

A Symphony of Black Comedy and Political Satire: On the Absurd Narrative and Power Deconstruction in Byun Sung-hyun's Film *Good News*

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Abstract

Released in 2025, the South Korean film *Good News* is director Byun Sung-hyun's latest political satire and dark comedy. Based on the 1970 Japan Airlines Flight 351 hijacking, the film uses absurdist narrative techniques and a multi-layered satirical structure to sharply critique bureaucracy, international politics, and individual identity. This paper analyzes the dialectical relationship between the film's historical prototype and its artistic fiction, examining how it deconstructs power discourse through dark comedy and constructs a postmodern allegory about truth, power, and identity through a unique visual language and metaphorical system. The study finds that *Good News* not only continues the consistent social critique of South Korean cinema but also reaches new heights in genre fusion and narrative innovation, revealing the essential absurdity of political discourse and historical narrative through its "absurdist realism."

Keywords: *Good News*, Byun Sung-hyun, black comedy, political satire, power deconstruction, absurdism

1. Introduction

"Sometimes the truth lies, and sometimes lies reveal the truth" — this line from the film *Good News* aptly encapsulates the core concept of the work. As the fourth collaboration between director Byun Sung-hyun and actor Sol Kyung-gu, this film, released globally on Netflix in 2025, has garnered widespread attention in the international film industry for its unique historical perspective and sharp political satire. Set in the 1970s, the film tells the story of a farcical rescue operation orchestrated by South Korean intelligence after a Japanese passenger plane is hijacked by the communist organization

"Red Army Faction" and en route to Pyongyang. However, this seemingly crisis response gradually evolves into a comprehensive satire of bureaucratic systems, international politics, and media manipulation.

Good News continues director Byun Sung-hyun's consistent style of genre fusion and keen insight into power relations—from the complex male emotions in *The Merciless* to the political games in *King Maker*, and then to the violent aesthetics in *Killing Bok-soon*, his works have always explored authorialism within the framework of commercial genres. This time, however, he chose a subject based on a real historical event—the

“Yodo hijacking incident”—but did not adhere to historical restoration. Instead, he used this as an opportunity to construct a metaphorical world that is both absurd and real, reflecting the political absurdity that still profoundly influences contemporary society half a century later.

This article aims to analyze from multiple dimensions how *Good News* achieves a sharp critique of social power structures through its dark comedy narrative strategy, visual language, and character development. The film is not only a recreation of a historical hijacking incident, but also a metaphorical interpretation of contemporary global political dilemmas—in that seemingly distant event of the 1970s, we can see a microcosm of today’s international relations, bureaucratic failures, and media manipulation.

2. The Dialectic Between Historical Truth and Artistic Fiction

The film *Good News* draws its inspiration from the Japan Airlines Flight 351 hijacking incident (also known as the “Yodo hijacking”) that occurred on March 31, 1970. This event shocked Japanese society at the time and had a profound impact on Japan-South Korea relations. Historically, nine members of the Japanese Communist League’s “Red Army Faction,”

armed with samurai swords and homemade bombs, took control of a Boeing 727 flying from Tokyo to Fukuoka, taking 129 people hostage. The hijackers initially demanded to fly to Cuba, but due to logistical problems, they changed their destination to Pyongyang, North Korea. During this process, South Korean authorities attempted to disguise Seoul’s Gimpo Airport as a North Korean airport to deceive the hijackers—a highly dramatic historical detail that became the main source of inspiration for the film’s absurd narrative.

However, director Byun Sung-hyun did not attempt to create a strictly historical reenactment, but rather explicitly stated that his intention was to reflect “those absurd things that still resonate in the world today, spanning decades.” To this end, the film employs extensive artistic fiction and exaggeration on a historical framework, most notably the creation of the mysterious character “Mr. A” (played by Sol Kyung-gu)—a nameless, unofficial secret coordinator who manipulates the entire operation from behind the scenes like a shadow. This entirely fictional character becomes the core vehicle for the film’s exploration of the nature of power and identity politics.

Table 1. Comparison of Key Elements in Historical Events and Artistic Fiction

Historical elements	Artistic fictional elements	Artistic Function
Japan Airlines Flight 351 hijacking incident	The hijacking incident in the film	Provides a narrative foundation and a sense of realism
South Korea disguises Gimpo Airport as Pyongyang Airport	The exaggerated depiction of the “secondary hijacking” plan	To enhance the absurdity of the situation
The hijackers demanded to see a photo of Kim Il-sung.	Various verification scenes in the film	Increase dramatic tension
Real-world “double hijacking” operators	Lieutenant Xu Gaoming’s role	Provide audience identification perspective
Japanese Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Transport and Tourism exchanges hostages.	Diplomatic solutions in the film	Showing the complexity of international politics
No corresponding historical figure	“Character A”	Exploring issues of power and identity

The film’s creativity also lies in its reimagining of the historical outcome. In real history, the hijackers ultimately released all the passengers in exchange for a volunteer hostage—Shinjiro Yamamura, then Japan’s Parliamentary

Vice-Minister of Transport—and the entire incident was resolved without any casualties. However, the film constructs an allegory within this historical framework about identity swapping, power struggles, and historical

nihilism—especially at the film’s ending, where “A” acquires the new identity of “Cui Gaoming,” while Xu Gaoming, who originally expected a promotion, becomes the forgotten “A,” completing a thorough deconstruction of the historical narrative.

This dialectical relationship between historical truth and artistic fiction elevates *Good News* beyond the realm of a simple historical drama, placing it within the postmodern narrative domain that reflects on the act of writing history itself. The film seems to suggest that the boundary between history and fiction is inherently blurred, just as the moon has a visible front and an invisible back, yet both together constitute the complete reality of the moon.

3. Black Comedy as a Weapon of Criticism

The most prominent auteur mark of *Good News* lies in its narrative strategy of pushing black comedy to its extreme. This comedy is not a lighthearted entertainment, but a sharp weapon for deconstructing power and criticizing the system. The humor in the film does not come from isolated jokes, but rather from the enormous gap between the extremely dire situation (a plane full of hostages) and the authorities’ absurd, selfish, and chaotic response. This absurd realism places the film in the tradition of Korean satirical films such as *Parasite* and *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, while simultaneously forging a unique artistic path.

3.1 The Absurd Presentation of Bureaucracy

The film’s satire of the bureaucratic system is comprehensive, encompassing everything from the South Korean Central Intelligence Agency to the intelligence agencies of the United States and Japan. In the emergency situation of a hijacking crisis, the friction, chaos, and even contradictory strategies between various agencies further complicate the already dangerous rescue mission. The concept of Lieutenant Seo Go-myung, played by Hong Kyung, “hijacking the plane a second time from the ground” is itself a powerful metaphor for bureaucratic control—in the process of attempting to resolve the crisis, the control exerted by the authorities on the hostages is no less restrictive and dangerous than that of the hijackers themselves.

A highly representative scene in the film depicts South Korean intelligence officials arguing endlessly about trivial procedural issues in a lavishly decorated conference room, utterly helpless in the face of the actual crisis. This

portrayal of “inefficient meetings” vividly reveals the fundamental failure of the bureaucratic system—not the incompetence of individual officials, but the disconnect between the formalism of the entire system and its substantive objectives. Even more interestingly, South Korean President Park Chung-hee is absent throughout the film, only to be represented by his wife (in a special cameo role by Jeon Do-yeon), who mentions that the president is “not feeling well,” when in reality it’s just a hangover. This setup pushes the irony to its extreme—the highest decision-makers are absent for ridiculous reasons during a national crisis, suggesting the hollowing out of the core of national power.

3.2 Multi-Layered Ironic Structure

The satirical structure of *Good News* comprises three layers: first, a direct critique of the South Korean bureaucratic system; second, a satire of international political maneuvering; and finally, a revelation of the universal human desire for power. The film “equally kills the whole world,” sparing no one, not even Japan, North Korea, or the United States. This indiscriminate satirical strategy allows the film to transcend the narrow perspective of nationalism and gain a global critical vision.

Of particular note is the film’s portrayal of media manipulation. In a key scene, “A” barges into the newsroom, threatening the bureau chief to report according to his wishes, or he’ll “label” someone. The camera then uses a picture-in-picture effect to show how news can be manipulated—simply adding “suspected” can easily create fake news and guide public opinion. When “A” stares directly at the camera with a villainous smile, this breaking of the “fourth wall” creates a distance that both strengthens the audience’s critical distance and metaphorically suggests the pervasiveness of media manipulation in the post-truth era — “public opinion always works, in any era.”

3.3 Comedy as a Critical Distance

Director Byun Sung-hyun deliberately maintains a critical aesthetic distance through various narrative and visual strategies, preventing the audience from becoming completely emotionally involved and allowing them space for rational reflection. Whether it’s the absurd scenes that imitate American Westerns (the shadow of a plane flies by, instantly determining the winner, and the loser being shot and falling

to the ground), or the characters' sudden self-referential remarks in front of the camera, the audience is constantly reminded that this is not just a story about a hijacking, but a distorted yet truthful mirror reflecting the absurdity of society.

This use of dark comedy distinguishes *Good News* from simple disaster films or historical dramas. The film doesn't aim to immerse the audience through tension, but rather to use laughter and absurdity to prompt reflection on the political realities behind the laughter. As director Byun Sung-hyun stated, his goal was to reflect "those absurdities that still resonate in today's world after decades," and dark comedy is precisely the most appropriate art form to capture this "absurdity."

4. Narrative Metaphors of Power Structures and Individual Identity

Beneath its surface narrative of a hijacking, *Good News* subtly explores the complexities of power structures and individual identity. Through three main characters—the mysterious "A," elite Lieutenant Seo Go-myung, and Intelligence Chief Park Sang-hyun—the film constructs a miniature power ecosystem, revealing the mechanisms of power operation and the alienation of individuals within it through their interactions.

4.1 The Triangular Relationship in Power Structures

In the character system constructed in the film, the three protagonists represent different types of power: "A" represents invisible shadow power. Although he has no formal position, he has a special ability to solve thorny problems and is the real behind-the-scenes manipulator who influences the course of events; Minister Park Sang-hyun represents institutional power. He is at the top of the bureaucratic system and cares more about political interests and departmental struggles than human safety; Lieutenant Seo Go-myung represents professional rational power. As an elite air force officer, he believes in technology, rationality, and professional ethics and is one of the few people in the system who truly tries to solve problems.

This power imbalance is not only reflected in the roles but also reinforced through visual language. In the crucial scene between "A" and the minister, the director deliberately sets the scene in a dimly lit, narrow spiral staircase, with

the characters positioned in a staggered fashion—the minister stands high above, while "A" is several steps below, visually representing their power relationship. Even more extreme is a "crotch shot"—when the minister leans down and pinches "A's" face, the camera shoots from between the minister's legs, capturing "A's" humiliated expression. This composition is highly insulting, vividly illustrating "A's" lowly position within the power structure. The gossip Xu Gaoming overhears in the restroom—saying that "A" is a North Korean defector, nameless and without status, merely a dog for the CIA doing various tasks, summoned and dismissed at will—is confirmed through this visual metaphor.

4.2 Identity Mobility and Deconstruction

The film's most ingenious design lies in its exploration of the fluidity of identity. At the end, Xu Gaoming, who had hoped to gain promotion by successfully resolving the crisis, is completely forgotten, relegated to the background as an obscure "A." Meanwhile, the nameless and identityless "A" acquires the new identity of "Cui Gaoming," transforming from a shadow into an entity. This exchange and interchange of identities constitutes a political allegory about identity.

The character "A" is a paradoxical figure in himself—he possesses the ability to influence significant events, yet lacks official status; he is needed by power, yet despised by it; he resolves crises, but receives no public recognition. When the scene of him staring at a stray dog appears, the audience can feel one of the few moments of misery and chill in this comedy. This is a vivid embodiment of Foucault's concept of the "nameless"—those marginalized individuals excluded from formal power structures, yet used as tools by power.

4.3 Individual Nihilism in History

Through the experience of Xu Gaoming's father—who lost both legs in the Korean War but received only a watch as a "vain honor"—the film extends the questioning of the value of the individual in history. The father's story foreshadows the son's fate: in grand historical narratives, the sacrifices and contributions of individuals are often simplified and forgotten, ultimately leaving only symbolic compensation and substantial neglect.

Table 2. Analysis of the Role Functions of the Three Main Characters

Role	Types of rights	Identity characteristics	Final fate	Symbolic meaning
A / Cui Gaoming	Shadow Rights	The ability to solve problems despite being nameless	Gain a name but lose the essence	Necessary Other in the Power System
Xu Gaoming	Professional power	Has a name, rank, and professional skills	Becoming an anonymous existence	Idealists within the system
Park Sang-hyun	Institutional power	High-ranking official, political animal	Maintain position and power	The self-continuation of the bureaucratic system

This skepticism towards historical narrative reaches its climax at the film's end: a bird's-eye view overlooks Xu Gaoming, who stands alone on the empty land, the camera zooming out until he becomes as small as an ant, and finally the moon appears. This visual metaphor strongly suggests that in the grand historical perspective, individuals are merely insignificant existences; their pain, contributions, and losses will ultimately be forgotten, while only the moon, which shines on both truth and lies, remains eternally.

5. Visual Language and Metaphorical Systems

The artistic achievement of *Good News* is not only reflected in its narrative content, but also in its innovative visual language and multi-layered metaphorical system. Director Byun Sung-hyun constructs a film text that is both entertaining and profoundly allegorical through his unique camera aesthetics, use of color, and imagery.

5.1 The Power of Cinematic Language in Narrative

The film boasts a bold and expressive visual style, most notably its unconventional camera work. In segments depicting media manipulation, the director employs a "picture-in-picture" composition, allowing the audience to simultaneously see the news report and the behind-the-scenes manipulation of that report. This self-referential visual design not only satirizes the artificial manipulation of news but also hints at the blurring of the lines between reality and fiction in postmodern society.

What's even more groundbreaking is the moment "A" looks directly at the camera—through another layer of lens, he reveals a smile like that of a villain. This double breaking of the "fourth wall" design creates a

unique sense of irony and unease. When the on-air red light comes on, "A" is still teaching people how to graft montage segments of two news stories, creating a visual sense of novelty while revealing the mechanism of public opinion manipulation: "Existing facts, a little creativity, and the desire to believe—these three factors, when properly combined, can work."

The film also visualizes power relations through camera composition. In addition to the staircase scene and the "crotch shot" mentioned earlier, another noteworthy design is the spatial arrangement of the three main characters in the command center—Minister Park is often positioned in the center of the frame at a high position, "A" wanders in the shadows on the edges, while Seo Go-myung is often placed in the foreground but in a lower position. This spatial positioning corresponds to their different positions in the power structure, forming a visual political map.

5.2 The Image of the Moon: The Metaphorical Core of Truth

If the film has a central, unifying image, it is undoubtedly the moon. The moon, as a metaphor for "two sides of the same coin," runs throughout the film and echoes the recurring quote: "The truth is sometimes on the dark side of the moon, but that doesn't mean the other side is false. — Truman Shedd." This seemingly profound quote is ultimately revealed to be a fiction—Truman Shedd himself is just "A," an existence without a definite identity.

The metaphor of the moon in the film contains at least three layers of meaning: First, it represents the integrity of truth—the front and back together constitute the whole of the moon, just as truth needs different perspectives to be

fully grasped; second, it symbolizes the dialectical relationship between the visible and the invisible—we can only see one side of the moon, but that doesn't mean the other side doesn't exist; finally, it metaphorically represents the selectivity of historical narratives—just as we always focus on historical heroes and celebrities while ignoring those nameless individuals who actually drive history behind the scenes.

The film's ending—a bird's-eye view from the moon's perspective—elevates this imagery to a philosophical level: from the moon's perspective, human activity on Earth appears insignificant and meaningless; all power games, identity anxieties, and historical contributions ultimately dissolve into eternal silence. This contrast between the cosmic perspective and the individual predicament elevates the film beyond specific political satire, achieving a universal reflection on the human condition.

5.3 Visual Reconstruction of the Atmosphere of the Era

Despite being an allegorical work whose themes transcend a specific era, *Good News* is uncompromising in its visual reconstruction of the 1970s atmosphere. The production team built meticulous sets in Gunsan City, and even imported a real Boeing 727 from the United States to cut and reassemble for the in-flight scenes to ensure authenticity. This attention to material details provides a solid foundation of reality for the film's absurd narrative.

At the same time, the film is not bound by historical accuracy, but rather creates a visual style that is both retro and surreal through color, costumes, and art design. The saturated colors and meticulously designed camera compositions fill every frame with carefully calculated visual information, serving both the narrative and thematic expression. This balance between historical accuracy and artistic exaggeration is a key manifestation of director Byun Sung-hyun's auteur style.

6. Conclusion

As Byun Sung-hyun's latest work in his auteur series, *Good News* represents another achievement of the Korean film industry in terms of genre fusion and social critique. Through a narrative strategy of black comedy, a multi-layered satirical structure, and rich visual metaphors, the film successfully transforms a historical hijacking incident into a sharp critique of power structures, bureaucratic systems, and

identity politics.

The film's most outstanding value lies in its absurdist realism aesthetic practice—it does not pursue pure historical truth, but rather captures those “absurdities that still resonate in today's world after decades” through creative interpretation of historical events. From this artistic perspective, the hijacking is no longer just a strange event from the Cold War era, but becomes a microcosm for examining contemporary global political dilemmas—in which issues such as bureaucratic failure, international political maneuvering, media manipulation, and individual alienation are not fundamentally different from those of half a century ago.

More importantly, through the identity swap between “A” and Xu Gaoming, and the continuous presentation of the moon imagery, the film ultimately transcends the level of specific political criticism and enters into philosophical reflections on historical writing and individual value. When Xu Gaoming—a character who originally hoped to gain recognition in history—is ultimately forgotten and stands alone on the empty land under the moonlight, the film reveals a cruel yet true insight: history often remembers constructed narratives rather than genuine contributions; but as “A” tells Gaoming: “The moon is the moon. It doesn't hang there because you call it the moon, nor does it have meaning because someone recognizes it. What you do is meaningful enough in itself.”

Good News is therefore not only an entertainment product that provides laughter and food for thought, but also a magic mirror reflecting the absurdity of society, and an allegory about the vanity of power. It reminds us that between appearance and truth, front and back, fame and anonymity, there is not opposition, but rather a whole like the moon—only by accepting this complexity can we get closer to that elusive “truth”.

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