

Fragmented Narrative Ideology: Analyzing the Narrative Strategies and Audiovisual Language in Li Changdong's 'Burning'

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Abstract. This study focuses on Li Changdong's "Burning" and explores the logic of fragmented narrative and audiovisual language. In the narrative innovation of contemporary cinema, the film breaks the traditional framework with non-continuous shot grouping, allowing the audience to independently piece together the truth of Hye-mi's disappearance through the subjective perspective of the protagonist Jong-soo, the memory flashbacks, and the white space of other people's narratives. Visual symbols such as the well and the plastic shed form an intertext with the sound-picture dichotomy of the music and the special filming technique of the camera, alluding to the philosophical ideas of class violence, the lack of discourse, and the anxiety of individual existence. The burning imagery not only refers to the disintegration of the rural economy, but also symbolizes the desperate breakout of the underclass under class oppression. The film refuses to answer the question directly, but uses the fragmented narrative to guide the audience to think about the class division and existential dilemma in modern society, which provides a new way of thinking for the study of film narrative and audiovisual language.

Keywords: Fragmented Narrative; Burning; Audiovisual Language.

1. Theoretical Origins of Fragmented Narrative and Contemporary Film Practice

At the beginning of the 20th century, Western society was in turmoil, and modernist literature represented by stream-of-consciousness novels emerged. Stream-of-consciousness novels narrate according to the free association of human consciousness, which breaks the coherence of narrative and provides a narrative paradigm for the fragmented narrative of film. On the philosophical level, existentialism, represented by Sartre and others, coincided with stream-of-consciousness literature. Existentialism advocates that "existence precedes essence," meaning that individuals are free to define themselves and fight against absurdity. At the same time, the Soviet School of Montage proposed that "the conflict of shots produces meaning", creating logical connections through the combination of shots and giving the image new connotations. Therefore, the root of film fragmentation narrative lies in the use of non-continuous shot grouping to stimulate the audience's association and thus reconstruct the story.

In contemporary cinema, Korean director Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* implements the technique of fragmented narrative. The entire film is told from Jong-soo's first-person point of view. At the beginning of the movie, a hand-held camera follows Jong-soo as he delivers goods on a cheap shopping street, and then cuts to a subjective shot of a chance encounter with Hye-mi, who wins a lottery and receives a lady's watch, which leads to an intersection between the two persons. The story revolves around Jong-soo, Hye-mi and Ben. Everything about Hye-mi and Ben we see in Jong-soo's peephole or subjective camera, and the audience has no direct access to the inner world of these two characters. Before and after Hye-mi's disappearance, Jong-soo's memory images keep flashing back and forth, scenes shift abruptly, and the truth of Hye-mi's disappearance is not known, as Jong-soo soliloquizes, "She disappeared like smoke." The movie gives only fragmented information about Hye-mi's disappearance, leaving the audience to figure out the story by themselves.

Existentialist Sartre's understanding of the art of fiction also emphasizes an "objectivity" that is not the traditional realist fidelity to life, but rather the separation of author and character in the

narrative, in order for the fictional character to have “free will” [7]. This arrangement is to achieve a metaphysical narrative effect, between reality and fiction, the audience can freely talk to the characters with “free will”, the director and the audience together reconstruct the truth of the events in their minds, and feel the pain that the story brings to people.

2. Audiovisual Language and Fragmented Narrative and Intertextuality in Modern Society

Intertextuality refers to the relationship between a text and other texts that can be argued to exist within that text [6]. By extension to film, it refers to the relationship between cinematic texts and other texts that reference, deconstruct, or refer to each other. Creators can expand the meaning of a movie by correlating the audience's pre-existing perceptions with other texts through intertextuality. With its fragmented narrative and poetic audiovisual language, *Burning* dissolves the thrill of solving a traditional mystery. The audiovisual language in the film is not only a carrier of the fragmented narrative, but also a core component of the story's ideology.

2.1 Visual Symbols and Class Violence

Imagery is the center of gravity in this film. The imagery of the “well” is present throughout the film, but it never appears in its full physical form; Hye-mi's story is always a collage of other people's narratives, and she claims that she “fell into a well when she was a child and was saved by Jong-soo,” but both Jong-soo and Hye-mi's mother deny this memory, leaving the mystery of whether or not the “well” exists. However, both Jong-soo and Hye-mi's mother deny this memory, leaving “whether the well exists or not” a mystery. The fragmented images associated with the “well” symbolize a form of gaze. As the characters stare into the abyss of the well, the well, in turn, gazes back at them. The “invisibility” of the well is intertextually linked to Hye-mi's disappearance. Class in the movie does not only refer to the upper class and the lower class but also to the issue of male and female class. In Haruki Murakami's original book, *Burning the Barn*, Jong-soo confesses, “Will he tell me to burn the barn? That is, he inputs the image of a burning barn into my head, and then inflates it as quickly as he pumps up a bicycle.” [4] It can be seen that Jong-soo, as a man of the lower class, is ignited by Ben, a man of the upper class, to burn the barn, and putting aside the desire for love, Jong-soo doesn't really care about Hye-mi's disappearance, but he wants to prove himself worthy in front of Ben, who is also a man, so he follows Ben after Hye-mi's disappearance, and kills him. In the capital-dominated social structure, the women of the lower class are like falling into the invisible abyss, and their existence itself is erased from the narrative. Existence itself is a narrative fragment that has been erased.

The burning imagery of the plastic shed is depicted only through a distant view of the flames and the shed's remains, along with a close-up of the fire as imagined by Jong-soo. Ben claims that the burning of the shed is an aesthetic act, but the camera does not show the real Ben lighting the shed, but a close-up of the burning shed in Jong-soo's imagination. As Ben narrates the burning of the shed, the camera uses a large aperture to defocus the background, blurring his face and suggesting the ambiguity of upper-class violence, while in Jong-soo's subjective shot, the shed is presented in a deep-focus lens, with clear but meaningless details, a metaphor for the bottom-dwellers' futile search for the truth. Ultimately, Jong-soo's killing of Ben is more of a class breakout and revenge. The three young Koreans in *Burn* are characters with transcendent meanings and concepts crafted by the director, representing the epitome of class and different states of existence.[3]

The fragmented image of *burning* becomes a metaphor for class oppression, and the shed also symbolizes the smallholder economy. The game of the upper class is based on destroying the traces of the underclass's existence (the shed), and this violence is packaged as “aesthetic art” in Ben's words, further blurring the truth of the disappearance of the underclass girl, Hye-mi.

2.2 Auditory Fragments and Discourse

The aural fragments suggest the ending of the movie. After Hye-mi's disappearance, Jong-soo returns to her apartment, and as the camera sweeps through the empty room, the background sound is suddenly withdrawn, leaving only the sound of light footsteps. The "auditory vacuum" corresponds to the disappearance of evidence of Hye-mi's existence in the narrative, and the movie uses silence to suggest society's collective aphasia on the disappearance of marginalized groups. The fracture of sound forms an intertext with the fragmentation of the narrative, as Hye-mi's story is cut into fragments such as "the trip to Africa," "the mime performance," and "the cat that never appeared, Boil," just like the "silence of this moment," where each fragment is a part of the story. Like the silence of this moment, each fragment points to a certain truth, but it cannot be connected to a complete chain of cause and effect.

The dislocated use of music in the film creates an intertextual dialogue with the reality of class violence. When Ben is making coffee and trimming his nails in his apartment, the background sound is Chopin's *Prelude to Raindrops*, and the elegance of the piano sound contrasts with the potentially violent elements of knives in the scene. The music is a misleading message for the fragmented narrative, and the opposition between sound and picture makes the music more invasive. The audience is guided by the music to oscillate between romantic imagery and criminal reasoning, ultimately pointing to meaninglessness. Any attempt to interpret the film with linear logic is a simplification of class violence, and the complexity of the fragmented narrative stems from the oppression of real class violence.

2.3 Camera Movement and Individual Existential Anxiety

When tracking Ben, Jong-soo's subjective camera utilizes hand-held photography, and the shaking and the amplification of breathing sounds create a sense of flux, so that the audience can directly perceive Jong-soo's anxiety. The shaky camera disrupts the traditional narrative structure, mirroring Jong-su's current state of mind, which encompasses his lust for Hye-mi, shame regarding his family, and confusion about the future. The deserted physical spaces, such as suburbs and warehouses, become the figurative expression of his spiritual wasteland, echoing the disordered state of the lives of the lower class.

In the three-minute long shot of Hye-mi dancing, the voyeuristic perspective is fixed, Megumi's body swings with the music, and birds fly by in the distant view. At this moment, time is elongated into a purely sensory experience, creating a rupture with the tension of the preceding and following narratives. The "non-functionality" of the long shot corresponds to the nature of fragmented narrative, that is, the narrative no longer serves to promote the plot, but becomes a tool to capture the characters' state of being. The long shot allows time to stand still and the characters to flow. Hye-mi's dance of the hungry proves her attempt to break free from nothingness, echoing her philosophical discourse on "little hunger" and "great hunger" in Africa. "Little hunger" refers to the shallow, material needs of individual pursuits, while "great hunger" speaks to the deeper longing for spiritual fulfillment [1]. Here is both a physical response to "The Well" and an emphasis on the existence of marginalized groups ignored by mainstream narratives.

The audiovisual language of *Burning* and the fragmented narrative together complete the dissection of Korean society; the interweaving of imagery corresponds to class violence, the fracturing of voices symbolizes the class division of discourse, and the psychologization of camera movement transforms the existential anxiety of the individual into the spiritual crisis of the modern group. This intertextuality refuses to provide the truth of the movie's suspense, and allows the audience to face the essence of modern society in the midst of "meaninglessness". The power of fragmented narrative does not lie in the dismantling of the story, but in the use of audio-visual language to re-tell the story for the audience. These seemingly useless fragments of audio-visual close-ups precisely reveal the original sensory form of the movie, breaking the fictionality of the narrative.

3. Narrative Aesthetics and Philosophy in Lee Chang-dong's Cinematography

The fragmented narrative in Li Changdong's *Burning* breaks the linear logic of traditional suspense films and tells a story full of metaphors and white space.

3.1 Blanks in Narrative Perspective

In the movie, Lee Jong-soo, Hye-mi, and Ben reflect the survival of different classes [1].

The movie unfolds from Jong-soo's point of view, and his memories are frequently intertwined with reality, forming a time layer of "present-past-fantasy". After Hye-mi's disappearance, Jong-su's repeated visits to Hye-mi's apartment are interrupted by Ben's appearance, a time jump that reinforces his confusion about Hye-mi's disappearance. In the process of Jong-soo's following Ben, there are repeated montages of "driving, staring, and blanking out," and time comes to a standstill, which is a metaphor for the powerlessness of the underclass youth in their class predicament.

Hye-mi's story is always told through other people's narratives. She claims that she was saved by Jong-soo when she fell into a well when she was a child, but Jong-soo denies her memory, thus creating the central mystery of whether the well exists. Hye-mi's "Hunger Dance" is inserted into her daily life after her return to Korea, suggesting that the emptiness of her existence is already there. Her "nude display" and "sunset solo dance" in front of Ben are presented through Jong-soo's voyeuristic perspective, which prevents the audience from having direct access to her inner world, and her subjectivity is dissolved by the male gaze.

As a symbol of the upper class, Ben's behavior is full of contradictions. He claims that "burning the shed is an aesthetic act" but avoids the details when asked by Jong-soo; his unconscious performativity in displaying his watch, makeup bag, etc. suggests the "ornamental oppression" of the lower class by the elite.

This fissure in perspective forces the viewer to pay attention to the details of each fragmentary shot, and through Jong-soo's paranoia, Hye-mi's mystery, and Ben's suspicion, a complex story of class, gender, and existence is pieced together.

3.2 The Multiple Meanings of the Core Symbol

The central symbol of the film is the burning shed. On the physical level, the burning of the plastic shed symbolizes the disintegration of the rural economy and refers to the abandoned spaces of urbanization in Korea. On the psychological level, Jong-soo's anger is ultimately transformed into violence, and his attempt to assassinate Ben is a desperate self-immolation in search of a sense of existence in the midst of nothingness. On the philosophical level, Ben's "aesthetics of burning" alludes to Baudrillard's "theory of symbolic consumption," in which the elite maintains its superiority by destroying the traces of the underclass, such as Ben's self-reported burning of a plastic shed once every two months. "just right". In the scene where Jong-soo calls her repeatedly after she disappears, the camera suddenly cuts to the burning shed, juxtaposing "searching for Hye-mi" with "destroying evidence," suggesting a possible connection between the two.

In the movie, Hye-mi goes on a trip to Africa and entrusts her cat, Boil, to Jong-soo, who has never seen the cat. However, at the end of the film, Jong-soo meets a cat of the same name at Ben's house, and Boil may be a fictional pet of Hye-mi's, symbolizing the neglect of marginalized groups. Influenced by Hye-mi's study of mime performance, Jong-soo believes that both the well and the cat are made up by Hye-mi; the cat may also be real, and after Hye-mi's disappearance, a cat with the same name as Boil appears in Ben's house, implying that Hye-mi was killed by Ben.

The well is a metaphor for existentialism, the well is the proof that Hye-mi has been "seen", and the dispute between reality and reality maps out the plight of the underclass, if no one is there to witness it, does the individual's suffering exist? This is the philosophical reflection conveyed by the director.

3.3 Existentialist Dilemma

While traditional social realist films often show class antagonism through the contrast between the rich and the poor, *Burning* reveals hidden oppression through the fragmentation of everyday details: Ben's Porsche, white shirt, imported watch, and other symbols infiltrate Jong-soo's life in an "unintentional" way, hinting at the intrusion of the elite into the space of the underclass. The movie intersperses fragments of marginalized characters, such as Jong-soo's mother demanding money over the phone, Hye-mi living on low income, and a gas station colleague being verbally abused by a customer, to show the life of the underclass in Korean society. The fragmented narrative itself becomes a metaphor for class, as Ben drives a luxury car, lives in a mansion, and has candlelit dinners day after day; Jong-soo is depleted of inspiration as a writer and drives a broken-down van; and Hye-mi lives in a room that reflects sunlight off of glass in order to make ends meet. The life of the upper class is complete and elegant, while the life of the lower class is broken and disorganized.

Sartre's "the other is hell" is materialized in the trio's relationship. Jong-soo confirms his existence by peeping into Ben's life, but falls into a deeper nothingness; Hye-mi, through the double deprivation of "little hunger" and "great hunger", is a woman who has to live in a broken van to make ends meet; and Hye-mi lives in a room with glass reflecting the sunlight. Hye-mi proves her existence through the double deprivation of "little hunger" and "great hunger" and the dance of the hungry, but she is still destroyed by Ben's elegance in the end; Ben's behavior of "burning the shed" is a defiance of meaningless existence, and he destroys not only the physical space, but also the traces of the existence of the lower class. Does "burning the useless shed" imply "killing the useless"? Is Hye-mi the "sacrifice" and the useless "shed" that Ben is talking about? Does Ben kill Hye-mi? These interpretations are not substantively confirmed in the film through any verbal narration (e.g., the answers are given by Jong-su himself) or direct presentation of the scene (e.g., the direct presentation of Ben's killing of Hye-mi).[5] The movie refuses to answer questions such as "whether Hye-mi was killed" and "whether the well exists", just as existentialism argues that there is no preconceived meaning in life, and that meaning needs to be created by the individual in action.

4. Interpretation of Fragmented Narrative Films from the Viewer's Perspective

As a cinematic technique that breaks linear logic and collages stories with fractured imagery and multiple perspectives, fragmented narrative poses a challenge to the audience's daily cognition and perception. There is a certain threshold for watching a film with fragmented narrative, as this narrative mode may trigger the viewer's reflection or lead to comprehension barriers.

The fragmented narrative of *Burning* forces the viewer to undergo a cognitive shift, whereby the viewer needs to reassemble the pieces like a jigsaw puzzle through some kind of logic to get the experience of the complete narrative [2]. The movie refuses to give a positive answer to the question of the murderer and the truth, and the failure of suspenseful expectations forces the audience to give up the linear reasoning of "who is the murderer", and focus on the motivation of "why is the murderer killed", which causes the audience to think about class, gender, and existential issues. At the same time, through the repeated symbols of the cat, the watch, and the well, the film creates a collage of Hye-mi's character in the viewer's mind, even though the viewer recognizes Hye-mi from someone else's point of view.

Viewers from different cultural backgrounds of the movie can relate the fragments to their local experiences; Korean viewers can see the plutocratic oppression, Chinese viewers can associate it with the plight of small-town youths, and European and American viewers can interpret the relationship between the individual and the Other from an existentialist perspective.

Lee Chang-dong said, "The meaning of a movie is not in the camera, but in the audience's imagination." The fragmented narrative of *Burning* creates meaning gaps through narrative gaps, allowing the audience to become complicit in the narrative, so that each viewer completes the "secondary creation" of the movie in his or her own cognition, and its fragmented narrative not only

challenges the audience's cognitive habits, but also reproduces in an artistic way the struggle of individuals in modern society when facing nothingness.

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