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Freshman Writing Intensive Seminar

15 December 2019

A Clash of Classes

In an online survey conducted by Hankyoreh Economy and Society Research Institute, 72.1 percent out of 1000 polled Korean adults concurs with the unjustness of the upper class's economic and social status. This staggering number of class dissatisfaction can have its root traced back to the early 1960s when the South Korean government introduced the cooperation between the government and the chaebols, a Korean type of family-ran conglomerates, as an effort to modernize the country's economy after the end of the Korean War. While this cooperation between the private and public sectors establishes the South Korean economy as one of the biggest in the world, it inevitably intensifies class conflict as a minority of the society possesses major political and financial power. The movie *Burning*, directed by Lee Chang-dong after an eight-year hiatus, is an attempt at attacking capitalism by analyzing the clashes of characters from two different ends of the social spectrum. In *Burning*, Jong-su finds a new spark of romance in his recently reconnected childhood friend – Hae-mi – whose romantic interest seems to lean towards a mysterious young billionaire named Ben. **By employing a variety of narrative, cinematic, and semiotic devices in its depiction of the protagonists' relationships and interactions, *Burning* argues for the Marxist notion that the dictatorship of the working class to put an end to the ruling of the capitalist class is the only solution to class conflicts.**

The three protagonists in *Burning*, Jong-su, Hae-mi, and Ben, function as synecdochical representations of the class they belong in: Jong-su and Hae-mi as

representatives of the proletariat and Ben as the bourgeoisie. This disproportionate ratio between the representation for each class with two for the working class and one for the upper class hints at the fact that the former makes up the majority of the society. In the establishing tracking shot, Jong-su and Hae-mi's professions are shown to be labor workers, with one being a market model and the other a porter to represent the Proletariat class that trades their labor for a living. Meanwhile, Ben's profession is never explicitly shown, and he has gone so far as to say that work is play to him, which are both characteristics of the bourgeoisie, who does not engage directly in any labor work but receives income from exploiting the works of laborers instead. In *Burning*, the form of exploitation is not for monetary purposes but Ben's twisted satisfaction of killing. Only concerned with reaping the benefit from the proletariat's labor, the bourgeoisie is typically perceived to have a lack of emotion or sympathy towards others, and as shown during the three's first encounter together, Ben admits to not being sure about his ability to feel sorrow because he has never cried.

Jong-su and Hae-mi share a similar background of upbringing in a poor city by the border with North Korea; however, their character development embodies the proletariat's different class consciousness in the face of exploitation from the bourgeoisie. While both are struggling financially and spiritually, they have different ways of going about their problems. Hae-mi is in debt and desperate for validation. She sees a relationship with Ben as a chance to escape her miserable life, thus representing the proletariat who accepts the hegemony that the power of the bourgeoisie is natural and seeks the inappropriate solution to escape exploitation by looking for a way to transition from the class of labor workers to capitalists. Hae-mi's submission to hegemonism for validation is evident in her subordinate position in the relationship with Ben as she dances while Ben and his upper-class peers laugh and clap at her performance, which

signals their perception of her as an entertainer, not Ben's girlfriend as Hae-mi perceives herself to be. The other proletariat, Jong-su, is an aspiring writer who struggles to produce his debut work and to make ends meet. Sharing a similar upbringing, Jong-su initially possesses a false consciousness of the superiority of the ruling class, which incites time a sense of inferiority, leading to cruel remarks on Hae-mi's naked dance during their last meeting to push her towards Ben. However, after the disappearance of Hae-mi, Jong-su realizes that Hae-mi is only a victim in her relationship with Ben, in other words, that her action is the result of false class consciousness imposed by the capitalist system. Jong-su's recognition allows for the interpretation of a proletariat's transitioning from an unconscious submission to the capitalist hegemony to acknowledgement of the unjustness in the bourgeoisie's means to wealth.

In order to extend the scope of criticism of the capitalist world to its effects on social dynamics and thus intensify the need to overthrow such system, symbolic and indexical signifiers work in harmony with irony to illustrate the objectification of women by the capitalists. In the last night meeting of the three protagonists at Jong-su's house in Paju, Ben confesses to Jong-su about being an arsonist whose satisfaction is derived from burning plastic greenhouses. Despite being an aspiring writer and a graduate in literature who should be adept at using and recognizing metaphors, especially after the question on the definition of this figure of speech has been targeted at him once by Ben before, Jong-su ironically takes Ben's words literally and thus spends two months in vain looking for Ben's next target that is supposedly close to Jong-su's house. Ben's target to burn, or to kill, here is a masterful use of symbol and index to mean Hae-mi, who, as early as in her first meet with Jong-su in Seoul, has admitted to having done plastic surgery and introduces Jong-su to Ben as her only close friend. While Jong-su's house is an index for Jong-su, the only one Haemi trusts, the plastic greenhouse imagery that is

very common in Korea according to Ben, is symbolic of the women with plastic surgery who are the stereotypical woman type in Ben's wealthy neighbor of Gang-nam in Seoul. This symbol can be interpreted in terms of Marxist criticism of media as serving the purpose of distracting the working class from their exploitation. Influenced by the beauty values constantly disseminated by the bourgeoisie through the media, women undertake plastic surgery to alter their appearance because they are led to believe that by meeting that upper-class beauty values, they will be regarded as equal to the upper-class. Also, on the same night, Jong-su regards Hae-mi's half-naked dance as a practice of prostitution, which is regarded as a form of commodifying the woman body in a capitalist system by Marxist thinkers such as Karl Marx himself and Friedrich Engels. The irony of this scene is that while Hae-mi is trying to advance to the upper-class through Ben to escape her exploitation from people of his class, she inadvertently submits herself to be a commodity to be exploited by the very same people. Concurring to the theme of leading women into believing in the existence of an opportunity to advance in social ranking, Ben lures Hae-mi into believing that he is genuinely interested in her by repeatedly telling Hae-mi that he finds her personality intriguing in their multiple dates. The irony once again manifests when Jong-su catches Ben yawning during Hae-mi's passionate performance of the exotic dance in a night out date with Ben's posh friends, since yawning is indicative of a bored mindset or of complete disinterest and apathy, which is at odds with Ben's previous words to Hae-mi. The use of irony in *Burning* goes to show that in the presence of a bourgeoisie group, the women will always be viewed as subjects of exploitation despite what they are led to believe.

***Burning* uses montage to foreshadow Ben's murder by Jong-su, alternatively, a proletarian uprising against the bourgeoisie.** Even before the bourgeoisie character is introduced, the proletariat rage against them is foreshadowed to stress its inevitability by

associating Jong-su with his father, whose opposition against the capitalistic norms is especially extreme. In order to achieve the association, in a conversation between Jong-su and a friend of his father, the friend is shown by the camera when they talk about Jong-su, while Jong-su is exclusively shown when the topic is about his father. This association of Jong-su and his father is significant because as revealed in the remaining of the movie, *Burning*'s protagonist slowly transforms to the type of egotistic madman protagonist that his father is, as characterized by the friend based on two refusals: to accept the advice to spend money from labor work on buying an apartment in Gang-nam, the neighborhood of the bourgeoisie like Ben, and to write a letter of apology and petition to the judge in a case of assault, or to put it differently, refusals to accept the disseminated capitalistic values and the capitalistic justice system. To portray Jong-su's process of transformation and increasing rage, *Burning* continues to use montage. On multiple occasions, the scene from Jong-su's house in the impoverished city of Paju is cut to show Ben's luxurious apartment in one of the most expensive neighborhoods in Korean capital to show the disparity of the two lifestyles that would inevitably causes conflicts, that is the financial and romantic jealousy of Jong-su towards Ben. In a scene at a nightclub, Hae-mi is shown dancing at the center of the frame while Jong-su is standing from aside, the film then cuts to featuring Jong-su at the center of the frame trying to leaves the dancing crowd to suggest his attempt at disassociating from the capitalist crowd as opposed to Hae-mi's effort to integrate herself into the bourgeoisie's lifestyle. After the early sign of the working class' desire to escape from the superficial lifestyles disseminated by the capitalists, the film argues that only when an uprising for power from the proletariat themselves happens will there be justice for the working class. With Ben's statement that the Korean police do not care about him being an arsonist in the night at Jong-su's place, the last time Jong-su sees Hae-mi, *Burning* shows that justice cannot be attained otherwise in a

system in place only to protect the interest of the ones holding means of production to consolidate its point about the need for a proletariat uprising, or the murder of Ben.

***Burning* makes use of a series of techniques, most prominently synecdoche, symbol, index, montage, and characters, to successfully transform what seems to be the Korean melodrama's stereotypical love triangle in a psychological thriller drama into an analysis of the attitude towards the upper-class, social issues brought on by such system and the inevitable rage and upheaval under the oppression of capitalistic societies, with modern-day Korea as a case study.** With a heavy Marxist undertone, *Burning* makes three central points about capitalism through the death of its protagonists. Firstly, tragedy ensues the clash of bourgeoisie and proletariat due to conflicting class interests as two characters of different classes die at the end of the film. Secondly, social mobility in capitalist societies is only an illusion set up by the bourgeoisie as illustrated by Hae-mi's death while trying to advance to the ruling class. Thirdly and finally, Ben's murder by Jong-su to ultimately stop his killing spree of young females who represent the vulnerable and misguided proletariat makes the point that the demolition of the bourgeoisie class by the dictatorship of the enlightened proletariat is the only way to put an end to the exploitation of the working class. The movie ends with Jong-su driving away from the crime scene, leaving skeptical audience wondering whether his action or a single proletariat uprising in a longstanding capitalistic system, would make any difference. However, as with the Marxist world revolution for the ultimate goal of stateless communism that does not require multiple simultaneous revolutions, the supporters of Marxist ideals can believe in the ideal world where Ben's filthy crimes are uncovered to eventually trigger a more significant proletariat movement.

Works Cited

Burning. Directed by Lee Chang-dong, performances by Yoo Ah-in, Steven Yeun and Jeon Jong-seo, Pinehouse Film, 2018.