Analyzing the Narrative Logic of South Korean Director Bong Joon-ho's Films as the Metaphor of Reality and Society

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Abstract. Korean director Bong Joon-ho uses film as a language, everyday life as a narrative, and reality as a metaphor to portray Korean society and even address global issues transcending the Korean context.The author attempts to analyze Bong Joon-ho's distinctive and skillful cinematic metaphors through a semiotic and archaeological approach.

Keywords: Bong Joon-ho, visual symbolism, semiotics, surrealism, realism, Korean director.

1. Introduction

This artical is to discuss the Narrative Logic of South Korean Director Bong Joon-ho's Films as the Metaphor of Reality and Society. Korean films have long been named as "social observers". Bong Joon-ho has presented the wonders of everyday life through the lens of surrealistic realism since his maiden work in the new millennium. He constructs a spiritual core in his future film practices, which is infused with a strong awareness of social issues, using a unique sociological perspective and exquisite symbolism. Even after winning the first Palme d'Or for Korea, he continues to use film as a language, everyday life as a narrative, and reality as a metaphor to portray Korean society and even address global issues transcending the Korean context. The author attempts to start with Bong Joon-ho's three short films and six feature-length films. This essay will firstly discuss the Internal and External Perspectives of Class Differentiation in Korean. Following this, it will explain Historical Reflection and Critique in Bong Joon-ho's Films.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. The Sociological Theme of Class Differentiation - the Intersection of Film and Reality

In his book "The Power Elite", Charles Wright Mills sharply points out that power is not something necessary for a social system or for the fulfillment of a social function, but the ability of certain groups to prevent others from obtaining what they desire. Although the book focuses on American society, it can also be applied to South Korea. South Korean society has a group of power elites who, as sovereigns, consider the middle and even lower levels of power as workforce that can be controlled for their own interests. The middle level of power consists of flow forces and contend with the upper level of power, while the lower levels of society are fragmented and passive in both political and daily life, with their power fluctuating according to the dominance of the upper levels. Bong Joon-ho confronts the issue of class differentiation in Korean society, presenting the reality through different characters and events. Ironically, the differences between the so-called upper, middle, and lower classes are relative, as each person is simultaneously in a state of domination and being dominated. Furthermore, Bong Joon-ho's perspective combines this divided power structure with factors such as skin color and capital, presenting it as a homogenous power narrative. Thus, the author will analyze the internal and external differentiation in Bong Joon-ho's films.

2.1.1. Critique of Internal Differentiation

1) Elites as Common Sovereigns

In Bong Joon-ho's early short films such as "White Man" and "Incoherence", he focused on the lower strata of society, and satirized the upper class, and criticized class disparities. The film “White

Man" directly targets the cynicism of the upper class: a middle-class man found a severed finger on his way to work and treated it as a plaything. The middle-class man manipulated the finger to make phone calls, play the guitar, and eventually threw it to a dog on the street.

The "White Man" represents the white-collar upper class, specifically the urban middle class. The film's backdrop aligns closely with South Korea's urbanization movement in the 1990s, which was also addressed in the early works of directors like Lee Chang-dong and Hong Sang-soo. The film, shows the contrast between high-rise buildings and small houses, which serves as a metaphorical critique of societal urbanization, and represents a critical perspective on the attitude towards social urbanization: the playfulness and warmth of children in the small houses' alleys under the setting sun versus the decadence and irrationality embraced by the high-rise buildings. Furthermore, the severed finger originates from a work accident, then a lower-level employee attacked the boss. Additionally, the middle-class man's attitude towards the finger, like using it to make phone calls and playing the guitar, reflects the reality of the power structure: the exploitation of the lower class by the upper class, the desire for resistance in the lower class, and their ultimate powerlessness as they become mere playthings in the hands of the upper class.

"Incoherence" undoubtedly shares the same depth of sociological perspective and symbolic metaphors as Bong Joon-ho's other works. The film consists of three stories. Bong Joon-ho portrays a professor who fantasized female student, a newspaper editor engaged in theft, and a lawyer who urinates in public while intoxicated with his consistent use of black humor. In the end, these three individuals appear together on television discussing social issues in Korea, thereby criticizing the dark and hypocritical side of the elite class.

2) Power as an Exceptional Sovereign

Dogs are animal with lower intelligence levels than human beings. “Barking Dogs Never Bite"can be translated as "Higher-Level Animal"in Chinese. Obviously, it’s still a story about humans. However, in this film, the division between "humans" and "dogs" is not defined by dichotomy. The stories revolve around a residential apartment building and its occupants: a university lecturer who cannot get promoted without bribery, his nagging wife, a secretary eager to appear on television, a security guard who engages in corruption, and a homeless man hiding in the basement.

The film follows the university lecturer, Won-jun, who was frustrated with his job and unable to advance due to his refusal to engage in bribery. He became annoyed by a neighbor's noisy dog and decides to kidnap it and keep it in the basement. The apartment manager discovered the dog in the basement with the homeless. Then, they cook and ate it. However, Won-jun kidnapped the wrong dog, so he decided to kidnap the neighbor's dog again. He threw the dog off the building, and it was witnessed by Chul-nam, who is on the rooftop. This act of "watching" has a voyeuristic meaning, extending the hidden perspective of the audience. Unexpectedly, Won-jun's wife also got a dog, which was stolen by the homeless man during a walk. In the end, it is Chul-nam who witnessed Won-jun killing the dog that helped him retrieve his wife’s dog. Won-jun eventually succeeded in promotion through bribery, the homeless man was mistaken as the dog killer and got arrested, and Chul-nam was fired from his job for skipping work to search for the dog. The real criminal, the apartment manager, escaped from punishment.

Throughout the film, the hero embarks on a dog-searching journey that involves symbolic shifts in his portrayal: from a little girl to an old lady and so on. Even in the process of posting lost dog notices, he talked about the significance of the lost dog to him, which was a moral contradiction. It represents a divergence between action and morality, with an ironic undertone of acceptance at the ideological level. The image of the hero's nosebleed dripping onto the printed paper may imply that he was about to pay a bloody price.

In this film, Won-jun represents the victims of corruption among Korean officials, who can only climb up by sacrificing their dignity and interests. The homeless man represents the lower strata of Korean society, who will forever sacrifice for the upper class. Chul-nam represents the young people in Korea who aspire to achieve something but are ultimately unable to resist the exclusion from the powerful system. The apartment manager represents the corrupt government officials in Korea who

infringe upon the assets of the people but escape from punishment through their power. When the elites are absent, and an exceptional state is reached, the true sovereign emerges - the owners of power, who are presented as divine beings. They can escape the framework of judicial and social structures. However, in this case, Bong Joon-ho portrays the "evil" aspect of power, which still controlling over the lower class and those who have not been disciplined.

3) The Ironic Metaphor of Internal differentiation

Bong Joon-ho's visual symbolism is rich in metaphorical meaning, particularly in his adept use of the extending space to depict the rise and fall of social classes. This symbolical characteristic can be observed from his early short film "White Man" to his later highly successful film "Parasite."

In "White Man," the middle-class hero was driving downhill to work, with the camera then focusing on the slums below. Later, when his car broke down and he walked home from the company, he traversed the slums by climbing staircase. This is a classic example of staircase metaphor, implying the pyramid-like social structure. Even the speed of "car" and "walking stairs"conveys the solidification of social classes. The upper classes easily move downward, while the lower classes struggle to find upward mobility. This portrayal through symbolic metaphors highlights the rigidity of class stratification. The opportunities for upward mobility gradually shrink, resulting in the consolidation of resources and social classes. The resources flow out less, but there is a larger population competing for them.

In "Parasite," there are numerous scenes featuring uphill and downhill movements, differentiating the social classes of the poor and the rich. When Ki-woo first went to tutor the wealthy family, he constantly climbed uphill, creating a stark contrast between the grandiose setting and the diminutive characters. Even entering the wealthy family's house requires climbing a set of stairs to reach the mansion's garden. The overall color of these scenes is bright and soft. However, during the torrential rain when the family had to rush back to their own home from the affluent neighborhood to salvage their belongings, the color shifted to a tense red. For at least five minutes, they were walking the downpour, with a significant portion of the footage showcasing them constantly descending stairs, symbolizing their return to their rightful place in the social hierarchy.

2.1.2. Critique of External Differentiation

1) Race and Class Struggle

"Snowpiercer" is a genre film that Bong Joon-ho's first try go into Hollywood. Through his collaboration with an American production company, the film was so stimulating and novel that made it commercially successful in theaters. However, due to the overly caricatured characters, the director's intended deep portrayal of international social class divisions became somewhat superficial, staying on the surface. For example, he uses train compartments as symbols to differentiate social classes: The lower-class people could only eat protein bars made of cockroaches, and their train cars are crowded and dirty. In contrast, the roome for upper-class were luxurious. The director chose to have a black boy and an Asian girl as the hope for humanity in the film's ending. It was indeed a deviation from the conventional narrative. In typical Hollywood films, white characters often represent the heroic figures, yet in this case, the final hope for humanity does not include any white characters.

Although the film still presented themes of class struggle, Curtis, as a class warrior, embodied the essence of human rights—no one is destined to live in the lower class, and the demand for freedom from oppression is a human right. Curtis represented the lower class in the tail section of the train, fighting for liberation. However, the revolutions were ultimately a failure. Objectively speaking, hardly anyone survived in the train's journey. Regardless of skin color, the survival of these two children appears too fantastical and idealistic. It prompts reflection on the notion of gambling with the fate of all humanity to break free from class oppression. Curtis became a doomed prisoner who took the most direct path to fight for rights. However, for the whole train, it turned out to be the worst outcome.

The contradictory and metaphorical symbolism in Bong Joon-ho's films serve as an intersection between cinema and the realities of the time. Whether the difference in skin color between the Asian

and black child in the film's ending, or the "collapse-like" victory brought by Curtis and the revolution in the tail section of the train. All of these elements represent Bong Joon-ho's contemplation of the sociopolitical issues of global coexistence.

2) Freedom and Capital

After receiving an invitation from Netflix, Bong Joon-ho took absolute creative control in the production of "Yuzi". Breaking free from the constraints of American production companies, director Bong Joon-ho stepped out of South Korea and used film as a parable to discuss social systems and capital exploitation on an international scale.

In the film, the Milan Corporation, which based in USA, sent genetically modified pigs to farmers worldwide for breeding. However, fearing about the public rejection, the company marketed it as a new breed. They also decided to recall the pigs and hold a beauty contest after ten years. Yuzi, a genetically modified pig sent to Korea for foster care, lived in the countryside with Mija. When times up, Yuzi was taken away by the corporation from Mija. Mija was so sad that she embarked on a journey to rescue Yuzi and coincidentally encounters members of an animal rights organization who help her in the rescue mission. They caused public commotion along the way. Seeing a business opportunity, the Milan Corporation even invited Mija to attend the beauty pageant in New York. The animal rights organization exposed the corporation's false advertising, revealing that Yuzi was actually a genetically modified animal, not a new breed, which sparked public anger. To minimize losses, the Milan Corporation lowers the price of genetically modified pork, which surprisingly sold well. In the end, in order to save Yuzi, Mija gives the corporation the golden pig, which was given to her by her grandfather. Then, she rescued Yuzi and a little pig from a group of genetically modified pigs waiting to be slaughtered.

The author believes that each character set by the director corresponds to a social metaphor. The Milan Corporation represents capitalists who resort to false advertising and even use consumersin in order to gain profits. The animal rights organization represents idealists in society, who have beautiful ideals but impractical methods. For example, one member of the organization who would rather starve to death than eat. The masses buying genetically modified food in the film represent consumers deeply exploited by the rules of capitalism. Despite opposing genetically modified food, they cannot resist the cheap and delicious genetically modified meat. They are powerless against the manipulation of capital in society. Mija, on the other hand, represents a kind-hearted person with ideals. However, she could only use the social rules. She succumbs to social norms and exchanges the golden pig for ownership of Yuzi.

2.2. Historical Reflection and Critique - Archaeological Reflection in Bong Joon-ho's Film Narrative

2.2.1. Hegemony, Democracy, and Satire of "Bowing to America" - The Historical Fluctuations of the South Korean Government

In 1986, South Korea was under military rule. During the transition towards a democratic society, South Korea was filled with violence, repression, and bloody movements. The anxieties and chaos pushed the people to the edge of collapse. The tumultuous historical background became a breeding ground for murder cases. "Memories of Murder" is based on a real murder case that occurred in South Korea in 1986. By reconstructing the actual situation at that time, the film resonates with the audience. It only focuses on the historical context, instead of discussing social issues such as class or wealth disparity.

In the film, police Park had accustomed to using violent interrogation methods. His partner, police Cho, often wear military boots to kick suspects, which symbolized the violent rule of the military government. One of the suspects, a mentally disabled teenager, accidentally stabbed police Cho in the leg with a nail while trying to stop the violence. It leads to a tetanus infection and the necessity of amputation. This scene implies that only by completely overthrowing the military government can a true democratic society be established. The director uses these elements to suggest the chaotic domestic situation at the time and its significant connection to the United States. The film also

includes scenes of police Park and police Cho watching American dramas, and police Park gave a wrongly identified suspect a pair of counterfeit Nike shoes. All of these scenes embody a sense of satire.

In "The Host," the monster in the film was created when a U.S. professor instructed his Korean assistant to dump toxic chemicals into the Han River. The film depicts the indifferent of the United States towards the monster and the exaggerated portrayal of a nonexistent virus, which leads to the unleashed rampage of the monster that could have been contained by the military. This sets the stage for the subsequent use of biochemical weapons by the United States in the film. The film's conclusion is filled with metaphors: The hero's daughter died, but the young boy she protected survived, which symbolized that although the results of the crisis were tragic, there is still hope for the future.

It is important to note that the South Korean government is powerless in dealing with the elimination of the monster. The cause of the problem lies in the United States, but South Korea had to seek help from them. This strange behavior was a satire, as the South Korean government merely acts as a puppet in handling the situation, instead of playing a substantial role. Furthermore, the student protests in South Korea were scattered due to the chaos caused by the monster. Although the demonstrations by the young students were useful to some degree, the external and malignant events remained catastrophic to them. The real problem cannot be fundamentally resolved through protests. In the end, the responsibility fell onto the South Korean people themselves. The resolution of the crisis was achieved by the hero's siblings and their homeless friend, implying that relying on external forces weas not desirable for the South Korean people, as it only perpetuates their weakness and vulnerability.

2.2.2. Floating Eggs and the Monster of the Han River - A Dream of Bloody Reality

"Floating" is also one of Bong Joon-ho's short films, telling the story of a father and daughter making a bet with the owner of a convenience store. They threw three eggs into the Han River, and if none of the eggs float, the father would give his daughter to the store owner. If the eggs do float, then the father and daughter could take as many products from the store as they want. In reality, this is impossible. However, in the film, when they threw the third egg, a huge egg miraculously floated up from the Han River. In the end, the father and daughter joyfully took many products and ran off into the distance.

In fact, this short film serves as a prophecy of the bubble economy in South Korea during the Asian financial crisis. The impoverished father and daughter, who can only afford three eggs, symbolize the majority of the Korean population at that time. The convenience store owner represents the wealthy Korean corporations relatively. By throwing three small eggs, the Han River (representing Korea) gave them a floating giant egg, indicating the bubble part of the economy that can stay afloat on the surface but is at risk of collapse at any time.

"The Host" was Bong Joon-ho's first attempt at a science fiction film and also the first of its kind in Korean film history. Underneath the sci-fi exterior, it still carried Bong Joon-ho's trademark political metaphors. The monster appeaed in the Han River, which symbolizes the rapid economic development that created the "Han River Miracle" in post-World War II Korea. The Asian financial crisis marked a turning point in the decline of the Korean economy. Therefore, the monster represented the Asian financial crisis. The monster crated by USA professor signifies that the Asian financial crisis was primarily caused by the United States. The submissive Korean assistant represented the weak and ineffectual Korean officials at that time.

After the Asian financial crisis, the IMF, controlled by the United States, provided a $55 billion loan, and also demanded that Korea fully open its financial market and lift restrictions on foreign ownership in Korean companies. It was not until 2001 that the loan was fully repaid. During this period, the Korean people suffered greatly under American control. In the film, the United States exaggerates the danger of the monster, even claiming the existence of a nonexistent virus, representing the exaggerated propaganda by the United States during the Asian financial crisis regarding structural issues in the Korean economy. It caused panic among the Korean population.

The subsequent use of biochemical weapons instead of conventional firearms represented the erroneous solution imposed by the IMF on Korea at that time.

The little girl, Hyun-seo, who was captured by the monster, represented Korea's future hope. However, in the end, she was not killed by the monster but is accidentally shot by a stray bullet from a Korean police officer. This plot symbolized the director's belief that Korea's mishandling of the financial crisis would lead to its disappearance in the future. In the final scene, Gang-du hold the lifeless Hyun-seo, and the camera showed her back leaning against Gang-du's left shoulder. On the other hand, when Gang-du hold the rescued boy, the camera shows his front, leaning against Gang-du's right shoulder. This differentiation seems to imply the political stance of left-wing and right-wing forces in Korea.

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