

A Brief Analysis on the Artistic Expression Characteristics of Director Chang-dong Lee

Taking "The Burning" as an Example

Dunmin Shi

School of Theater, Film and Television
Communication University of China
Beijing, China

Zongwei Zhang*

School of Theater, Film and Television
Communication University of China
Beijing, China

*Corresponding Author

Abstract—This article mainly uses the film "The Burning" [1] as the entry point to analyze the film aesthetics of director Chang-dong Lee and the social value of his works. This article not only regards "The Burning" as a movie art work to analyze its expression techniques and artistic features, but also interprets the film as an important sociological text into the torrent of social history. As a representative of Korean contemporary film, Chang-dong Lee not only has a keen insight into society and the compassionate sentiments of the literati, but his film language also has the oriental aesthetic characteristics that break through the traditional film narrative, which is very poetic.

Keywords—burning; Chang-dong Lee; South Korean Film; realism; metaphor

I. INTRODUCTION

After eight years of silence, another realist theme film directed by Chang-dong Lee, "Burning", followed the pulse of the times. This time, the film aimed at the contemporary young Koreans, telling the situation, confusion and anger of marginalized groups in the face of cruel social reality. The film is adapted from Murakami Haruki's novel "Burning Room", which is still a trace of sadness in the background behind the atmosphere of suspense thriller.

The male and female protagonist Zhong Xiu and Hui Mei are the young people living in the vicinity of the 38th parallel line in South Korea. Although life makes them difficult, the two have their own dreams and warm each other. In an African trip to Hui Mei, she met Ben, the rich man, but she did not know that Ben was a psychopathy who addicted to have fun with women at the bottom of society and to burn plastic greenhouse (in the film, alluding to killing women on the edge). In this emotional entanglement between different classes of people, Hui Mei lost her life. When Zhong Xiu tracked the whereabouts of Hui Mei, he also fell into an abyss of more confusion and anger. In the end, the murderer Ben was retaliated by assassinating and burning. The narrative of the film overlapped void and reality, which the reality and the imagination constantly intertwined. Finally, the director left an open ending to the audiences to interpret and understand by themselves.

The films of Chang-dong Lee maintain its consistent realism perspective and poetic image narrative style, which is unique in Korean movies. This article will mainly use the film "The Burning" as the entry point to analyze the film aesthetics of director Chang-dong Lee and the social value of his works.

II. THE BURNING: THE PAIN OF THE TIMES BEHIND INDIVIDUAL TRAGEDIES

In the 21-year film creation career of Chang-dong Lee, only six works were published, and all of the six films were sharp criticisms and sober cognition and introspection on Korean society. The characters portrayed by Chang-dong Lee in the film generally have profound symbolic features and the times brand mark. The director intertwined the characters' personality and destiny with the background of the times to create drama conflicts to question the roots of individual tragedies, that is, the pain behind the times. Chang-dong Lee is a very keen observer of Korean society. Each of his work is an accurate capture of the current Korean society, the living conditions and the state of mind of the Korean young people, and then appeals to poetic images, so that has strong era characteristics. For example, "Green Fish" [2] reflects on the urbanization process destroyed the way of life, "Oasis" [3] in the critique of collective consciousness oppresses personal consciousness, "Secret Sunshine" [4] in the discussion of Korean society's religious communication heat and "Poetry" [5] is about the evil of human nature. The point of view of Chang-dong Lee to the society has both historical and macroscopic heights, and it also combines the individual's life experience. Through strong humanistic care, the films have emotional temperature, making the characters in these movies seem to live around us, so that viewers can empathize with their feelings. In his films, there are indifferent and dominant upper classes from different historical periods, ordinary people and ant tribe living in the margins of society. The director has opened a channel to watch and reflect on Korea's harsh social reality and feel complex humanity to the audiences through express the living conditions, emotional world and inner contradictions of these characters [6]. It is also based on this that the

characters in these movies have the vitality to cross the fog of history.

"The Burning", like past movies of Chang-dong Lee, continues to focus on the social marginal groups and social reality issues. Under the background of the difficult employment pressure and the huge social class division of young people in South Korea, young people's powerlessness, confusion, emptiness and anger against the real dilemma have become the focus of the director. The film aimed at the young people in Korea who are currently in a weak position, and explored the cognition and pursuit of marginal groups in the face of the cruel social reality and survival predicament on existence and value, truth and nothingness, and the meaning of life and ideals. The raging fire of anger once again asks the roots of people's suffering and the social causes behind the tragedy.

In the film, when the male and female hero Zhong Xiu and Hui Mei met for the first time, the director threw out the metaphor of the African tribal legends "great hunger" (the person who pursues the meaning of life) and the "little hunger" (the hungry person in general). The metaphor indicates the collision and contradiction between the survival dilemma and the spiritual dilemma of different social classes.

In the portrayal of the characters, the director emphasizes the marginalization of Zhong Xiu and Hui Mei all the time. The two grew up in the small town on the border of South Korea and North Korea. They were couriers and promoters to maintain their livelihoods. They were on the edge of society, and they all experienced emotional alienation and margins. Zhong Xiu's mother left home, her sister married, and her father was in prison. Hui Mei lacks her father's love, her mother is indifferent, and one is under debt pressure. Life is undoubtedly difficult, lacking hope and export for them. They also taste more indifference in society. For example, when Zhong Xiu wrote a petition requesting the signature of the neighbor, the attitude of the neighborhood is indifferent, etc. The houses they rented in Seoul also have no windows or no sunshine. Zhong Xiu has the dream of writing but only can be a cheap porter. Hui Mei learns the mime in order to feel the existence of the self, and ignores the pressure of reality to go to Africa to find the meaning of life. It also reflects the weakness, nothingness and confusion of the marginalized group in the face of this society and life. There is a deep sadness.

Ben's involvement has highlighted the cruelty of social reality. The director uses this role to express the class differences in the Korean society. Ben is a wealthy man in Gangnam. He lives in a luxury house with a luxury car. He has nothing to do all day. He only has fun in his life. It is a typical image of a rich and playboy, which is in contrast to Zhong Xiu. The director uses these two figures to present two very different living conditions of young people in Korean society, guiding the audiences to think about the roots of mental "loneliness" and "hunger" of different classes, and point out the social causes of serious class differentiation. On the one hand, the young people at the bottom can hardly have an ideal life, no matter how hard they struggle, and they are full of powerlessness and confusion. On the other hand,

the rich young people regard having fun as a job. They do not have to struggle but have a life of affluence and their spirit is extremely empty. The serious gap between the rich and the poor makes young people living at the bottom of society unable to see the hope of life.

When Ben came to the Zhong Xiu's house in the countryside, he said that he liked to burn the plastic greenhouse. He put forward his values that the plastic greenhouses were useless seemed to be waiting for him to burn off. He only needed to accept this reality, and this is "the morality of nature." In Ben's value system, he believes that he is in a dominant position in society and is extremely indifferent to the ordinary people. This can also be regarded as the result of capital alienation. The film also reflects the invisible violence of the capital society in the modernization process from another perspective.

III. THE BURNING: THE PAIN POINT OF PEOPLE'S INNER WORLD ABOVE THE REALITY

Chang-dong Lee's films are consistent realism. He once said: "The essence of film is life, we must find those that are hidden by life," [7] so he believes that movies must be truth-seeking. Chang-dong Lee seems to shoulder certain missions forever that use the film to guide the public through the fog of appearance to explore the essence of life. His work is based on reality, but higher than reality. The drama contradiction and character relationship in his film are the conciseness of social contradictions and social relations, and the reflection of reality ultimately leads to the exploration of people's spiritual world in society. In this film, the director built a link between reality and spirit with raging fire, expressing the pain points of people's inner world in the cruel reality of society. Burning is the confusion above the unsolved reality, the anger above the cruel reality, and the redemption above the desperate reality.

In the narrative of "The Burning", Chang-dong Lee did not tell from the perspective of pure realism, but on the basis of reality, he used the identity of Zhong Xiu's novelist to add dreams and fantasy, and brought the imagination into the movie. The movie showed the audience a world that looks like a fan. The constant alternation of reality and illusion in the film not only throws the director's thinking about the reality and the existence proposition, but also implicitly presents that the reality is unsolvable mystery and the ideographic role of seeking spiritual salvation and release in imagination.

Chang-dong Lee's film has always focused on the marginalized people who have tasted the hardships of the world, but for them, what is more desperate than the harsh reality is the spiritual loneliness and confusion. Compared with reality itself, the spiritual world of these marginal individuals is also more concerned by the director. Paying attention to their self-value realization and exploration of the meaning of existence reflect director's concern for the bottom group. It is actually a kind of love and kindness that the director stands on the edge of society calling and gestating through hardships.

The discussion of existence and reality in "The Burning" has been running through, and this proposition is the deepest pain point in the bottom group's inner world. From the first meeting, Hui Mei played the mime of eating oranges, and then through the plastic greenhouse that Zhong Xiu never found, the dry wells that only Hui Mei and her mother said exist, the sport watch and cat in the closet of Ben's bathroom, the director make reality and fantasy reciprocate throughout the film. The narrative combines the nihility and reality, which also adds mysterious and suspenseful atmosphere to the film. The first half of the film is based on a realistic logic, but after Ben tells his hobby that he likes to "burn a plastic greenhouse", the boundary between reality and illusion become blurred. The metaphor laid by the director in the first half of movie began to be questioned successively about the authenticity of its existence. For example, Hui Mei let Zhong Xiu go to her house to help feed the cat, but this cat never appeared. When Hui Mei disappeared, the neighbor's grandmother told Zhong Xiu that there was no cat in the house. Hui Mei always said that she fell into the dry well when she was a child, and Zhong Xiu saved her. However, everyone said that this well does not exist and it is the story of Hui Mei's own compilation. However, after Hui Mei disappeared, when Zhong Xiu asked her mother for proof, he got the answer that the well did exist and so on. The uneasiness and tension created by this kind of void and real overlap forms an intertextual relationship with the confusion, sensitivity and fragility of the underclass youth. All kinds of clues have introduced the audience into an atmosphere of suspense and horror, showing the desperation and powerlessness of the underclass youth in the society.

Zhong Xiu has never thought of what kind of novels to write, because he feels that the world is like a group fan that can not be seen clearly. In fact, the process of Zhong Xiu's search for Hui Mei's whereabouts is to continuously strip the fog and explore the truth behind the reality. Moreover, the process of Zhong Xiu's search for the whereabouts of Hui Mei is to find the evidence of existence. However, in this process, Zhong Xiu also fell into deeper confusion and confusion, as if he could not find any traces of existence. This humble, repression accumulates anger and eventually pushes him into the abyss. Finally, Zhong Xiu started his novel in Hui Mei's room where he was obsessed many times. In the end, the reality was completely hidden. The angry Zhong Xiu retaliated by burning Ben to vent his anger. The director appealed all the powerlessness and anger of reality to imagination, and in this spiritual killing, Zhong Xiu found the exit and got the redemption of the mind and body and the reconciliation with the self, which full of sadness.

IV. THE BURNING: SYMBOLIC METAPHOR WITH ORIENTAL AESTHETIC COLOR

Chang-dong Lee talked about "The Burning" in an interview at the Cannes Film Festival that the difference between a film and a text is through images. Isn't the image an illusion that light created on the screen? The audience is facing the place with nothing and they accept in their own way to give them meaning and concept..., he wants to express the mystery of the film media itself through this film

[8]. This is Chang-dong Lee's unique insight into film narrative and has a strong sense of oriental aesthetics. In the film, the director broke through the traditional way of telling the story, adding rich images, using symbolic metaphors and body language to express the narrative, transforming his philosophical thinking into a visualized way of thinking, bringing more space to interpret the film. This kind of exploration for "the nature of the film" is particularly prominent in "Burning". In Chang-dong Lee's expression, the film is no longer just to tell a story, but has a more artistic conception and vitality beyond the narrative level. This use of symbolic metaphor also gives Chang-dong Lee's film a power to escape the linguistic restrictions and reach the spiritual beauty of the pictogram.

A. Hunger Dance

At the beginning of the film, the director threw out the legends of "great hunger" and "little hunger" to metaphorize the spiritual exploration and the reality of survival to show the dilemma faced by the young people at the bottom of the contemporary Korean society. The heroine Hui Mei, regardless of all the obstacles of reality, empties all her purse to travel to Africa in order to find the meaning of life. In this journey of pursuing the meaning of life, those desires for beauty and freedom, the pursuit of existence and value have repeatedly hit the wall, and eventually disappeared in the cruel reality of society, together with herself, as if disappeared together with the last sunset in the desert. The two dances of hunger in the film "Burning" seem to be the struggle and despair of the spirit in reality.

The first dance of hunger was Ben's reception with Hui Mei and Zhong Xiu to attend the upper class. Hui Mei talked about the dance of hunger she saw in Africa, and she jumped up when she spoke. The dance of the little hunger is like a zombie with arms hanging on the chest, while the dance of the great hunger is a gesture of holding hands up and embracing the sky. The body language is full of meanings showing two distinct life forms. At the reception, Hui Mei enthusiastically performed her dance of hunger. However, in the eyes of the upper class, Hui Mei who is impoverished but pursuing the meaning of life, is like a joke. At this time, the dance of hunger is the struggle of Hui Mei. She wants to integrate into the upper class and achieve self-worth, but everything is illusory and out of reach. The struggle seems even more tragic by strong contrast. Finally, the dream was still swallowed up by reality, so the lens turned from the dance of life to the dance of all beings in the nightclub. This also metaphorizes the desperate situation of the underlying groups in the highly capitalized social and industrial culture systems represented by Ben at a deeper level.

The second dance of hunger is in the courtyard of Zhong Xiu's hometown. In the sunset, Hui Mei took off her clothes and integrated into nature, like a big bird flying to the sky. This dance also became a curtain call for her life. There is too much pain to die in desperate reality. Hui Mei would rather use the spirit of the dance to create a life color, as if the last touch of the sunset, and finally disappeared.

B. Dry Well

Hui Mei always said that when she was a child, she fell into a dry well near her house. Looking at the round sky at the bottom of the well, thinking that if no one found, she would die like this, she felt extremely afraid of despair until she saw Zhong Xiu's face. Actually, Hui Mei now is in the same situation as the one in that well. She is still lonely, weak, forgotten and neglected, as if she fell into the dry well of life. She looked at the sky but can't escape from here.

When Zhong Xiu went to Hui Mei's family and villagers to prove the dry well, everyone denied the existence of this well. Only Zhong Xiu's mother said that there was such a well. This is a well that only a marginalized woman with debts can see. This is the hollowness left by the harsh reality in their hearts. It is the loneliness and despair rooted in their hearts. The coldness of the family and the lack of love make these women fall into the deep well of spiritual loneliness.

1) *Plastic greenhouse*: Ben said in Zhong Xiu's house that he likes to burn plastic greenhouses. He feels that these abandoned plastic greenhouses are dirty, messy and useless, as if they are waiting to be burned by him. In the film, the plastic greenhouse is also a metaphor for the marginalized underclass youth. Plastic greenhouses have similar temperament to the marginal crowds. They are placed in the suburbs, have no expressions, no features, and will not be discovered if been burned. It seems that one more and one less is irrelevant. The metaphorical expression makes the characters in the film have a more profound and desolate beauty and connotation.

2) *Fire*: The image of fire runs through the film. When Zhong Xiu was a child, he listened to his father's words and burned his mother's clothes. This is the fire of anger. Zhong Xiu and Hui Mei smoke together in the narrow and cramped city alleys. This is the fire of loneliness. Zhong Xiu stabbed Ben, and finally made Ben's clothes and cars burn to ashes. This is the fire of despair. Ben addicted to burn plastic greenhouse, which is an empty fire. In the film, the director used the image of "burning" several times to express the inner feelings of young people in Korean society. It represents anger, loneliness, despair and emptiness.

V. CONCLUSION

Chang-dong Lee's film focuses on the individual tragedies of the marginalized figures of society. The tragedies of these characters are concise social contradictions and social problems. His films always have a bleak aesthetic and a sad background. He used the tragic story to break the beauty and smash it, and presented it to the audience in order to stimulate the viewer's reflection on the society and the sympathy for the marginalized people, and awaken people's reconstruction of the beautiful social system. Chang-dong Lee's exploration of people's spiritual world in the real dilemma is also a sublimation of realism, helping people in distress to find spiritual exports so that his films have more profound social significance in the present.

Chang-dong Lee is a keen thinker of the society and a brave explorer of the visual language. His realistic aesthetics of the film is a good reference for the creation of Asian realist films.

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