

Class Narrative in Lee Chang-dong's Films: A Case Study of the Film *Burning*

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Abstract

As one of the most significant auteur directors in the South Korean film industry, Lee Chang-dong has always focused on social realities, marginalized characters, and underprivileged groups, earning a reputation for his strong critical consciousness in the global film scene. At the 71st Cannes Film Festival, his latest work *Burning* garnered a score of 3.8 out of 4, setting a record for the highest rating in the history of Cannes press screenings. The film primarily explores the existential circumstances and survival conditions of individuals, depicting how individuals seek freedom in an absurd world. It maintains Lee Chang-dong's consistent stance on the margins, continuing his attention to the plight and survival conditions of individuals from the lower strata of society and his strong critique of social realities. This paper will conduct a narrative analysis of *Burning* from the perspective of class narrative.

Keywords: Lee Chang-dong, *Burning*, class narrative, realism, South Korean cinema

Transitioning from a novelist to a director, Lee Chang-dong has produced only six films throughout his directing career. This prolonged period of meticulous craftsmanship has earned him widespread recognition from domestic and international audiences alike. After a hiatus of eight years, Lee returned with his latest film *Burning* adapted from Haruki Murakami's short story *Barn Burning*, interwoven with elements from William Faulkner's short story *Barn Burning*. Lee expanded upon these narrative elements to create a suspenseful film, once again focusing his lens on contemporary South Korean youth. The film delves into the harsh social realities faced by these individuals, exploring the confusion and anger stemming from their

circumstances.¹ *Burning* was nominated for the main competition at the 71st Cannes Film Festival, achieving a remarkable rating of 3.8 out of 4, and receiving widespread acclaim from critics and audiences alike. As one of the most important auteur directors in the South Korean and Asian film industries, Lee Chang-dong is renowned for his attention to the plight and survival conditions of individuals from the lower strata of society, the alienation inflicted by modern societal structures, and the strong critique embedded within his works. His

¹ Gu Zheng. (2018). The Bass from the Depth of the Skeleton — A Brief Review of Lee Chang-dong's Film *Burning*. *Art Criticism*, (08).

cinematic perspective consistently focuses on marginalized characters within South Korean society, with his critique of reality stemming from a bottom-up examination and critical attitude, aiming to explore the dreams, anxieties, pains, and loneliness of marginalized individuals alienated by non-coercive social ideologies such as consumerism, hypermodernity, spiritual individualization, and cultural populism.¹

In Lee's *Green Trilogy* — *Green Fish*, *Peppermint Candy*, and *Oasis* — the director employs poetic cinematic language and character portrayals of Makdong, Kim Yong-ho, and Jong-du to brutally depict the oppression of marginalized groups by mainstream society against marginalized groups and the alienation of human nature by social organizations, analyzing the squeezing and infringement of gray individuals by social-historical environments. Subsequently, *Secret Sunshine* and *Poetry* reveal the distortion of character and inner psychology of Lee Shin-ae and Yang Mi-ja, illustrating the cruel and devastating effects of destinies influenced by mainstream discourse on individual lives. It can be said that Lee Chang-dong is one of the most critically conscious filmmakers in the Korean film industry today.

Continuing his tradition of social critique, *Burning* tells the story of tortured individuals in a cruel world, digging deep into complex societal issues and the spirit of the times through the character of Jong-su, a lower-class individual. In an interview, Lee Chang-dong expressed, "I have always been concerned about the changes in South Korean society, perhaps out of 'artist' responsibility, so I want to use this work to showcase the current state of young people's lives, such as their anger, frustration, and helplessness."² However, *Burning* also innovates beyond Lee's previous works. While his past works emphasized the relationship between individual life and societal history and cultural environment, *Burning* focuses on the individual's oppressive living conditions, the materialization of their mental life, and the frustration and sexual confusion that remain unresolved, leading to a sense of powerlessness and nihilism. Furthermore, *Burning* not only

depicts various inequalities in South Korean society and the confusion of young people but also incorporates dreams, fantasies, and the protagonist's identity as a novelist from a realistic perspective, constructing a mysterious world that seeks to establish a connection between the unknown enigma and the anger of contemporary youth, building a "mysterious" connection. As the director puts it, "The puzzles that cannot be solved, the lack of clear evidence, that kind of confusion is a bigger problem, something that arouses deeper anger."³ It can be said that the criticism in *Burning* is more radical, the metaphor is stronger, and the direction is more obvious.

Although the film is adapted from Haruki Murakami's short story, *Burning* largely departs from the original text, undergoing significant alterations. Lee Chang-dong modified the original text's inherent meaning, imbuing *Burning* with a strong inclination towards class narrative, endowing it with a more powerful social orientation and critical consciousness. In Murakami's original text, the protagonist "I" is a married middle-class male, whereas Lee's protagonist, Jong-su, is a recent graduate living in a rented room, altering the protagonist's identity shifts the film's intended meaning away from the silent erosion of capitalism on people's lives and cherished memories, instead primarily expressing the class divide caused by capitalism, which subsequently triggers class antagonism.⁴

Lee Chang-dong expresses skepticism towards the various appearances constructed by the civilization built by capital. He shares a sense of suffocation with regards to class rigidity and established order, deeply understanding the essence of literary creation. In *Burning* Lee constructs a multi-layered symbolic system, with burning serving as a central motif representing the eruption of anger. The imagery of fire recurs throughout the film, from Jong-su's childhood experiences, Ben's lighter, the burning of greenhouses, the monumental fire at the art exhibition, to the extreme choice made by Jong-su at the end. His father's anger, Jong-su's unfillable emotions and desires, and the "loss"

¹ Li Yan. (2018). The Biography and Filmography of Chang-dong Lee. *Contemporary Cinema*, (12).

² Chang-dong Lee, Fan Xiaoqing. (2018). Crack of History, Power of Reality: An Interview with Chang-dong Lee. *Contemporary Cinema*, (12).

³ Wu Weiqi. (2019). Absurdity, Solitude, and Struggle — Existentialism in Li Cangdong's *Burning*. *Art Evaluation*, (02).

⁴ He Xiangyu. (2019). The Resistance and Nihilism of the "Other" — A Brief Discussion on Class Narrative and Existentialism in Lee Chang-dong's "Burning". *Home Drama*, (36), 80-81.

of memory brought about by Hae-mi's disappearance all provide a pretext for this burning. Although the film's mysteries persist until the end without a final answer, the director's intended cinematic world has already taken shape.

Burning revolves around Lee Jong-su, a young South Korean deliveryman. He encounters his childhood friend Hae-mi by chance and establishes an unstable intimate relationship between friendship and romance with her. Both of them epitomize the imagery of the South Korean "rental house young generation," struggling for survival in poor living conditions.¹ Apart from moments of genuine joy, they face long periods of loneliness and harsh realities. As Hae-mi departs for Africa, the narrative increasingly diverges from Jong-su's expectations. In Lee Chang-dong's portrayal, real-life remains distant from Jong-su. His hometown, Paju, is a "forgotten place," and the echoes of the inter-Korean border broadcast remind the audience of his "marginal" status. News of South Korean youth unemployment and Trump's policies towards blue-collar workers playing on the TV seems both relevant and irrelevant to Jong-su. He lives in a dilapidated and cramped rental house filled with things left behind by his father, only a photo on the wall seemingly proving their father-son relationship. When he attends his father's trial, there is hardly any eye contact between them, except for one instance when his father looks at Jong-su, who immediately averts his gaze. Jong-su attempts to connect with the world by writing a petition with excellent prose, but his neighbors display an indifferent attitude towards him. Like the ox later sold off, Jong-su is worthless and meaningless, but the presence of Hae-mi becomes more important. Jong-su often goes to feed the non-existent cat in Hae-mi's rental house, masturbates in front of the unreflected observatory tower in the apartment, and fantasizes about the Hae-mi in the photo. Jong-su is portrayed as a marginalized figure throughout a series of images, with various allegorical mysteries presented at the beginning of the story. After Hae-mi returns from Africa, she recounts legends of "little hunger" and "great hunger" in African tribes, seemingly a metaphor for their

survival situation. Besides the daily struggles of "little hunger," what torments them more is the plight of "great hunger," the emptiness of finding no meaning in life.

Later, with the emergence of the upper-class figure, Ben, who symbolizes the opposition to Jong-su and Hae-mi, the film begins to focus on the class differentiation caused by wealth disparity. The social reality depicted in the film becomes even more brutal, penetrating and eroding Jong-su's last trace of hope, pushing him further into the abyss of despair. In Jong-su's eyes, Ben is the "great Gatsby" of South Korea — someone who is rich but doesn't seem to have a job. At first, Ben appears to be a near-perfect figure, living in a mansion, driving a luxury car, and frequently traveling around the world. Hae-mi and Ben's saleswoman girlfriend, as representatives of two different classes from Ben, engage in exaggerated performances in front of Ben. When Hae-mi passionately performs the hunger dance of African tribes, and the new girlfriend exaggeratedly imitates the expressions and postures of Chinese customers in the specialty store, both women strive to showcase their self-worth with rare topics unfamiliar to ordinary South Koreans. Their lively performances seem like hope for crossing class boundaries, but in reality, they are more like a desperate struggle, struggling to integrate into other classes, struggling to climb the pyramid.² Ben remains indifferent and bored, yawning while Hae-mi performs passionately. What Jong-su has been pursuing with Hae-mi is only a collectible commodity for Ben and others. Ben is constantly immersed in the condition of "great hunger."

As the relationship between Jong-su, Hae-mi, and Ben gradually intensifies, Ben reveals to Jong-su his secret preference for "burning plastic greenhouses." Those abandoned plastic greenhouses, dirty, messy, and useless, seem to be waiting to be burned by him. At this point, the director sets up a mysterious suspense. Ben's description of the plastic greenhouses metaphorically represents Jong-su and their group, which are similarly deemed worthless. Through the metaphor of "plastic greenhouses," Ben expresses his values of "natural morality," which humans cannot judge but can only accept. "Natural morality" is a kind of balance, just like

¹ Fan Xiaoping. (2018). Korean Film Author Chang-dong Lee: Chang-dong Lee and Characters in His Films. *Contemporary Cinema*, (12).

² Li Yan. (2018). Stare into Humanity: Gender Narrative in Chang-dong Lee's Film. *Contemporary Cinema*, (12).

how he can exist simultaneously in different places. This transcendent value system is difficult for Jong-su to understand. For Jong-su, the world has always been a heavy oppression. If something is useless, just let it self-destruct on the edge, or simply burn it. "Natural morality" wouldn't care about their existence. Hae-mi is more like a worthless "plastic greenhouse." She has expressed multiple times her desire to disappear with the sunset. This emotion is fully manifested in her spontaneous dance, accompanied by the sunset. With her upper body naked, hands clasped together like a bird flying into the sky, the joy of vitality turns melancholic as the sun sets. Even more tragic is that, although belonging to the same class, Jong-su lacks the ability to understand Hae-mi's sadness. Instead, he channels his anger into attacks against Hae-mi, accusing her of casually undressing like a prostitute. This declaration marks the definitive end of their love. Jong-su and Hae-mi's love is tragic. Their trajectories intersect and quickly develop to an end in a moment. As "hungry people," they have no conditions to pursue luxurious love. Their love appears fragile in the face of cruel reality.

Soon after, Jong-su discovers Hae-mi's inexplicable disappearance, and the latter half of the film is shrouded in suspense and thriller atmosphere. After Hae-mi's disappearance, Jong-su becomes like an inept detective, searching for Hae-mi's whereabouts. However, he not only gains nothing but also becomes increasingly confused and powerless, deeply entrenched in the mystery. Jong-su finds everything about Hae-mi becoming blurrier, and her disappearance goes unnoticed. Lee Chang-dong depicts Jong-su's investigation of Hae-mi's disappearance with a mysterious tone. His true purpose is to find the truth behind reality, the answers to all questions, and the logic between things. Instead of the answers to the mystery, the process of finding evidence and the evidence itself seem more important. Jong-su is not only searching for his missing lover but also seeking evidence of her existence, attempting to find evidence of his lover and his memories. Ironically, after Hae-mi disappears, all evidence denies the existence of their past memories. He continuously checks if the plastic greenhouses around his residence are burning, if burning the greenhouse implies murder. This pursuit is not necessarily related to Hae-mi's disappearance. He seeks a sense of reality,

tangible clues he can see and touch, but the result is inevitably disappointment. All clues ultimately lead to greater uncertainty. When he goes to Hae-mi's home, he only sees an empty apartment. The neighbors say pets are not allowed in the building. Does the cat exist? He seeks confirmation from Hae-mi's family and villagers about the well Hae-mi mentioned, but they cannot provide a definite answer. Only a mother who has been missing for years absentmindedly affirms the existence of the well. When he tracks Ben, he doesn't know what he's trying to prove. At Ben's place, he sees the watch he gave to Hae-mi. Does this prove that Hae-mi is dead? He sees a cat in Ben's mansion, calls out Hae-mi's name, and the cat comes running. Is this Hae-mi's cat? The beginning of the film seems to suggest the existence of such imagination. Hae-mi performs a pantomime of eating non-existent oranges, saying the trick is not to think about the oranges here but to forget they are not here. The question of existence and reality is continuously raised through clues such as the greenhouse, the well, the watch, etc., throughout the film.

Hae-mi's disappearance, as well as the absence of the cat and the watch, symbolize a certain vivid "existence" of young people, yet a despairing and powerless feeling of "never having existed." Even if they have lived fervently, they find it difficult to find memories of the past. Without evidence of existence, everything about this person after disappearance becomes completely unverifiable. The first half of the film is built on a logic of reality, but after Jong-su learns about the "burning plastic greenhouses," reality gradually blends with fiction. Jong-su's actions, such as dreaming of burning plastic greenhouses, searching nearby warehouses, looking for Hae-mi, tracking Ben, and fantasizing about lying in bed with Hae-mi, are interspersed with real-life segments such as job searches, meeting his mother, his father's conviction, and the plight of contemporary young girls mentioned by Hae-mi's colleague. These actions are full of fragmented dream-like sensations, reflecting Jong-su's frustration in real life. Reality and illusion alternate, and the previously appearing metaphors are continuously confirmed in this segment, expanding the mystery. Jong-su acts alone, akin to Hae-mi's "peeling oranges" performance. Finally, in Hae-mi's empty apartment, Jong-su imagines Hae-mi's presence,

saying, "Forget that there are no oranges here; that's it." Until this point, reality fades away entirely, and the film leads to an illusory ending.

For Jong-su, Hae-mi is irreplaceable. She is not only a lover and a sexual fantasy object but also connected to Jong-su's past, the carrier and witness of his memories.¹ After Hae-mi disappears, all memories become unverifiable, as if there are no traces of ever existing. In the search for evidence of existence, ultimately relying on Jong-su's identity as a writer, the film throws an unknown realistic or fictional ending to the audience: Jong-su writes a novel on the computer, followed by Ben's perspective. He confidently examines himself in the mirror after putting on contact lenses, then proceeds to make up that newly acquainted girl, as if preparing some kind of "sacrifice." These scenes, along with the final scene of Jong-su killing Ben, are likely to appear in his novel, rather than reality. By this point in the story, what is true and what is false is no longer so important. Jong-su, crushed by reality to the bottom, needs to find some outlet for his anger, but it remains uncertain whether he can hear the "low sound from deep within the bones" that Ben speaks of while committing murder.

The resistance of the powerless at the bottom against reality ultimately evolves into anger towards the upper echelons of society. In their process of climbing upwards, they experience repeated failures and ridicule, eventually becoming the knife that stabs the elite. This process allows the audience to glimpse into the journey of young people in modern Korea as they urgently search for real answers and the meaning of their existence in the face of life's seemingly unsolvable yet stark realities, leading to a spiritual dilemma of being trapped between the contradictory realities of actual life and ideal values. The disparities and conflicts of hierarchy, the indifference and alienation in interpersonal relationships, the suppressed resentment and sexual confusion are the prevalent themes running through the narrative of the film. Ultimately, by burning Boon's body and the Porsche car, the anger of the lower class is vented, and the marginalized "other" finally voices their resistance.

Through the metaphor of the "burning plastic

greenhouse," *Burning* exposes the growing class divisions in South Korean society. For society, Hae-mi's existence is also on the margins, as the "plastic greenhouse" in the film serves as a metaphor for individuals like Hae-mi and the lower class, whose existence and disappearance go unnoticed. Even with continuous efforts like Jong-su's search, their endeavors remain futile. The gap between the proletariat represented by Jong-su and Hae-mi and the elite represented by Ben, although seemingly equal in outward appearance and achieving what Franklin termed as "snatching lightning from the sky and power from tyrants,"² is marked by extreme inequalities in property, sexual rights, and discourse power. Essentially, class conflict persists, and social mobility between classes has been blocked, rendering marriage ineffective in bridging class divides. In the eyes of Ben, Hae-mi is merely one of the plastic greenhouses destined to be burned down sooner or later. Even the class mobility facilitated by exams diminishes significantly. After graduating from college, Jong-su can only live in a cramped rental house and make ends meet by doing odd jobs. In this new class society, the upward mobility of South Korean youth has been completely blocked, class stratification has been solidified, and destinies have been predetermined. Throughout the film, Lee Chang-dong tirelessly portrays the opposition between classes. Every scene with the three characters seated together forms a triangle filled with opposition, except for the one scene when they are all under the influence of marijuana. This metaphor sarcastically points to a sorrowful reality: only in altered states of consciousness is there brief equality.

In discussing the film *Burning* Lee Chang-dong mentioned in an interview at the Cannes Film Festival, "Film, unlike text, expresses itself through imagery, and imagery is merely an illusion created by light on the screen, isn't it? Viewers face the empty space on the screen and interpret it in their own ways, endowing it with meaning and concepts... I want to depict the mystery of the film medium through this movie."³ Lee Chang-dong's cinematic art is a

¹ Sun Xiaobing. (2018). Pathos in Despair: Character Pedigree and Cultural Ethos in Chang-dong Lee's Films. *Contemporary Cinema*, (12).

² YAN Lin. (2012). Class Narrative and Construction of Masses "Historical Subject". *Journal of Shanxi Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, (01).

³ Ma Ying, Wang Yongchao. (2018). The Poetic Image Presentation of Li Cangdong's Film "Burning". *Movie Literature*, (23).

blend of reality and illusion, reflecting his principles of adapting literature. Besides the narrative's selection between reality and metaphor from the novel, the fusion of reality and illusion lies primarily in the expression of imagery itself. The interplay between reality and fiction in the film, and the question of where reality ends, varies with our perspectives. The character and position of Jong-su in the film, as well as his representation of marginalized youth grappling with life's unsolvable mysteries, are all aspects that the film endeavors to present.

Coming from a literary background, Lee Chang-dong has personally experienced the rapid prosperity and economic crises of South Korean society. Faced with the immense wealth disparity and unavoidable contradictions in South Korean society, as well as the bewildered anger and confusion of the younger generation, he uses poetic imagery and texts filled with metaphorical, philosophical, and humanistic awareness to expound and contemplate. He consistently stands from a humanistic perspective to focus on marginalized characters, observing the marginal and lower-class people in capitalist society. In the film *Burning* in addition to Lee Chang-dong's consistent use of poetic cinematography to record the absurd world and express care for marginalized individuals, he also explores essential questions about personal existence, individual choices in facing the absurd world, and the pursuit of freedom, all of which reflect his unique way of expressing criticism and contemplation of South Korean society through filmmaking.

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