

Quenching Annihilation: Exploring Cinematic Space in the Crime Film *Pieta*

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Abstract

Pieta is a South Korean film directed by Kim Ki-duk, featuring a crime story about love and redemption between a mother and her son, starring Jeong-jin Lee and Min-su Jo. The film narrates the story of a “mother” and “son” without any blood relation, aligning with Director Kim Ki-duk’s consistent thematic choices: love and redemption, death and destruction. This article focuses on the analysis of the audio-visual language of *Pieta*, attempting to examine the film’s narrative space from the perspective of audio-visual language. It primarily explores the functional forms of space, analyzing the construction of physical, mental, and social spaces within the film’s scenes.

Keywords: *Pieta*, Cinematic Space, Kim Ki-duk

1. Introduction

“The world is inherently violent, and it is filled with so much sorrow already. I am merely portraying these truths as they are. By making such films, I aim to provide us with an opportunity to reflect upon ourselves.”¹ Director Kim Ki-duk’s crime-themed film *Pieta* showcases his unique artistic pursuit in revealing the violence and sorrow of the real world. Through meticulous design of physical space, such as scene arrangement, the use of color, and lighting, the film constructs a strong sense of visual reality. At the same time, the shaping of mental space, through symbols,

metaphors, and the form of characters’ inner monologues, reveals the characters’ inner worlds and their psychological responses to violence. The depiction of social space, through character interaction and conflicts on a societal level, reflects the film’s socio-cultural background, unveiling the complexity of interpersonal relationships and deep-seated issues in society. By employing Henri Lefebvre’s triadic theory of space, we can understand how *Pieta* utilizes filmic language to construct a multidimensional narrative space. The interweaving of physical, mental, and social spaces not only offers audiences a rich audio-visual experience but more importantly, it resonates emotionally and cognitively with them, prompting profound self-reflection and societal contemplation. Through the expression of multidimensional space, Kim Ki-duk not only reproduces reality but also presents a critique and reflection on it,

¹ “Silver Screen Book: 2015 Annual Report on the International Communication of Chinese Films,” Appendix II: Interviews with Renowned Personalities in the International Film Industry, Interview Record (II) with South Korean Director and Screenwriter, Kim Ki-duk.

demonstrating the power of film as a tool for examining oneself and the world.

2. Apocalyptic Ruin-Like Mechanical Physical Space

Fei Mu once discussed in “A Brief Talk on ‘Atmosphere’” that a film should create the atmosphere within it through sound and cinematography, arguing that the primary means of expression in film is to assimilate the audience into the environment of the characters. This can be understood as the combination of objective material and the created “atmosphere,” together forming the concept of space. The material space in film encompasses living spaces, cultural spaces, geographic spaces, and more. This section will primarily analyze the material space in the film composed of elements such as environment and costume, created through the use of light and shadow.

2.1 Public Vistas of Fallen Tiles and Crumbling Walls

Throughout history, humans have always been fascinated by the beauty of transgression, the thrill of crime, and the pleasure of tragedy. Film noir is the embodiment of this obsession combined with the equally widespread spirit of nihilism and negation, materializing in the late capitalist era.¹ As a work involving elements of crime, the film *Pieta* intricately designs its material space with public scenes, such as bustling city streets and oppressive enclosed spaces, cleverly constructing the temporal and spatial background of the film. This design profoundly affects the narrative progression and the emotional engagement of the audience. These locations are not just visual displays; they are closely related to the characters’ psychological states and social statuses, reflecting the interaction and conflict between the characters and their social environment. The noise and crowdedness of urban spaces contrast with the characters’ inner loneliness, while enclosed spaces intensify the emotional tension of the characters. This allows audiences to more profoundly feel the internal and external challenges faced by the characters, thereby fully demonstrating the significant role of material space in film narrative.

2.1.1 Uncompleted Residential Flats

The phenomenon of Uncompleted Residential Flats typically centers academic discussions on multiple dimensions such as urban planning, economic development, and social psychology. From the perspective of urban planning, the presence of uncompleted residential flats disrupts the continuity and integrity of urban development, creating visual breaks and functional voids that affect the cityscape and the quality of life for its residents. The abandonment of physical spaces is often due to inadequate urban planning or market fluctuations. Further analysis may reveal flaws in urban governance and inadequacies in economic policies. The frequent occurrence of uncompleted residential flats is closely related to fluctuations in economic development, reflecting adjustments in economic structure, bubbles in the real estate market, and deficiencies in financial regulation. These factors together lead to the disruption of developers’ capital chains, resulting in projects that cannot be completed as scheduled.

In the study of space within crime-themed films, uncompleted residential flats, as a specific type of outdoor scene, play a unique role in conveying the thematic significance of the film through their selection and portrayal. Under bright daylight, the use of overexposure and yellowish-white tones not only intensifies the sense of desolation of the scene but also deepens the viewers’ sense of discomfort on a psychological level, creating a visual metaphor for social disorder and economic depression. Through such visual design, the film conveys a sense of desolation that transcends the physical abandonment, touching on social and psychological barrenness, and alluding to problems within the social structure.

In the film, the depiction of uncompleted residential flats is closely tied to plot development. Through the setting of deserted factories and mechanical workshops, it creates an atmosphere of underlying social instability and individual despair. These sites are not just backdrops for the story’s progression but also reflections of the characters’ psychological states and societal issues. For instance, the plotline where Lee Jiang coerces others into self-harm for insurance money, and the emotional climax of debtors’ fear and despair, all reach their peak within the scenes of these uncompleted residential flats. These scenes symbolize the characters’ inner turmoil and the indifference of society, mirroring the individuals’ feelings of

¹ Zhang Chunxiao. (2021). Noir as Method: Classification and Interpretation of Hong Kong Crime Films. *Film Art*, (04), 138-145.

helplessness ensnared within the socio-economic framework and their evasion of reality. Through such scene settings, the film not only showcases the abandonment of physical spaces but also deeply portrays the desolation of

the human heart and societal indifference, turning uncompleted residential flats into a backdrop of sorrow and creating a heavy atmosphere for the entire story.



Figure 1. The Dangerous Building in the Film *Pieta*

2.1.2 Streets

In the film *Pieta*, the reproduction of material space is not merely a backdrop setting but deeply engages in and propels the development of the film's narrative. The selection and depiction of street scenes, especially portraying them as spaces akin to hardware industry clusters, carry profound symbolic significance. The abandoned metal objects and dilapidated industrial facilities not only objectively reflect the social status and living conditions of the characters in the film but also symbolize the characters' shattered lives and societal marginalization through the decay and rust of these materials. In the film, from the moment Lee Jiang steps downstairs, the scenes are filled with such damage and abandonment, invisibly reinforcing the theme of conflict and alienation

between humanity and the environment.

Cinematography plays a crucial role in this process. The director and cinematographer, through compositional strategies, create a sense of visual oppression and coldness. For instance, in the scene where Lee Jiang goes downstairs to collect debts (see Figure 2), the sparse presence of people, the silent streets, and the ubiquitous debris visually contribute to an oppressive atmosphere. Especially noteworthy is how, within the frame, Lee Jiang is squeezed to one side of the screen, contrasting with a glass display case filled with hardware items on the other side. This spatial arrangement invisibly intensifies the character's sense of isolation and the unfriendliness of the environment. This visual contrast amplifies the emotions and themes conveyed by the film.



Figure 2. The Streets in the Film *Pieta*

The use of color plays an extremely crucial role in this film. The use of low-saturation blues, blacks, and grays in the early and late stages of the film not only reflects the desolation of the town and the characters' moods but also visually strengthens the gloominess and sense of oppression throughout the story. The low-key and hard lighting design, as seen in scenes set in dim weather, on the eve of a cloudy sunrise, or during the night, further accentuates the somber mood and the sense of foreboding in the imagery. For example, the scene where Lee Jiang attempts suicide at the rear of his car is set against the hazy blue ambiance of the early morning before sunrise. Such lighting and color design not only shape the film's unique visual style but also provide strong visual support for the themes of despair and hopelessness the film seeks to convey.

2.2 *Silent and Hidden Corners*

2.2.1 Home

The "Historical Records (Shiji) · Biography of Yue Yi" states: "After Yue Yang's death, he was buried in Lingshou, and his descendants settled there as their home." Home is a place for rest

and a gathering place for familial ties, originally referring to a dwelling place, but later extended to encompass spiritual and social meanings. For the characters in the film, the space of the family home serves as the last defense against the alienation of humanity. Ensnared by money and institutional structures, facing physical impairments, they can only curl up in their small but slightly warm rooms to protect the last vestiges of beauty.

In the film, scenes set in homes are often enveloped in a relatively gentle atmosphere. For example, before Lee Jiang comes to collect debts, Hun-cheol's family is bathed in the warm glow of yellow light (see Figure 3); the guitar player is also surrounded by warm lighting; and when Lee Jiang finds Kang-cheol's mother, the atmosphere in her modest but cozy little house, accompanied by a rabbit, is not cold. However, this warmth is temporary. Most characters in the film still embark on the cold path of debt repayment. Even if Lee Jiang spares the guitar player and the young father, life will not spare them.



Figure 3. The “Home” of the Debtors in the Film *Pieta*

The costume and props in the film also provide emotional guidance for the narrative of hidden spaces. In the early stages, the characters’ attire is extremely oppressive and gloomy. For example, the male protagonist, Lee Jiang, lives in a room almost entirely enveloped in blue, with blue curtains, bed sheets, and a fish tank, all indicating his cold-blooded ruthlessness. However, there are occasional warm colors, such as the dark red pillow Lee Jiang hugs in the opening scene and the sporadic red hues mixed in the bed sheets, hinting at his eventual transformation.

2.2.2 Stairwells

In the film *Pieta*, the spatial design of stairwells carries complex symbolic meanings and functionalities. They serve as the boundary between private and public spaces, as well as symbolic sites for the characters’ psychological transformations. Stairwells, as intermediary spaces, exhibit an interesting dual characteristic: they are both a shared passageway for residents within a building and, in certain contexts, become a private area for a particular household. In the film, this space serves not just as a physical junction but also as a transitional zone for emotional and psychological state changes. Lee Jiang’s descent down the stairs symbolizes his move from the warmth and safety of home into the indifference and ruthlessness of the external world. The stairwell becomes a symbolic passage for him, transitioning from the coziness of home to the harsh life of debt

collection. Simultaneously, the appearance of “Mother” Jiang Meishan on the stairs presents an emotional confrontation and tug-of-war. Her presence attempts to stop Lee Jiang’s steps towards the indifferent outside world, symbolizing the ties of family and the conflict with the external environment.

In its use of audio-visual language, *Pieta* conveys the subtle shifts in the characters’ moods through changes in lighting and color. Initially, Lee Jiang’s neglect of “Mother” Jiang Meishan is reflected in his disregard for the stairwell space, depicted through the use of gray-white and cold-colored lighting (see Figure 4), making the stairs appear indifferent and merciless, echoing the emotional distance in Lee Jiang’s heart. At this stage, the stairwell serves merely as a transitional space for sorting out his emotions. However, as “Mother” Jiang Meishan gradually enters his life and heart, the significance of the stairwell space begins to change, becoming an important site that connects the emotions and relationships of the characters. In a certain night scene of the film (see Figure 5), the lighting in the stairwell space chooses a warm yellow, mimicking the warm light of voice-activated lights in hallways. This not only creates a sense of safety and warmth but also symbolizes the change in Lee Jiang’s heart and his trust and dependence on “Mother” Jiang Meishan. Through such audio-visual design, the stairwell space transforms from a simple physical passage into an emotional carrier within the film’s

narrative, reflecting the deepening of transformation of their inner worlds. relationships between characters and the



Figure 4. The Stairwell in *Pieta* (Cold Light)



Figure 5. The Stairwell in *Pieta* (Warm Light)

3. Autumnal Solitude Amidst the Overgrown Grass of Social Landscapes

Marx once said that the essence of man, in its reality, is the sum of all social relations. Thus, social space refers to a composite image of social relations among people, primarily perceived through the environment and props of material space, as well as through tangible aspects like

characters' clothing and behavior.¹ The material space creates an objective environment under the true portrayal of society, such as the metallic cold texture mentioned earlier, with props and costumes being specific perceptions within the social space. Meanwhile, social space is a comprehensive consideration of the spiritual and cultural environments based on a material

¹ Huang Dequan. (2005). On the Narrative Space of Film. *Film Art*, (03), 18-24.

foundation.

The story depicted in the film represents a culmination of issues within South Korean society over a certain period. The widespread issue of shortages due to poor cash flow forces small enterprises to seek small loans (i.e., high-interest loans) to maintain operations. The director of *Pieta* openly states that the film aims to showcase the extreme phenomena of capitalism and the alienation of humanity caused by economic material problems, making the social space of the film a subject worth exploring and analyzing.

3.1 *The Overlooked and Marginalized Realm of Small-Scale Borrowers*

In the film *Pieta*, the portrayal of social roles deeply reveals the living conditions and psychological states of characters from various strata against the backdrop of extreme capitalism. From a sociological perspective, these characters represent different strata within the social structure, and through their interactions, the dynamics and conflicts of social space are displayed.

Firstly, the character of Lee Jiang is the embodiment of a wandering debt collector in the film. The art design of his living environment, attire, and makeup places him in a dark and marginal social zone. He is both an enforcer of social violence and a victim under this violent system. This contradictory identity makes Lee Jiang a typical representative of individuals struggling under the oppression of the social structure. His character in the film is endowed with multiple meanings, reflecting both the tragedy of the socially vulnerable and the helplessness and powerlessness when confronting oppression.

Secondly, the character of Jiang Meishan represents the remnants of a broken family. As a mother, her image in the film is both tragic and deeply significant in a social context. On one hand, her actions reflect a redemption for the family and a resistance to social injustice. On the other hand, her actions also represent an irreversible tragedy; she redeems others but cannot save her own child. Jiang Meishan's acts of revenge reveal the sense of powerlessness and complex psychology individuals may feel when faced with social injustice. It also demonstrates the extreme measures that might be taken to defend morality and justice under extreme social conditions.

Lastly, the film also portrays countless ordinary debtors, such as the new father, the guitar man, the impoverished couple, and the middle-aged man, who represent the most common groups in society. The existence of these characters reveals the predicaments of ordinary people under socio-economic pressures. They can neither bear the burden of poverty nor repay their heavy debts. Yet, their desire and hope for life reflect the brilliance of humanity, even in the most desperate circumstances. Their portrayals in the film construct a microcosm of society, showcasing how people struggle to survive on the margins under the capitalist system.

The depiction of these three groups of characters forms a complex web of individuals that crisscross through the social space portrayed in the film. Within this social space, the dimension of morality is flattened; no one can stand on a moral high ground to judge others. Every individual here is subject to the top of the power structure—Lee Jiang. Yet, even Lee Jiang, who is in a position of control, cannot escape the fate of being controlled by a higher power. The display of power relations and class structure within the social space not only reflects the reality of social inequality and oppression but also explores how individuals seek possibilities for self-redemption and survival in such a context.

3.2 *Systemic Oppression in the Chilled Silence of Mountains and Waters*

The hierarchical system in Korean society has a long history, with its roots traceable back to traditional Confucian culture, which emphasizes strict social hierarchies and order. The strict norms in language use reflect meticulous respect for age, gender, and social status in social interactions, showcasing the clear stratification within the social structure. From the hereditary system of the Joseon Dynasty to the occupational stratification of modern society, the use of polite language and honorifics consistently emphasizes this clearly defined hierarchical social structure. This awareness of hierarchy is meticulously embodied and enacted in the fields of education, the workplace, and even public services, affecting people's behavior patterns and psychological expectations.

However, with the development of the capitalist economy, the hierarchical structure of Korean society faces new challenges and transformations. Under the influence of extreme capitalism, money and market logic become the

dominant forces in social operation, with the chaebol economic system being particularly prominent in this process. Within such a system, economic interests often overshadow social responsibility and humanitarian concern, leading to increased instability in the lives of the lower strata of society. Under this system, every fluctuation in society can have profound effects on individuals living on the edge of instability, and the unfair distribution of social resources exacerbates this instability.

In a value system where capital reigns supreme, economic benefits become the important criteria for assessing individual value and social status. This has led to the marginalization of traditional humanitarian values such as kindness and understanding, which are often seen as lower-cost, less important considerations. However, such disregard for humanity and basic morals can ultimately lead to societal indifference and a lack of trust, a cost that the entire society must bear. During this process, the moral foundation of society is eroded, relationships between individuals become fragile, and the overall cohesion and stability of society are threatened. Therefore, in the reality of extreme capitalism, how to balance economic development with social justice, and how to protect humanitarian values and the interests of the lower strata of society, have become critical issues that South Korean society must address.

4. Twilight's Loess Spirit: Dusk in the Spiritual Landscape

Spiritual space refers to the abstract mapping of an individual's inner world, influenced by the material environment and social structure. It reflects the subject's psychological response and internal experience of their social reality. In a materialistic capitalist society, an individual's spiritual space is often alienated by the overflow of material desires and the values of selfishness. This alienation can manifest as inner isolation, conflict in values, and estrangement from social relationships. Therefore, the spiritual space is not only an individual's perception and interpretation of the external world but also a collection of emotions and thoughts triggered deep within. It is often used in literature and film art to explore profound questions of human existence.

4.1 *Fleeting Longings for Love*

The spiritual space is built upon the material and social spaces, and the desire for love often

interplays with the material space of a home. For example, the stairwell as a material space bears the weight of societal financial pressures, Lee Jiang's inner coldness, as well as the warmth yearned for by human nature. At times it is cold, yet it can also become warm. The spiritual inclinations within this material space are greatly influenced by the disposition of its occupant. In the film, whether it be seemingly in control characters like Lee Jiang and Jiang Meishan, or the seemingly subordinate group of debtors, all harbor a desire for warmth and love at certain moments. Although these moments are fleeting, they are highlights in their lives.

In terms of audio-visual language, Jiang Meishan is bathed in a sea of white light atop an abandoned building, with the sunlight at an unusually high exposure level. This symbolizes Jiang Meishan's intensely conflicted spiritual state. She approached Lee Jiang seeking revenge for her son but developed a familial dependence on him. The more complex the emotions, the more delicately they are portrayed. She yearns to embrace warmth and forgive herself, yet she cannot let go because of her biological son's death.

4.2 *Whispers and Melodies of Survival Hope*

Within this materialistically driven social framework, individual entrepreneurs and microenterprise owners are constructed as marginal figures within the socio-economic mechanism. Their states of existence and psychological experiences reflect the harsh reality of modern urban life. This group is positioned at the lower end of the social hierarchy, serving both as the exploited under the logic of capital and as exploiters of each other within their own stratum's competitive environment. The film, through the interactions between Lee Jiang and characters of his social stratum, showcases the complex state of existence for these microeconomic participants.

In the imagery, lighting, color, and objects carry more than just visual aesthetics; they are endowed with rich symbolic meanings, becoming crucial elements in exploring the characters' spiritual spaces and inner psychological states. The lighting around the guitar man, the light and shadow behind the couple, the warm tones outside the window, the nearby fireplace, the yellow wallpaper on the wall, and the red women's clothing in the clothing store—these details can be interpreted

in academic research as symbols of individuals seeking self-redemption and psychological comfort in a repressive living environment. For instance, Lee Jiang's wavering under the light not only reveals the fluctuations in his personal emotions but also reflects the uncertainty of his position within the social structure and his quest for identity recognition.

Moreover, the use of light and color often serves as an externalization of emotions and psychological states in art films, a technique directors use to convey the story's themes and the inner worlds of their characters. Their arrangement in the narrative presents a visual contrast and psychological tension, a tension that stems from the collision between reality and ideal, the coexistence of desire and despair. These elements together form a complex mental map, marking the psychological journey of the characters through modern urban life, pointing towards their pursuit of peace, hope, and a sense of belonging. These delicate artistic techniques and symbolic objects provide a wealth of material for textual analysis in academic research, revealing the psychological states and survival challenges of individuals in a capitalist society.

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