

CULTURAL TRANSFER AND THE RE-REPRESENTATION OF REALITY: *BARN BURNING* IN FAULKNER, MURAKAMI, AND LEE CHANG-DONG'S FILM

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Abstract: This paper examines the cultural transpositions and shifts in symbolic meaning of the “barn burning” motif through William Faulkner’s *Barn Burning* (1939), Haruki Murakami’s *Barn Burning* (1983), and Lee Chang-dong’s film adaptation *Burning* (버닝, 2018). Through a comparative analysis, the study delves into the socio-economic underpinnings and contextual metamorphoses that transform the barn from a productive manorial setting of the American South to an emblem of urban marginalization in Murakami’s work, culminating in a signifier of agricultural decline in Lee’s narrative. Interweaving the theoretical framework of world literature, this paper spotlights the divergent realities these texts embody and propagate. It investigates how the notion of “reality” is translated and recontextualized across cultural borders, and how meanings are variously appropriated and reimagined in the realm of world literature. The intertextual study thus emphasizes the complexities in the transmission of symbolic cultural assets, shedding light on the varied interpretations and implications of the barn burning motif as it transcends and evolves through time and space.

Keywords: Cultural Transpositions, *Barn Burning*, William Faulkner, Haruki Murakami, Lee Chang-dong, Reality.

Introduction

In the beginning, Lee Chang-dong’s 2018 film *Burning* (버닝) was an attempt to depict the ferocious rage that has festered and seeped into every aspect of modern Korean culture. In 2016, Lee and his crew were inspired to begin work on a film project that revolves around rage because of instances of rage in Korean society that were “so severe that it was suffocating” (Lee). The director said that this issue was not limited to Korea but rather was global in scope at that time:

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We are grateful to Director Lee Chang-dong and PINEHOUSEFILM Co., Ltd for granting permission to include screenshots from the film *Burning*.

I've been thinking about why we've become so irritable in recent years. It's not just Korea, it's the same all over the world. There are different reasons for anger regardless of country, religion or culture. Americans are angry too, so Trump became president. [...] *However, there is no actual object of this anger, it is different for everyone.*¹

The emphasis on anger clarifies Lee's adaptation technique, which involves transforming the protagonist of Haruki Murakami's *Barn Burning* (1983) from a middle-aged writer into a young writer-to-be named Lee Jong-su, as well as the affective resonance with William Faulkner's *Barn Burning* (1939) that is missing from Murakami's original work, but abundant in Lee's adaptation.

For the first point, the reason lies in the fact that the younger generation is the most susceptible to anger towards the immutable status quo in modern Korean society where class solidification is a defining feature². For the second point, while Murakami's protagonist maintains his cool demeanor throughout the story, Lee and Faulkner's male characters both display distinct anger.

On the one hand, as a preceding piece, Faulkner's *Barn Burning* clearly elicited different reactions from Lee and Murakami. Despite the title's implied connection, seven years after *Barn Burning* was originally published, Murakami attempted to remove any reference to Faulkner by replacing specific phrases such as "Faulkner's short stories" with the more generic phrase "three magazines"³. On the other hand, in the film, the hero Lee Jong-su, a young novelist, admits that William Faulkner was his favorite author, and this was meant to establish a connection between him and the other male character, Ben, the rich lover of the feminine character Hae-mi: "Lee Jong-su: William Faulkner. When I read his work, I feel like I'm reading about myself." [42:14] Again, when the two men met in an upscale coffee shop following Hae-mi's disappearance, Ben was reading none other than Faulkner: "Ben: You said you liked Faulkner, so I wanted to give him a shot." [1:39:05]

¹ Lee Chang-dong, "历史的缝隙 真实的力量 —李沧东导演访谈录" [The Cracks of History. The Power of Truth – Interview with Director Lee Chang-dong], in 《当代电影》 [Contemporary Cinema], 2018, available at https://www.sohu.com/a/281163613_662038 (accessed October 5, 2024). All translations and emphasis of non-English materials are mine, unless otherwise noted.

² Yan Fei and Cui Elihe, "韩国社会阶层分化的特点及趋势" [The Characteristics and Trends of Social Stratification in South Korea], 《国外理论动态》 [Foreign Theoretical Trends], no. 4, 2020. pp. 158–166.

³ Haruki Murakami, *Barn Burning*, in the collection *The Elephant Vanishes*, translated by Alfred Birnbaum and Jay Rubin, London, Vintage, 2003, p. 135 (first English edition, ed. by Gary Fisketjon, Knopf, 1993). Murakami first published his short-story in a Japanese magazine in 1983, the same as William Faulkner, who first published his short story *Burn Burning* in the American magazine *Harper's*.

Hyeyoon Kim (2021) has examined how William Faulkner's short story *Barn Burning* (1939) and Lee Chang-dong's film *Burning* (2018) depict class immobility⁴. He explores the social and historical backgrounds of both works, emphasizing how the stories in both represent the frustrations and struggles of people from lower socioeconomic classes against social systems that impede their ability to move up the social ladder. Indeed, it appears that the recurring theme of "frantic grief and despair" in Faulkner's *Barn Burning*⁵ finds its contemporary manifestation in Lee's film *Burning*. In Lee's psychological thriller, the "specter" of William Faulkner – to borrow a phrase from Jacques Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* – became a haunting presence. Also, the social issue of economic inequality, an old ghost of the American story, re-enters a present-day Korean narrative.

However, in Murakami's *Barn Burning*, the spectre of Faulkner seems to vanish along together with the sense of reality. Murakami's text presents itself as a symposium of signs, where the three main characters are referred to by personal pronouns, yet William Faulkner's name, as a proper noun, was removed during the revision process. Nevertheless, Japanese academics of American literature juxtaposed the two texts with the same title and endeavored to locate the hidden link between Murakami and Faulkner. Tateo Imamura, for example, interpreted the barn burnings in Faulkner and Murakami, respectively, as a form of spiritual patricide and a metaphor for murder⁶. On the basis of a thorough structural analysis of the stark differences between the two stories, Yoshihiko Kazamaru contended that Faulkner was Murakami's inspiration when he wrote *Barn Burning*⁷. Motohiro Kojima, on the other hand, focused on the rewriting process, analyzing the intertextuality of Murakami's *Barn Burning* in relation to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and considering the erasure of any earlier connection to Faulkner⁸.

⁴ Hyeyoon Kim, "The Image of Class Immobility in Chang-dong Lee's Film *Burning* and William Faulkner's *Barn Burning*", in *동서비교문학저널* [The Journal of East-West Comparative Literature], no. 57, 2021, pp. 395–423.

⁵ William Faulkner, *The Faulkner Reader: Selections from the Works of William Faulkner*, New York, Modern Library, 1929, p. 500.

⁶ Tateo Imamura, "フォークナーと村上春樹—「納屋を焼く」をめぐる冒険" [William Faulkner and Murakami Haruki: Adventures in *Barn Burning*], in 『フォークナー』 [Faulkner], Tokyo, Shohakusha, 2006, pp. 42–49.

⁷ Yoshihiko Kazamaru, 語り手の気づかい、あるいはおせっかい—「納屋を焼く」" [The Narrator's Attention or Meddling: *Barn Burning*], 『村上春樹短篇再読』 [Haruki Murakami's Short Stories Re-read], Tokyo, Misuzu Shobo, 2007, pp. 28–40.

⁸ Motohiro Kojima, "村上春樹「納屋を焼く」論—フォークナーの消失、ギャッツビーの幻惑" [Murakami Haruki's *Barn Burning*: Faulkner's Disappearance, Gatsby's Disillusionment], *文化と言語* [Culture and language] 札幌大学外国語学部紀要, no. 69, 2008, pp. 49–67.

In fact, multilayered intertextuality has taken center stage in the analysis of these three narratives that employ various modes of expression but are connected by the common motif of barn burning since the release of Lee's film in 2018. In 2019, Yumie Yamane had expressed a different view. He contends that Lee's *Burning*, with its depiction of violence, wrath, and class inequality based on the harsh realities of contemporary Korean society, exceeds Murakami's *Barn Burning* as a work of world literature⁹. Björn Boman (2021) offers an overview of South Korea's sociohistorical context, highlighting the influence of rapid modernization and globalization on the nation's artistic production. For him, Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* (2018) functions as a cultural text that represents the intricate intertextuality of modern cinema, negotiating both local and global influences¹⁰.

In the meantime, film studies scholars tried to situate *Burning* (2018) within the broader context of South Korean cinema, highlighting the academic and public interest in intertextuality, transnationality, and hybridization in South Korean films. Hwanki Min and Jiwon Moon examined character development and concluded that Lee Chang-dong's film form differs from the literary versions due to the protagonist's vision of reality and to his reaction to events¹¹. Another perspective was offered by Kosuke Fujiki, who looks at how sociopolitical tensions in modern-day Korea are reflected in Lee Chang-dong's film version of Haruki Murakami's short story *Barn Burning*, with a focus on the competitive tension and sexual interactions between characters. According to Fujiki, the film draws a comparison between the protagonist's personal challenges and the wider geopolitical tensions between North and South Korea by setting the story in Paju, close to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and focusing on themes like visibility and invisibility¹².

Scholars studying film studies and literature alike appear to concur that Lee's *Burning* (2018) incorporates elements from both Faulkner's story – the motif of rage – and Murakami's story – the main plot, but the film adds new features and modifies existing ones. Regarded as Asia's master of realism, Lee has a unique skill in bringing to light aspects and themes of Faulkner's American South that

⁹ Yumie Yamane, "'Burning' as 'World Literature': Beyond Haruki Murakami's 'Barn Burning'", 広島大学大学院文学研究科論集 [The Hiroshima University Studies. (Graduate School of Letters)], no. 79, 2019, pp. 51–71.

¹⁰ Björn Boman, "The Multifold Intertextuality in Lee Chang Dong's *Burning*", *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, volume 3, Issue 1, 2021, pp. 100–119.

¹¹ Hwanki Min and Jiwon Moon, "The Character Study on Lee Chang-Dong's *Burning*", *Korea Science*, volume 19, Issue 7, 2019, pp. 110–119.

¹² Kosuke Fujiki, "Adapting Ambiguity, Placing(In) visibility; Geopolitical and Sexual Tension in Lee Chang-dong's *Burning*", *Cinema Studies*, no. 14, 2019, pp.72–98.

are relevant to current socio-cultural challenges in South Korea, such as class solidification that results in severe wealth disparity. An old American story appears to be recast as a contemporary South Korean one, and this assertion is supported economically as well. The socioeconomic structure of the 21st century is quickly reverting to that of the 19th century, according to Thomas Piketty, the author of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), when economic elites, referred to in *Burning* (2018) as the “Korean Gatsby”, often inherited their wealth rather than earned it by labor¹³. The wrath of 2016 that served as the inspiration for Lee’s film may be seen as a desperation expressed at the loss of any chance of revolution, the 20th century’s legacy, and the hopelessness of going back to the inflexible societal structures that defined the 19th century and early 20th century. It is therefore simpler to make comparisons between Lee and Faulkner’s stories, which also explains why Faulkner’s name and works manifest in Lee’s *Burning* (2018) and why academics are drawn to the themes that both authors share.

When it comes to the portrayal of reality, it may also seem that the narratives of Lee and Faulkner resonate beyond time, place, and cultural barriers: the strained relationship between father and son, the war experiences etc. In the meantime, while the imaginary, or unreal is perceived more realistic in the film, Murakami’s story, where all mention of Faulkner was removed on purpose – seems to lose its connection to reality. But is it so? This paper will explore the psychological and social dimensions of the film’s three main characters, with a focus on simultaneity and the re-representation of reality in Lee’s film. My goal is to examine how Murakami’s *Barn Burning* and Lee’s *Burning*, as postmodern works, reflect a defining characteristic of our time: the great absence of reality.

This paper concludes that the way the story was told in both Murakami’s original text and Lee’s adaptation resonates with a postmodern condition that is particularly evident in the superficial cultures of early Bubble-Era Tokyo prior to Neoliberalism and the post-currency-crisis economic wasteland of Seoul. Thus, this paper assumes postmodernist theory as the foundation for its discourse, incorporating Fredric Jameson’s observations on late capitalist society¹⁴. However, it will also be acutely aware of their relevance to an East Asian context given the intricate dynamics involved when theories travel abroad¹⁵.

¹³ See Thomas Piketty, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*, Cambridge Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014.

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, *New Left Review*, no. 146, 1984, pp. 53–92.

¹⁵ Edward W. Said, “Traveling Theory”, in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 226–47.

*The Barn Vanishes: Re-representation of Reality
in Lee Chang-dong's Burning*

Lee conveyed a powerful sense of rage in *Burning* (2018), but it's also critical to keep in mind that, as Lee himself noted, the prevalent rage that caught his attention in 2016 has no set definition and varies depending on the circumstances of the individuals, much like the evasive reality of today's world. For example, the barn in *Barn Burning* alludes to a significant manufacturing area of the American Southern manor economy in Faulkner's story and an abandoned or redundant storage shed of an urban space in Murakami's story. Although the barn is depicted in Lee's *Burning* as a plastic greenhouse, a symbol of modern agriculture, it disappears in the film title, evoking a scene where people's anger loses focus. This is the precise point at which Lee's film diverges significantly from Faulkner's, despite the seemingly shared motif of wrath. Although Lee's storytelling style is inspired and based on Murakami's version of *Barn Burning*, it goes a step farther in challenging the viability of our depiction of the world.

While Lee's narrative prominently references Faulkner's *Barn Burning*, the film *Burning* (2018) effectively exemplifies the concept of postmodernism. According to *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, "since its inception as a literary term in the late 1950s and its wider use as a critical term in the 1980s and 1990s, postmodernism has emerged as a significant cultural, political, and intellectual force that defines our era."¹⁶ Defining the critical notion of postmodernism is nearly impossible due to its extensive variety of phenomena and inherent acceptance of multiplicity and heterogeneity from the outset. Steven Connor, author of *Postmodernist Culture* (1989), attempted to delineate the trajectory of postmodernism and identified four distinct stages in its evolution: "accumulation; synthesis; autonomy; and dissipation"¹⁷.

The paper asserts that the argument presented by Fredric Jameson in his seminal essay *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*¹⁸ is particularly pertinent to the current discussions, as Jameson's essay was pivotal in the third stage of synthesis from the mid-1980s onward. Since the mid 1980s, Jameson's analysis of postmodernism has dominated conversations about the concept.

Furthermore, Jameson's discourse on postmodernism originates from the American consumer society, wherein he perceives the "whole global, yet American, postmodern culture" as "the internal and superstructural expression of a whole

¹⁶ Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist, *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2001, p. xiii.

¹⁷ Steven Connor, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 1.

¹⁸ See Jameson, *op. cit.*, 1984.

new of American military and economic domination throughout the world”¹⁹. It is particularly relevant in the context of postwar Japanese and Korean society, as both nations have been integrated into the geopolitical framework of America’s global domination from an early point in the postwar era. For more than half a century, the American consumer society served as a role model for postwar Japanese and Korean societies. Despite certain inherent cultural distinctions, postwar Japan and South Korea’s direct and speedy Americanization further facilitates the application of Jameson’s theoretical framework to East Asian reality. Thus, in line with Jameson, this study defines postmodernism as “a cultural dominant”²⁰ in the specific sense of the American culture’s overwhelming success in postwar Japanese and Korean societies.

Connor noticed that “Postmodernist theory responded to the sense that important changes had taken place in politics, economics, and social life, changes that could broadly be characterized by the two words *delegitimation* and *dedifferentiation*”²¹. Jameson describes “delegitimation and dedifferentiation” as taking on the following characteristics: “a new depthlessness”; “a consequent weakening of historicity” as well as “a whole new type of emotional ground tone” which Jameson names “intensities”²².

In order to examine the “constitutive features of the postmodern”²³ in Murakami and Lee’s narratives, this paper will analyze three key points: characters, simultaneity, and the absence of reality, as described by Jameson. Not only the three main characters – Lee Jong-su, Shin Hae-mi, and Ben – stand in stark contrast to one another, but their expression of anger also varies greatly, which speaks to the contemporary paradox that people’s anger becomes unfocused.

The Hamletian Dilemma of Lee Jong-su

The most obvious alteration Lee made to Murakami’s text was to replace the thirty-one-year-old writer protagonist, the anonymous “I”, with a young Lee Jong-su, who is a member of the same generation as Shin Hae-mi, the story’s twenty-year-old “she”. Jong-su was unable to feel empathy for his irate father, who battled the unavoidable decrease in agriculture brought on by globalization and

¹⁹ Idem, p. 57.

²⁰ Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

²¹ Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²² Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

²³ Idem, *ibidem*.

was losing the ability to vent his own inner rage. In South Korea, this is indicative of an entire generation. Director Lee talks in his 2018 interview about the feeling of anger in young people:

In fact, from the perspective of young people, most young people nowadays, either angry or helpless, do not even have the means to express their feelings of anger, but just keep them pent up in their hearts, without even realizing that they are burning with anger. In fact, this is a kind of consciousness disorder caused by the theory of the uselessness of the self. The social system and the environment unintentionally reinforce this perception, and if you can change something through your own efforts, this feeling of powerlessness and anger may be less, but unfortunately, the chances of such a change are getting fewer and fewer.²⁴

Global capitalism no longer has external boundaries, and the majority is marginalized, undervalued, and banished as a whole along with the rapid widening of wealth disparity. However, Jong-su and his father – both members of the silent majority – do not have the same emotional structure or instinctive response to the intricacies of daily existence. For Jong-su, what Jameson refers to as “the breakdown of the signifying chain”²⁵ resulting in a detachment from reality, manifests itself as anorexia. The past of the older generation, exemplified by Jong-su’s father, has diminished into the two-dimensional images displayed on the walls, embodying “a new depthlessness” that the camera merely captures as a fleeting view while traveling along Jong-su’s home. The reason Jong-su’s father fought in the Korean War was to uphold opposing ideologies, such as capitalism versus communism. In addition, he battled against the relentless tides of globalism to maintain his identity as a traditional farmer. Nevertheless, the impact of fathers’ battles for existence has long since diminished, and recent generations born in the new millennium have been unable to connect with them. Jong-su therefore thought his father’s fury was inexplicable and found it irritating when it manifested itself as abrupt, violent behavior. History exhibited “a new depthlessness” in the portrayal of fury, as essentially a sequence of footnotes in *Burning* (2018), exemplified by the image of a television screen featuring Donald J. Trump’s address or the incessant propaganda broadcasting from North Korea.

Thus, Jong-su finds himself ensnared in a post-communist revolutionary parallel to the Hamletian dilemma, unable to revenge his father and relegate to the

²⁴ See Lee, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Jameson, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

role of a thwarted avenger, grappling with an elusive, ghostly reality. Jong-su is not speaking much in front of the lawyer who mistook Jong-su's father's self-esteem as a farmer for unwarranted arrogance. Besides, for most part of the film, Jong-su stayed silent and noticed the psychological game Ben created for the three of them. The shot-reverse of a closet full of lethal knives, which was an inheritance from his father, represents Jong-su's inner rage visually. In this scene, there is no crime or enemy – just a welling up of rage and the helplessness that accompanies that anger²⁶.



Figure 1. © PINEHOUSEFILM Co., Ltd
Lee Jong-su looks intently at the
knife set his father left behind.

²⁶ Jinhua Dai, 镜中火焰-李沧东的《燃烧》, 今日电影与世界 [Flame in the Mirror – Lee Chang-dong's *Burning*, Today's Cinema and the World], online talk, 北京大学人文社会科学研究院 [Institute of Humanities and Social Science, Peking University]. <https://shorturl.at/h3uP1> (accessed October 7, 2024).

Shin Hae-mi as the Last Man

Shin Hae-mi, another central character in *Burning* (2018), embodies the existential despair, a human condition Nietzsche describes as that of the “last” man in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Director Lee also made reference to Nietzsche’s “last” man in his remarks regarding *Burning*:

In Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, there’s a description of “the last man”. The last man is like this. When the system and other aspects have been stabilized, people begin to enjoy their work, are content with the status quo, and are easily satisfied. [...] We have already entered such a time, and we are all going to be the last ones, taking things as they come. *Isn’t the term “small fortune” popular nowadays?* Being content with the small but real things and feeling happy. That’s why there are people who work at a convenience store and earn 7,000 won per hour, but drink 8,000 won of coffee, sometimes even more than 10,000 won. Because it’s tangible happiness. They also wear Nike shoes, and it’s hard to change their lives by saving up money anyway, so they might as well have the money to travel to Africa. The world has changed, and this is the modern way of life.²⁷

The English phrase “small fortune” Lee mentioned in his interview is a literal translation of a common term in mainland China and South Korea, and it originated from the Japanese word “shôkakkou”, which means a “small but certain happiness”. “Shôkakkou” is a term coined by Haruki Murakami in his Japanese book *Uzumaki-neko no mitsukekata: Murakami Asahidô jânaru* [How to Spot a Whirlpool Cat: Murakami Asahidô Diary]²⁸. Belief in “shôkakkou” explains Hae-mi’s seemingly irrational behavior patterns such as her decision to travel to North Africa despite the fact that “she can’t afford it... she’s broke.” (Ben’s lines, [1:41:44]). Even though being impoverished, Hae-mi nevertheless saw the world through the lens of the wealthy Ben and adopted similar lifestyle choices, such as visiting foreign lands, since, as the last man without any future, she was only able to see a small but certain happiness in front of her. It could be argued that Hae-mi is, in a sense, living in self-delusion; she refers to it in the pantomime of peeling mandarin oranges: it’s easier for her to forget that she doesn’t have money than it is to imagine that she does. Actually, Hae-mi is one of the many forgotten victims of the credit economy. A part-time employee in a pink jacket is quoted as saying “they all seem fine,

²⁷ See Lee, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Haruki Murakami, *Uzumaki-neko no mitsukekata : Murakami Asahidô jânaru* [How to Spot a Whirlpool Cat: Murakami Asahidô Diary], Tokyo, Shinchosha, 1996, p. 126.

but you never really know their story. Some of them are drowning in credit card debt, and because of that some of them go into hiding?" [1:34:08]

Hae-mi, as embodiment of Nietzsche's "last man" "doesn't contact her family and doesn't have any friends." (Ben's lines, [1:41:44]). When Jong-su visits their restaurant, Hae-mi's mother and elder sister made it clear that they would not like to see her until she paid off all of her debt. The comment of Abner Snopes, the main character of Faulkner's *Barn Burning* – "You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you"²⁹– does not apply to Hae-mi's circumstances, given the differences in the two economies (farm economy vs. credit economy). Also, the reason Jong-su was reunited with his mother after all these years was not love or compassion, but rather the fact that the mother required her son's assistance since she was in debt. Not only are our lifestyles altering in response to shifting economic systems, but so is our understanding of family and reality.

"Shôkakkou" (a small but certain happiness) stands in sharp contrast with Faulkner, who, in his Nobel speech, "declines to accept the end of man", and claims that "the poet's" or "the writer's duty" is to write "only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat"³⁰. In our postmodern world, due also to the dysfunctions of language, "the agony and sweat of the human spirit" may have already become the immense, untouchable nucleus of reality. Any attempt to approach it would be rejected at the first moment of verbalizing: it appears impossible to provide reality an adequate representation.

It should be noted that Hae-mi primarily expresses her anger through her griefs. She broke down in tears on several occasions, including when she danced at sunset in Jong-su's yard or when she told Jong-su and Ben about her travel adventures, especially about the moment when she had seen the setting sun. The motif of the sunset itself conveys a sense of closure, fitting with Hae-mi's role as the last man. Finally, the mystery surrounding Hae-mi's whereabouts and her disappearance serve to highlight the themes of existential uncertainty and the frailty of interpersonal relationships in a capitalist society.

²⁹ Faulkner, *Barn Burning*, in *The Faulkner Reader*, p. 503.

³⁰ William Faulkner, "William Faulkner's Speech of Acceptance upon the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature", *The Faulkner Reader*, pp. 3–4.



Figure 2. © PINEHOUSEFILM Co., Ltd
When Shin Hae-mi remembers witnessing the sunset
and dancing to it, she breaks down in tears.

Ben, the mysterious Korean Gatsby

Ben, whose mysterious nature and disengagement from social conventions make him an intriguing and unsettling figure, once remarked that “It is fascinating to see people cry” [40:56] since, in his own words: “I’ve never shed a single tear in my life” [41:08]. Ben’s hobby of burning greenhouses, which he describes with chilling nonchalance, serves as a metaphor for his underlying rage at not being able to find a purpose in his life. The narrator in Murakami’s text describes Ben’s character:

He was in his late twenties, tall, with a decent build, and rather polite in his speech. A little lean on looks, perhaps, though I suppose you could put him in the handsome category. Anyway, he struck me as nice enough; he had big hands and long fingers.³¹

³¹ Murakami, *Barn Burning*, ed. cit., p. 135.

But in the film, he was transformed into a Ben, and American actor Steven Yeun, who was probably in his middle thirties then, was cast to play him. This may explain why Ben in the film seems more collected and grown-up. In Murakami's work, the writer, the "I" protagonist, discusses with the female character the subject of Ben's kind of work at one point, but she gives only a vague response:

"Can you really make that much in trading?"

"Trading?"

"That's what he said. He works in trading."

"Okay, then, I imagine so... But hey, what do I know? He doesn't seem to do much work at all, as far as I can see. He does his share of seeing people and talking on the phone, I'll say that, though."³²

In the film, Ben likewise gives a highly evasive response when Jong-su asked him directly what his occupation is. However, he did offer an interesting observation about the type of work he performs. Ben commented: "well, I do this and that. You wouldn't understand even if I told you. But to put it simply, I play. Nowadays, there is no distinction between working and playing." [41:42] This actually meets the description of the consumerist society that Zygmunt Bauman defines as ours: "the trick is no longer to limit work time to the bare minimum, so vacating more space for leisure, but on the contrary to efface altogether the line dividing vocation from avocation, job from hobby, work from recreation; to lift work itself to the rank of supreme and most satisfying entertainment."³³ Hae-mi, the new poor, was forced to work multiple part-time jobs because of the shortage of jobs, brought about by neo-liberalist policies. She decided to spend all of her earnings on travel instead of repaying her debt: she acts on the "small fortune" principle, looking at what lies in front of her eyes rather than on a looming future. In a consumers' society, however, Ben, who comes from a wealthy family, also had little choice but to combine work and pleasure. There is no escape from this lifestyle, the only possible exception is the burning of a greenhouse, which touches him for the first time.

Jong-su's inner rage is visualized through the set of knives his father left him as inheritance, while Hae-mi expresses hers through tears. Although Ben may be just as desperate on the inside as are Jong-su and Hae-mi, he is unable to express

³² Murakami, *op. cit.*, pp. 136–137.

³³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2005, p. 34.

his anger, which also explains why he is fascinated with the act of burning a greenhouse, which seems nevertheless an imaginary event. In the film, there is a greenhouse burned down in Jong-su's dream, so also at an imaginary level. Jong-su was transformed into a small boy in his dream [1:21:09]. This imaginary burning may represent metaphorically the inability to accurately represent reality, in our post-truth era, leading to the absence of reality itself.



Figure 3. © PINEHOUSEFILM Co., Ltd
Jong-su watches the greenhouse burn down in his dream.

The Simultaneity of the Barn Burner

After Ben revealed to him his secret hobby and instructed him on the morality of simultaneity, Jong-su saw a greenhouse burning in his dream – the concept of simultaneity is designed to bind the two of them. In Murakami's short-story, the character referred to as "he" gives "simultaneity" the meaning of "an extremely important force in human existence" which he defines in terms of a personal morals:

Right, I'm here, and I'm there. I'm in Tokyo, and at the same time I'm in Tunis. I'm the one to blame, and I'm also the one to forgive. Just as for a instance. It's that level of balance. Without such balance, I don't think we could go on living. It's like the linchpin to everything. Lose it and we'd literally go to pieces. But for the very reason that I've got it, simultaneity becomes possible for me.³⁴

In the film, Ben not only restates what he told about simultaneity in Murakami's text, but he also uses a metaphor to offer his own view on this concept. While cooking with Hae-mi, Ben makes some remarks about sacrifices and gods. The scenery is his opulent apartment, where he welcomes for the first time Jong-su: "just as humans make offerings to the gods, I make my own offering and consume it. An offering. It's a metaphor." [53:16] Since we are all inherently both producers and consumers in a consumerist society, everyone is subject to the morality of simultaneity, not just Ben. But for a postmodern thriller like *Burning* (2018), it's significant that Ben, playing the imaginary (or real) serial killer, while Jong-su, the part of the fictitious detective, uses this metaphor of religious offering.

In Murakami's text the act of burning a barn takes on the metaphorical sense of killing, too. While Abner Snopes is named as the barn burner in Faulkner's text, readers and viewers are left in the dark about who the barn burner is in both Murakami and in Lee's postmodern narratives. Who is the murderer? Is a homicide actually occurring? The tension between Jong-su and Ben, their duality is the crux of *Burning* (2018) and it brings on another type of simultaneity.

Burning (2018) begins with the meeting of the three key protagonists at the airport. Ben was drawn to Jong-su because, like him, he is a writer who hopes to unravel the mysteries of the universe. The man gave the following explanation in Murakami's text for his reason to divulge his story:

You're someone who writes novels, so I thought, wouldn't he be interested in patterns of human behavior and all that? And the way I see it, with novelists, before even passing judgment on something, aren't they the kind who are supposed to appreciate its form? And even if they can't appreciate it, they should at least accept it at face value, no? That's why I told you. I wanted to tell you, from my side.³⁵

In the film, Ben told Jong-su that "since you write fiction, I'd like to have a chat with you sometime." [42:28] Ben's decision to tell Jong-su about his life narrative is prompted by his knowledge that he is a writer, or at least aspiring to

³⁴ Murakami, *op. cit.*, pp. 142–43.

³⁵ Idem, p. 142.

be one. Also due to Jong-su's significance to Hae-mi, who was the prey (at the airport, Hae-mi introduced Jong-su as "this is my one and only friend" [37:00]), Ben, acting in the role of the hunter, took the initiative to ask Jong-su to join him in the psychological chasing game of *Burning* (2018). During the chase, Ben seeks to eradicate the significance that Jong-su provides to Hae-mi. For Ben, she represents a worthless, meaningless, and abandoned existence.

Ben's deep-seated rage stems from his inability to find meaning in the surface of the world and from his automatic combination of work and play, which prevents him from taking anything seriously, as was previously argued. Ben's issue is not that his moral judgment is flawed; rather, it is that he lacks any moral judgment or value at all. For this reason, simultaneity builds for him the orderly progression of events that justify his drive for homicide. Ben is a representation of the smooth, *flat* world that we all experience daily, but are currently unable to fully grasp. In Murakami's work, the narrator perceived Ben's prototype: the man with a void expression. In the film, director Lee incorporated a phrase indicating that Ben found it atypical to articulate his emotions and that he had never wept before. Ben's rejection of meaning is validated by small, relevant details: his two yawns, once in a bar when the friends gathered and they heard Hae-mi's account of the great hunger, and again at Ben's apartment, when they listened to the saleswoman's stories.

Regarding Hae-mi, her childhood friend Jong-su is the one who gives her life a meaning. Jong-su said "I'm in love with Hae-mi" [1:19:00], whereas Ben, whom she met accidentally, turns out to be the one who takes away that meaning and purportedly erases her existence. Ben is the alleged serial killer in the psychological thriller *Burning* (2018), while Jong-su is the tenacious private investigator. Ben's elegant black Porsche and Jong-su's faded white truck represent their opposing social classes in the film, conjuring up the idea of a struggle between good and evil. Despite their apparent differences, both Jong-su and Ben use imagined or real acts of violence to release their pent-up inner anger. From the moment they first met, they have been inextricably linked as the pursued and the pursuer, the killer and the savior (or the revenger). "When she introduced us, he shook my hand, virtually in reflex", Murakami put it in his text³⁶. Furthermore, the last embrace Ben gave Jong-su before he was fatally killed symbolically confirms this initial handshake.

³⁶ Idem, *op. cit.*, p. 135.



Figure 4. © PINEHOUSEFILM Co., Ltd
Jong-su shakes Ben's hand when they met
at the airport and Ben embraces Jong-su before he dies.

The final scene, where Jong-su confronts Ben, blurs the lines between victim and perpetrator, highlighting the complex interplay of power, class, and morality. We are both producers and consumers in a society centered around consumption. In her imagination, the “new” poor Hae-mi may momentarily live a lifestyle akin to that of the wealthy Ben. If Jong-su’s father had followed the advice of the attorney and made real estate investments in Seoul’s Gangnam neighborhood, Jong-su might have become a wealthy Ben himself.

Additionally, Lee’s film blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. Did Jong-su actually murder Ben? Is this merely another imagined deed, similar to Jong-su’s dream of seeing a greenhouse burn down? Before the retaliation killing, Director Lee showed us a scenario in which Jong-su was using his laptop to write in Hae-mi’s tiny, now-empty attic. Therefore, everything in the last scene can be fictitious. In fact, while Murakami’s *Barn Burning* has the same title as Faulkner’s

short story, it turns out to have a completely different flavor, and Lee's *Burning* certainly leaves unresolved a lot of questions, if compared to iconic Hitchcock thrillers. In many ways *Burning* (2018) focuses on something else: it alludes to the absence of reality, to the blurring boundaries between the real and the imaginary, which are indicative features of our postmodern world.

The Absence of Reality: The Real Slips Away

As has been previously argued, *Burning* (2018) portrays a variety of unfocused forms of anger. If he had chosen to use the same title as Faulkner and Murakami, Lee would have written *barns*, the plural version of the word, rather than writing *Barn Burning*. Ultimately, the film's title becomes just *Burning*, suggesting the elusive quality of this anger. The barn, which was the object of the burning act, eventually disappears from the title itself because, in the end, there is no antagonist, no guilty act³⁷, just broken connections and a generalized sense of helplessness and rage.

The three central protagonists in *Burning* (2018), Jong-su, Hae-mi, and Ben, express their anger in different ways since each of them has different experiences with reality despite living in the same society. Hae-mi's approach to dealing with reality is the most common of the three, emblematic of the new poor or the underclass in South Korean society. *Burning* (2018) uses the automobiles that Jong-su and Ben drive to represent themselves, while Hae-mi is represented by the cheap, pink plastic watch that Jong-su won as a premium gift at the beginning of the film. Following Hae-mi's disappearance, the pink watch resurfaces in two distinct locations: first, it was on the wrist of her part-time coworker, suggesting that the type of work Hae-mi does is highly interchangeable; second, it surfaced in the bathroom cabinet drawer of Ben's opulent apartment, raising the possibility that Ben may have already killed her and retained it as a memento of his murder.

Regardless of how basic the plastic watch is, the department store's announcement referred to it as "a luxury sports watch" [3:13]. Exaggeration is inevitable because premium gifts are a well-known marketing tactic used to entice customers to make purchases at the store, and everyone is aware that the words and descriptions don't always correspond to reality. Similarly, Hae-mi's decision to go to other countries doesn't align with her reality: she doesn't actually have any money for leisure because she is deeply in debt. This type of mismatch graphically illustrates a very common postmodern phenomena in which the world we live in

³⁷ When Hae-mi unexpectedly called him without speaking and simply made indiscernible sounds that seemed to be her struggling and fighting, Jong-su started to suspect that Hae-mi had been "burned" as a greenhouse (barn). Jong-su follows Ben everywhere in an attempt to locate Hae-mi once more, even climbing to the top of a dam, but he is unable to find any convincing evidence to prove his theory.

is not consistent with the outward appearances expressed by words or languages. Postmodern problematic connection to language is best summed up by David Harvey's exposition of Lyotard's view:



Figure 5. © PINEHOUSEFILM Co., Ltd
The cheap, pink plastic watch reappears in
different locations after Hae-mi's disappearance.

Lyotard, for his part, puts a similar argument, though on a rather different basis. He takes the modernist preoccupation with language and pushes it to extremes of dispersal. While 'the social bond is linguistic,' he argues, it 'is not woven with a single thread' but by an 'indeterminate number' of 'language games.' Each of us lives 'at the intersection of many of these' and we do not necessarily establish 'stable language combinations and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.' As a consequence, 'the social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games.'³⁸

³⁸ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, London, Blackwell, 1991, p. 46.

It is evident that in the film, Hae-mi is inflicted the most with this “death of the subject”³⁹ if compared to Murakami’s “she”. The female character is portrayed in Murakami’s text as someone who is cut off from the society’s symbolic system, a loose sign that is not weaved into the web of meanings. For instance, she didn’t care about age or marital status and “seemed to consider things like age and family and income to be of the same a priori order as shoe size and vocal pitch and the shape of one’s fingernails”⁴⁰. She represents nothing more than an empty void in the language game, which explains why, “when I was with her”, “I could really relax” and “forget all about work I didn’t want to do and trivial things that’d never be settled anyway and the crazy mixed-up ideas that crazy mixed-up people had taken into their heads.”⁴¹ The narrator’s attitude as he listened to her confirms the words she utters are meaningless:

not that there was any great meaning to her words. And if I did catch myself interjecting polite nothings without really tuning in what she was saying, there still was something soothing to my ear about her voice, like watching clouds drift across the far horizon.⁴²

Here, her words lose all meaning; all that remains is their actual physical form, their sound, or the sound of her voice as she utters them. She even goes one step further, masking the sounds with a charade of peeling mandarin oranges. This already classic sequence, which Lee’s film faithfully recreated, is described in Murakami’s text:

Then she “peeled a mandarin orange.” Literally, that’s what she did: She had a glass bowl of oranges to her left and another bowl for the peels to her right—so went the setup—in fact, there was nothing there. She proceeded to pick up one imaginary orange, then slowly peel it, pop pieces into her mouth, and spit out the pulp one section at a time, finally disposing of the skin-wrapped residue into the right-hand bowl when she’d eaten the entire fruit. She repeated this maneuver again and again.⁴³

The key to this pantomime’s success is her claim that “a question of making yourself believe there is an orange there, you have to forget there isn’t one”⁴⁴.

³⁹ Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Bay Press, 1983, p. 114.

⁴⁰ Murakami, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁴¹ Idem, p. 134.

⁴² Idem, *ibidem*.

⁴³ Idem, p. 133.

⁴⁴ Idem, p. 134.

The deep-rooted value system is already lost when “in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum”⁴⁵. What she does is an act of pastiche, an imagined procession of meaning which resulted in “the reality of everything around me being siphoned away”⁴⁶.

What separates Hae-mi in the film from the female character in Murakami's fiction, though, is that Hae-mi is more determined to find meaning, a quality that Lee added, and she uses tears to vent her rage for the loss of it. For example, Hae-mi travels to North Africa in search of a higher purpose for her existence and performs the dance of “great hunger” in front of Jong-su and Ben. While there are some similarities to specific descriptions in Murakami's short story *The Second Bakery Attack*, director Lee claimed in the already mentioned interview that the co-screenwriter Oh Jung-mi got the idea of the “great hunger” scene on her own:

They're looking for the meaning of life itself. This is particularly primitive and religious. But in real life, Hae-mi lives in an attic, owes money on a card loan, and can't even take care of herself properly, yet she has to save up for a trip to Africa. Anyway, for a young person like Hae-mi, no matter what lifestyle she chooses, reality doesn't change drastically, but she still tries to find the meaning of life, and does the dance of finding the meaning of life, just like our ancestors did.⁴⁷

Hae-mi's ultimate disappearance, however, signifies the absence of reality and the inability to link together any disparate events into a coherent reality. Similar to the central enigma of whether Hae-mi is killed by Ben or simply vanishes due to her card debt, the empty well in Hae-mi's early recollections and her mysterious pet cat Boil are signifiers that highlight the ambiguity of the whole story. According to Hal Foster, Jameson's interpretation of Lacan's theory of languages also reflects how we relate to reality in the postmodern era:

A sign, a word, a text, is here modelled as a relationship between a signifier – a material object, the sound of a word, the script of a text – and a signified, the meaning of that material word or material text. The third component would be the so-called “referent,” the “real” object in the “real” world to which the sign refers – the real cat as opposed to the concept of a cat or the sound “cat.” But for structuralism in general

⁴⁵ Foster, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁴⁶ Murakami, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁴⁷ See Lee, *op. cit.*

there has been a tendency to feel that reference is a kind of myth, that one can no longer talk about the “real” in that external or objective way.⁴⁸

The only things that are known about the cat Boil in *Burning* (2018) are mere signifiers: its name and the waste that it left behind. The real cat is nowhere to be found in Hae-mi’s little attic, where it was supposed to be. As our relationship to our surroundings is essentially imagined and the symbolic system of the society is dysfunctional, the real becomes unintelligible, hinting at the absence of reality. Both Hae-mi’s pantomime of peeling mandarin oranges and Ben’s burning of the greenhouse are performed on an imaginary scale. In addition to seeing a greenhouse burn down in his dream, Jong-su might have as well imagined killing Ben in the end. Thus, when a real cat appeared out of nowhere in Ben’s opulent apartment, we are unable to confirm that it was Hae-mi’s cat Boil. Stendhal famously described the realistic novel as a mirror of reality; yet, in our postmodern world, reality is fractured by the reflections of a sequence of mirrors, each of which is a representation unto itself. This results in

a shift from the kind of perspectivism that allowed the modernist to get a better bearing on the meaning of a complex but nevertheless singular reality, to the foregrounding of questions as to how radically different realities may coexist, collide, and interpenetrate.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The complexity of reality radically alters our perception of literature. In his 1950 *Speech of Acceptance upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature*, Faulkner argued for “the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed [...]”⁵⁰. The basis for “the old universal truth”, however, “a meta-language, meta-narrative, or meta-theory through which all things can be connected or represented” is under attack by writers such as Foucault and Lyotard⁵¹, according to David Harvey. In our time, it is acknowledged that “universal and eternal truths, if they exist at all, cannot be specified”⁵². Today, the motif of barn burning can only take on a new meaning.

⁴⁸ Foster, *op. cit.*, pp. 118–19.

⁴⁹ Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁵⁰ Faulkner, “Speech of Acceptance upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature”, in *The Faulkner Reader*, p. 3.

⁵¹ Harvey, *op. cit.*, pp. 44–45.

⁵² Idem, p. 45.

This paper aimed to explore the postmodern aspects of Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* (2018) and it contends that the film's self-reflective and self-questioning approach challenges traditional notions of realism, encouraging viewers to engage with the film on a deeper level. The 2018 *Burning* gives filmmaker Lee Chang-dong's steadfastly left-wing social critical viewpoint a new, reflective dimension by transferring Faulkner's motif of barn burning into realities of South Korean society and incorporating postmodern elements of Murakami's text. A psychological thriller, the film makes use of the barn burning motif to show how mysterious the world is, as pointed in director Lee's interview:

From this suspense, the story leads to the suspense of the present world: what's wrong with the world? Is what we see with our eyes real? As we watch the film, we will think about the narrative of the film. Through the cause-and-effect relationship, we construct a reasonable story in our brain, but what we construct may only be our subjective expectation. That is, is the plausible narrative we believe and expect the actual story? Is it really true?⁵³

Let us hope a masterpiece like *Burning* (2018) won't become, in our consumer society, a mere decoration on the wall of an upscale restaurant, just like the painting inspired by the Yongsan Tragedy⁵⁴ and featured in the film. *Burning* (2018) turns the barn burning motif into a question that elicits from audience their own answers regarding reality.

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⁵³ See Lee, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ The Yongsan Tragedy transpired on January 20, 2009, in central Seoul, when law enforcement conducted a raid on a building occupied by demonstrators in a redevelopment area, resulting in the fatalities of five protesters and one police officer.

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