



The Silent Blaze: The Subtle Anger in Lee Chang-dong's Films

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Abstract. In 2018, the dialogue "Interpreting the Anger in 'Burning'" between directors Lee Chang-dong and Jia Zhangke revealed how Lee Chang-dong has expressed and explored the emotion of anger in various ways throughout his creative career. Academic research on Lee Chang-dong as an auteur has gradually deepened, focusing mainly on the realistic expression of his works, gender narratives, and thematic presentations. However, there has not yet been a comprehensive and systematic discussion on the core issue of "anger" that runs through Lee Chang-dong's works. Starting from the perspective of authorial strategy, Lee Chang-dong's expression of anger involves the definition of anger, its origins, and the ways it is expressed. These elements together construct a unique perspective and deep contemplation in his cinematic world.

Keywords: Lee Chang-dong; Authorial Strategy; Expression of Anger; Director Studies.

1 Introduction

South Korean realist cinema, guided by a profound sense of reality, has reached an ideal height in exploring the essence of life and reflecting on historical changes. Director Lee Chang-dong skillfully integrates the philosophical content and metaphorical elements of life into his films, greatly enriching the imaginative space of his works. Through meticulously constructed plots, he reveals complex and elusive truths to the audience, not only deeply reflecting the real issues of Korean society but also expressing his earnest hope that Korean youth can break free from aimlessness, transcend sorrow, and pursue their true selves.

The theme of anger in Lee Chang-dong's films is a multi-layered and multi-faceted complex issue. Through in-depth research and exploration of these issues, we can better understand Lee Chang-dong's film art and his unique contributions to cinema. At the same time, this also provides us with a new perspective and way of thinking, helping us better understand and deal with the anger and rebellion in real life.

2 The Definition and Origin of Anger

Firstly, it is essential to clarify the definition of "anger." Generally, anger refers to a state of intense emotional agitation caused by extreme dissatisfaction. The discussion of "anger" here is closely linked to Korea's "Han culture" [1], embodying two meanings: on one hand, it represents the endurance of pain and hardship, along with the inescapable regret and sorrow accumulated from such experiences; on the other hand, it signifies a kind of sorrow that is not openly mournful but an emotion that becomes more invigorated under the suppression of sadness.

Aristotle viewed anger as a burning desire to repay the pain endured; Balzac considered it a crucial force driving significant actions in life; Seneca saw it as a desire to punish. Although scholars' interpretations of anger vary, they all emphasize its significance and complexity within human emotions and behaviors. Anger is not merely irritability or violence; it can be repressed, silent, or fervent. Regardless, it always harbors intense emotional undercurrents and points directly to a sense of incompleteness and distress [2].

Such "anger," rooted in Korea's unique historical context, has become embedded in the national psyche and complex character, permeating the creative works of Korean filmmakers. Thus, their films conceal a "grit," evident in directors like Bong Joon-ho and Park Chan-wook, and even in Lee Chang-dong's "Burning," the ending has been criticized for its overt class expressions. While the films of Park Chan-wook and Bong Joon-ho ignite our desire to explore the art of cinema and its narrative allure, and Hong Sang-soo's works invite deep contemplation on love, Lee Chang-dong's films, by contrast, resemble the musings of a thoughtful philosopher, guiding us to ponder the suffering of life and the value that lies beneath it. Their depth and authenticity are undeniably moving [3].

Scholars such as Zhu Weiqi have pointed out that South Korea's economic modernization and political democratization have been closely linked and mutually reinforcing throughout its modernization process [4]. The rapid growth of the economy and the evolution of political democratization have occurred in tandem, with authoritarianism driving economic growth while also sowing the seeds of its own demise. Since the 20th century, the high development of technology, the trend of institutionalization and centralization in society, and accompanying deep-seated social issues such as economic hardship, crises of faith, political rigidity, and widening wealth disparities have emerged. These changes have led to varying degrees of suppression and deprivation of individuality, freedom, and creative spirit. Although humans seemingly control the material world, they have become increasingly subservient to it, losing their sense of self. Invisible barriers and chasms between people have led to alienation and a pervasive hostility, with others often seen as competitors or mere tools for use [5].

In Lee Chang-dong's films, the protagonists often exhibit a state of lonely spirituality. They feel isolated due to marginalization within familial relationships, lost amidst societal currents, or alone because their inner voices are misunderstood. They no longer adhere to traditional moral values, respect for life has nearly vanished, and their spiritual connections with others are weakening. This loneliness is not just physical but also a profound emotional separation. With his keen observation and deep reflection, Lee

Chang-dong successfully captures the spiritual plight and loneliness of modern society, bringing these characters to life on the screen with vivid and profound imagery.

Thus, whether it is from the historical and cultural roots of Korean "anger" and "Han," or the universal phenomenon of "silence" and "anger" brought about by the wheels of history, both are cultural interpretations and the spiritual soil of the core concepts in "Burning".

3 The Presentation of Anger

This paper divides the works of director Lee Chang-dong into two periods centered around the theme of anger. The first period focuses on his reflection of objective reality, primarily represented by the "Green Trilogy"; the second period turns inward, with key works including "Secret Sunshine," "Poetry," and "Burning," showcasing a distinct modernist style. This evolution confirms Lee Chang-dong's authorial style while still encompassing a portrayal of inner truth.

3.1 Society and History's Oppression

During one phase of Lee Chang-dong's creative career, his expression of anger intensely conveyed the pressures and pains of Korea during its historical transition. For instance, the 1999 film "Peppermint Candy" vividly presents significant historical events such as regime changes and democratic struggles. The protagonist Yong-ho's pain and anger are directly triggered by a stray bullet from the democratic struggle, with a leg injury serving as a physical reminder of his pain, and the excruciating mental trauma akin to flesh being carved by a knife. "Peppermint Candy" is crushed under the wheels of history; people are coerced in the midst of societal transformation, ultimately leading to self-destruction and degradation. Thus, the film begins with the protagonist's suicide, his face frozen in anger—a powerful expression that stands out sharply compared to Lee Chang-dong's later works like "Poetry" and "Burning."

"Green Fish" and "Oasis," which precede and follow "Peppermint Candy," respectively, continue to express anger stemming from the individual's struggle with society during Korea's modernization process. Lee Chang-dong once said, "The new city, as this term implies, is the realization of the dreams and expectations of the Korean people over thirty years. However, the process and its conception, which destroy the original rural landscape in an instant and create a new economic miracle in a very short time, is a form of violence. "I aim to depict the diverse lifestyles that once thrived in the original living spaces and the current realities that no one wishes to mention" [6]. At that time, Lee Chang-dong's exploration of "anger" was very apparent, reflecting the confusion and disarray of Koreans facing "modernization" issues.

3.2 The Inquiry into the Essence of Life

In the second period, with the enhancement of his political identity and social awareness, Lee Chang-dong continued to speak out for a "deaf-mute era," but his focus and

analysis extended beyond just Korean reality. On one hand, the postmodern process in Korean society made him acutely aware of the significant changes of the era, with societal landscapes enveloped by ideological rifts, the decline of tradition, and the devouring nature of capital. On the other hand, criticism of his gender narratives, especially the male narratives in the "Oasis Trilogy," prompted him to reflect and seek new subjects and methods of expression. This led to a transformation in his creative work, moving from a classical realist style to a modernist creation. He shifted from reflecting the objective reality of real life to questioning the authenticity of objective reality, and then to exploring the inner truth of individuals. Thus, even in terms of perception, audiences can feel the change in intensity both internally and externally in his films during this period. The source of anger in his works then becomes a questioning and skepticism of the world. "Secret Sunshine" explicitly raises doubts and rebellion against religious faith; "Poetry" quietly displays the inner pain of modern individuals. Over the eight years from "Poetry" to "Burning," the scripts Lee Chang-dong wrote were mostly related to anger.

Analyzing the anger in "Burning" from a class perspective, it is evident that the origin of anger lies in class solidification. This is also why the critical community often compares "Burning" (2018) with "Parasite" (2019), as both films presented at the Cannes Film Festival address class solidification. Lee Chang-dong also stated, "On one hand, there is the reality of hardship, but on the other hand, the overall improvement of the world and living environment makes them (Korean youth) feel hopeless about social life, which is a significant problem in Korean society" [7]. Adapted from Haruki Murakami's "Barn Burning" and William Faulkner's "Barn Burning," the film "Burning" exhibits a strong class narrative tendency.

4 The Significance of Anger

The expression of anger is diverse; it can manifest as hysteria or as a form of violent aesthetics, commonly seen in numerous revenge films. However, whether expressed silently or passionately, anger itself is not the goal but a means and tool. It can be used to expose social injustices, awaken people's conscience and sense of justice, and drive social progress and change. In the works of director Lee Chang-dong, this is the significance of anger.

4.1 Artistic Self-Expression

From "Green Fish" to "Burning," a constant form of expression runs through Lee Chang-dong's six works: dance. Dance is a form of expression favored by many auteurs, including director Jia Zhangke in "Still Life" and "Ash Is Purest White," and director Bong Joon-ho in "Mother." The significance of dance lies in using the physical presence to obscure perception, where the amplification of bodily movements enhances the inner experience. The dance in "Oasis" is particularly romantic, with Jong-du embracing Gong-ju and dancing on a cramped road amidst traffic. In this scenario, with cars pressing in like mechanical monsters, the two dancers are closely surrounded.

Compared to the use of dance elements, director Lee Chang-dong's 2010 work "Poetry" takes poetic self-expression even further. In the film, Mija takes out her notebook five times to record poetry. The first time is at a family meeting when she learns of her grandson's crime. The knowledge of the girl's death makes her extremely uncomfortable. In a moment of shame and anger, amidst the cold stares of men, she picks a cockscomb flower and writes "a flower as red as blood," with each word dripping with tears. The last creation comes after Mija reports the crime, where, having chosen justice over familial ties, she writes a poem that reflects her contemplation on human affairs. In an instant, the director overlaps Mija with the victim, achieving a transformation of opposites.

Thus, poetry is also an artistic means through which Lee Chang-dong presents anger. However, its content is not limited to anger alone; the feelings and layers it conveys are richer and more diverse than anger. "My deeply respected writer is Lu Xun, who keenly observed human weaknesses while also harboring a profound love for humanity. "I aspire to be like him, not only understanding the complexity of humans but also maintaining a passionate affection for them" [8].

4.2 Anger, Revenge, and Alienation

The poetic and artistic expression does not diminish the film's expression of revenge but rather intensifies it, adding to the audience's sense of melancholy. At the same time, the director also provides clear revenge actions for the characters.

In "Peppermint Candy," Yong-ho angrily wishes to "drag someone to death" with him, confronting a friend who deceived him and his divorced wife, but ultimately can only fire a blank shot at the era that betrayed him. In "Secret Sunshine," Shin-ae's spiritual collapse and loss of faith are directly triggered by the self-forgiveness of a murderer and religious salvation after she engages in a series of religious self-deceptions. In "Burning," Jong-su's final act of stabbing Ben, who has anger management issues, vents all the anger in the snowy landscape, similar in significance to the ending of "Parasite." It could also be a fantasy, a self-construction and creation by Jong-su, continuing the vague imagery from earlier in the film, with a stronger literary quality.

Thus, accompanying the acts of revenge is inevitably the alienation of individuals. Director Lee Chang-dong consistently focuses on marginalized groups, giving voice to those who have lost their ability to express and perceive in the torrent of the times. Every character in his films becomes a vessel for expressing the alienated state and solitude of modern people. "Since the 1980s, cinema as an art form has not only alleviated the pain brought by political oppression and the unspeakable national division but also redefined the essence of the national community experience under the shadow of dictatorship" [9].

Therefore, through works like "Burning," director Lee Chang-dong calls on people to re-examine their values and ways of acting, seeking a harmonious coexistence with society and others. Through artistic expression, he deepens the understanding of the negative impacts of anger and class solidification, awakening the pursuit and appreciation of fairness, justice, and community. This pursuit and appreciation not only help

alleviate social conflicts and promote social progress but are also the cornerstone and soul of human civilization.

5 Conclusion

Through in-depth research, this paper systematically discusses the expression of the theme of "anger" in the films of director Lee Chang-dong. From the basic definition of anger to its multidimensional presentation in the films, a detailed discussion is provided. Lee Chang-dong's works, through vivid character portrayals and deep emotional depictions, fully showcase the theme of anger. From "Poetry" to "Burning," spanning eight years, Lee Chang-dong has once again entered the public eye; during these years, his contemplation and reflections have revolved around the topic of "anger." This theme is identified as a common trait transcending race and nationality among modern individuals and has been found as an effective way to communicate with the audience. Thus far, his modernist style has matured further, and he continues to explore and unveil the mysteries of life through the expression of "anger." Lee Chang-dong, with compassion, confronts the hardships of life, seeking the tumult hidden within the trivialities of daily existence. His silent mode of expression directly points to everything concealed and forgotten at the depths of life. One by one, lives are ignited; one by one, lives silently burn in the dark corridors of existence.

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