uses slow motion, mirrors, narrow frames, repeated music, and wardrobe to create emotional restraint. Sutandio's (2020) article especially identifies visual signs in the film that support and amplify the theme of restraint, including cinematography, mise-en-scène, obstructed shots, and repeated elements.

Wardrobe is one of the clearest examples. Mrs. Chan's cheongsam is visually beautiful, but limits movements. The dress becomes more than clothing as it becomes a sign of elegance and social identity.



Sutandio (2020) argues that the cheongsam shifts from a symbol of Chinese beauty into a symbol of limitation because of how tightly it controls the body. The wardrobe communicates a social world in which emotion is controlled through appearance and posture, potentially making that system of restraint accessible even to viewers unfamiliar with its cultural context.



Figure 2b – Mrs. Chan’s cheongsam and framing emphasize controlled appearance and emotional restraint (00:47:36).

The repeated musical theme also shapes the film’s representation of emotional restraint. The music often appears during moments of slow movement or emotional tension, guiding the audience into the characters’ restrained desire. Because the characters rarely confess their emotions directly, the music functions as an emotional substitute for what the characters cannot say directly. Sutandio (2020) argues that the soundtrack helps read the restrained atmosphere of the film and contributes to the audience’s experience of the characters’ emotional state.

Mirrors and obstructed shots also create meaning. The characters are often seen through doorways, windows, curtains, or reflections. This visual style creates a sense of privacy, incompleteness, and forbidden observation. The camera does not give full access. Instead, it places the viewer in a position of partial understanding. This matches the characters’ situation that they also cannot fully access or express their feelings. The visual technique therefore positions the viewer to perceive restraint through limited visual access rather than simply observe it as a narrative theme.

Nakama’s (2009) article adds another layer by connecting Wong Kar-wai’s use of time, repetition, and identity to Hong Kong’s cultural uncertainty. The article argues that Wong’s films often move through time in cycles rather than simple lines, creating characters who are fixed in place but wandering through memory and temporal space. This is useful in understanding why *In the Mood for Love* feels nostalgic and suspended. The film creates a mood of memory, loss, and uncertainty instead of only telling a love story. The film therefore invites viewers to engage with aspects of its Hong Kong cultural context through atmosphere rather than direct explanation.

In *The Intouchables*, visual techniques are more direct and accessible. The film often contrasts Philippe’s wealthy, controlled environment with Driss’s more energetic personality. The contrast between Philippe’s restricted mobility and Driss’s physical expressiveness visually distinguishes their social positions and personalities. Philippe has social and economic power but limited physical mobility. Conversely, Driss has physical freedom and humor, but less social and economic power. The film therefore visually places their differences side by side, acting as each other’s foil.

Music also becomes important in *The Intouchables*. The contrast between classical music and popular music reflects the difference between Philippe’s elite cultural world and Driss’s background. Even though these musical differences are mainly used for comedy, they also show how culture is connected to class. When the characters share or challenge each other’s music, the film suggests that understanding can develop through cultural exchange. However, this exchange is not equal in every aspect because Philippe still holds wealth and power. This makes the film useful for discussing both empathy and inequality.



Across the three films, visual techniques make culturally specific perspectives visible without relying entirely on direct explanation. *Parasite* uses vertical space and controlled framing to show class pressure. *In the Mood for Love* uses wardrobe, slow motion, music and obstruction to show restraint. *The Intouchables* uses contrast, performance, music, and physicality to show class, race, and disability. These techniques make cultural differences visible and emotionally understandable.

Character Perspective & Potential Empathy

The final major finding is that all three films use character perspective to create opportunities for potential empathy toward characters whose experiences may be unfamiliar to viewers. However, the basis for this potential empathy differs across the films. *Parasite* emphasizes pressure and desperation, *In the Mood for Love* emphasizes restraint and longing, and *The Intouchables* emphasizes humor, friendship, and social contrast.

In *Parasite*, the narrative encourages viewers to consider the Kim family's desperation even when their actions become morally questionable. The family lies, manipulates, and invades another household, but we understand their economic pressure which shapes their behavior. Instead of being presented as useless or harmful beings to society, they are shown as people trying to survive inside an unequal system. By connecting their morally questionable actions to economic pressure, the film may encourage viewers to interpret their deception within the broader context of inequality.

The hidden bunker couple introduces another potential point of empathy after their existence is revealed. At first, the main conflict seems to be between the Kim family and the Park family. However, the discovery of the bunker introduces another level of inequality. The Kims, who seemed to be at the bottom, are not actually the lowest. This complicates the film's initial class structure by showing members of the underclass competing against one another for survival. The conflict suggests that inequality can divide people who might otherwise share common interests.

This perspective is important to the research question because the film does not simply present information about Korean society. Instead, it uses the Kim family's experiences to place class pressure within a specific Korean social context while also connecting it to broader forms of inequality. The cultural details remain specific, while emotions such as pressure, shame, and desperation may still provide points of engagement for viewers from different backgrounds.

In the Mood for Love creates opportunities for empathy through emotional restraint. The film invites empathy with Mr. Chow and Mrs. Chan precisely through their inability to express themselves openly. Their desire is shaped by social rules, reputation, and their own moral boundaries. They refuse to become like their spouses, even though their restraint causes pain. The audience is invited to empathize with what remains unspoken.

This potential for empathy depends on patience and observation. The film does not give the viewer a direct emotional explanation. Instead, it directs attention toward repetition, wardrobe, silence, and small movements. This is important to the research question because it shows how cinematic form can invite viewers to engage with an unfamiliar perspective without directly explaining it. A viewer does not need to belong to 1960s Hong Kong society to understand the feeling of wanting something but being unable to achieve it. The film preserves cultural difference while making the emotional conflict recognizable.

Nakama's (2009) discussion of time and identity helps explain why this empathy feels connected to memory. The characters seem caught between what happened, what could have happened, and what cannot happen. Their relationship becomes something remembered almost as a souvenir, creating a reflective form of empathy. As a result, their relationship can be interpreted as something shaped by memory, regret, and possibilities that were never fully realized.

In *The Intouchables*, the relationship between Philippe and Driss creates opportunities for empathy. The film invites viewers to consider Philippe beyond his disability by emphasizing his personality, loneliness, and relationships. Driss's refusal to treat Philippe only with pity becomes important because it allows



Philippe not to be seen as a disabled patient in need of aid. Their friendship provides narrative access to Philippe's loneliness and Driss's own need for opportunity and recognition.



Figure 3 – Philippe and Driss are positioned together despite their contrasting social backgrounds (00:31:34).

At the same time, *The Intouchables* must be discussed critically. The film may create opportunities for understanding by showing friendship across class, race, and disability, while at the same time simplifying some of these social differences through comedy. Driss is often presented as energetic, physical, and humorous, whereas Philippe is associated with wealth and seriousness. This contrast makes the film accessible. Fişek's (2018) article is useful because it examines how race and performance shape different interpretations of the film in contemporary France.

While all three films are important to the paper, *The Intouchables* adds a different perspective because it shows that intercultural understanding is not always simple or complete. Unlike *Parasite* and *In the Mood for Love*, which focus more on class pressure and emotional restraint, *The Intouchables* connects cultural differences to race, disability, class, humor, and performance at the same time. This makes the film especially useful because it creates the possibility of empathy with Philippe and Driss while also inviting viewers to question how social differences are represented. Therefore, the film strengthens the argument by showing that cinema can open a space for cross-cultural understanding, but that understanding still depends on how audiences interpret the film's representation of cultural difference.

Summary

Overall, there are several films which create empathy; nonetheless, these three films suggest that potential intercultural understanding depends partly on how viewers interpret cultural signs. Environment, silence, humor, wardrobe, and body language do not explain culture directly, but they direct attention toward how culture shapes emotion and behavior. This means cinema can become a bridge between different perspectives, but the viewer still has to actively question what is being shown. Therefore, the films do more than represent Korean, Chinese, and French cultural contexts. They show that intercultural understanding is a process of observation, interpretation, and emotional response.

Conclusion

My research suggests that the potential for intercultural understanding in cinema does not come simply from showing another culture on screen. Instead, films can invite viewers to observe how culture shapes emotion, behavior, relationships, and social pressure. In the three films, cultural differences are communicated through details such as space, silence, wardrobe, humor, body language, and visual composition. These elements can make unfamiliar perspectives more accessible without reducing each culture to a simple explanation.

A key finding is that film can make cultural differences more accessible while still preserving their cultural specificity. Viewers are not asked to ignore the differences between Korean, Hong Kong, and French social contexts. Rather, the films encourage viewers to interpret those differences through emotional



experiences such as pressure, restraint, loneliness, dignity, and friendship. This suggests that cinema can provide a space in which viewers encounter and interpret perspectives beyond their own.

However, this research also shows that film does not automatically create complete cross-cultural understanding. Viewers still bring their own cultural backgrounds and assumptions into the way they interpret a film. For this reason, future research could focus on how different audiences respond to the same culturally specific films. This would help further explore not only how films represent culture, but also how audiences actively create meaning from what they see.

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