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Aleph, UCLA Undergraduate Research Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0pk3001j>

Journal

Aleph, UCLA Undergraduate Research Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 17(1)

ISSN

2639-6440

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Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.5070/L6171049219

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Burning Greenhouses with Miles Davis: Class, Empathy, and Toxic Masculinity

Matthew Gilbert

Abstract: This essay examines a scene from Lee Chang-dong's film *Burning* (2018) as part of a larger discussion around class conflict. A Korean filmic adaptation of a short story originally by Japanese author Haruki Murakami, *Burning* tells the story of Jeong-su, a poor farmer who is caught in a love triangle with Hae-mi, an old classmate, and her new boyfriend, Ben, a mysterious, wealthy socialite. In a pivotal scene, Lee turns the camera on Hae-mi as she dances to a song by Miles Davis, creating a filmic parallel to Murakami's liminal spaces and forcing the audience to question reality. Through a consideration of textual and paratextual material, I argue that the director Lee Chang-dong uses music and dance to critique toxic masculinity through subtle sound editing techniques and narrative and metaphorical signifiers of class and power. Ultimately, Lee breaks from the source material to simultaneously express and nullify Hae-mi's agency and place her at the heart of the narrative.

Keywords: *Lee Chang-dong, Burning, toxic masculinity, jazz, class*

Introduction

The characters in Japanese author Haruki Murakami's fiction are often asked to inhabit a liminal space that is somehow completely mundane and totally surreal all at once. In "Barn Burning," Murakami's short story from 1983, the antagonist has a discussion with the narrator in which he casually admits that as a hobby, he often burns down barns.¹ While the narrator is perplexed, his response when asked if he finds this fact strange is somewhat nonchalant: "You burn barns and I don't. Obviously there's a difference between the two. Rather than say which is strange and which isn't, what I'd like to pin down is *how* they're different" (Murakami 1992, 89-90). There's a level of casualness to their discussion, as if they are talking about stocks or the weather, rather than committing arson. This quasi-surreal atmosphere is typical of Murakami and part of what has made it so difficult for his books to be adapted into film. *Burning*, Lee Chang-dong's Korean cinematic adaptation of "Barn Burning," succeeds on many levels by leaning heavily into what makes Murakami's work so compelling, but just as often so troubling.

In another of Murakami's most famous works, *Kafka On The Shore*, one character tells another, "The world is a metaphor," but the comparison is unclear: is it our world or the world that Murakami has created? The comically surreal environments that his characters find themselves in are not to be taken literally, except for when they are; it is, in other words, up for interpretation not only what the metaphor may be about, but also when we should search for them at all. The relationship between Lee and Murakami, two great auteurs in dialogue with each other through this movie, lends a great deal of context to the metaphorical elements of *Burning*. Much like the Japanese language itself, we can at least say that Murakami's work is reliant on context, though he rarely provides any himself. As Lee says, "Murakami's barn is a metaphor rather than a tangible object whereas Faulkner's barn represents reality itself—the very object at which rage is directed" (Lee 2018). Both stories are preoccupied in their art with exploring societal isolation and how alienation can turn into rage. I will be returning to the intertextual relationship between the film and the short story several times throughout this analysis,

as it is a central aspect of how Lee structures and reveals his narrative.

Burning is a story about three characters, whose paths are deeply intertwined, but who fail to ever truly connect with each other. Jeong-su is a farmer who has inherited his father's farm on the border of the DMZ in South Korea after his father is arrested for beating a police officer. He bumps into a girl at the market one day who claims to be his childhood friend, Hae-mi. He does not recognize her, to which she explains that she had plastic surgery. They go to dinner and eventually have sex, but soon after she leaves for Africa on a trip and asks him to feed her cat while she is gone. Jeong-su dutifully tends to her apartment every day, but despite her apartment being the size of a closet, he never actually sees her cat. When she returns, she is accompanied by a handsome man named Ben, who is around the same age as them, but is somehow wildly successful: he drives a Porsche, lives in a beautiful apartment, listens to sophisticated jazz music, and hangs around his beautiful friends. Jeong-su is jealous and somewhat suspicious of Hae-mi's new love interest but plays friendly in order to spend more time with Hae-mi. Jeong-su tries to learn more about Ben, but he is rather obtuse when answering Jeong-su's questions. When asked what he does for a living, Ben simply tells him, "I play." Similar to the source material, Ben eventually tells Jeong-su that he sometimes burns greenhouses to the ground.² Shortly afterwards, Hae-mi mysteriously disappears and Jeong-su begins to stalk Ben in an attempt to prove his suspicions about him correct, namely that Ben is responsible for Hae-mi's disappearance. The movie ends without answering many of the questions posed throughout the narrative, relying, as Murakami does, on context.

During a dinner party with Ben's friends, Hae-mi gives a monologue about the "Bushmen" in Africa, as well as the difference between "Great Hunger" and "Little Hunger":

At first, they stretch their arms toward the ground...This is the Little Hunger dance. The dance of the people who are hungry. And as the dance continues, their arms slowly rise and reach

toward the sky. This is the Great Hunger dance. The dance which seeks the meaning of life. They dance from early evening until deep into the night. As they dance, Little Hunger gradually turns into Great Hunger. I can't explain it in words. You need to see it for yourselves (Lee 2018).

Ben's friends are amused and ask her to demonstrate; while she dances, they humor her for a bit before growing bored. Jeong-su turns to see even Ben yawning before giving him a condescending look that somehow seems like an eye-roll and a wink at the same time, as if to say, *Women, am I right?* It is moments like this that clue us in to the power dynamics at play underneath our characters. In interviews, Lee has expressed that this is ultimately a movie about rage.³ There is a quiet anger stirring beneath the veneer of both male characters, though it becomes clear halfway through the film whose anger we are meant to empathize with. There are many scenes throughout the movie that illustrate not only how class plays a major role in how these characters act, but also how these class signifiers are viewed from the perspective of Jeong-su as a lower-class farmer, especially when Hae-mi goes missing. Ben is almost playfully indifferent to Hae-mi's dancing; Jeong-su thinks Hae-mi deserves someone more empathetic. As the audience, we experience the film through Jeong-su's lens, his slack-jawed stares mirroring our own bewilderment about the mysteries playing out before us, and it is his context that colors how we interpret the final half of the movie. This is South Korea divided into those who have, like Ben and his friends, and those who do not have, like Jeong-su and Hae-mi. In this regard, Lee's interpretation is a departure from Murakami's more ambiguous metaphorical strategy and it directly affects how we perceive the narrative.

The pivotal scene that divides the movie in half and will occupy the majority of my analysis occurs when Ben and Hae-mi visit Jeong-su's farm one day, bringing food and wine. As the three characters smoke a joint and watch the sunset, Ben gets up and walks to his car.⁴ He turns on a song by Miles Davis, which prompts Hae-mi to get up, as if in a trance, take her shirt off, and

dance. Lee lets his camera float behind her as her silhouette sways against the sun setting. Her dance ends with the reprisal of the Great Hunger, as she cries, and the camera slowly floats upward, and the sky turns violet. Afterwards comes Ben's admission of his obsession with burning greenhouses. The dancing sequence encompasses many of the major themes addressed throughout the movie: desire, freedom, meaning, isolation, power. Without context, the seemingly arbitrary choices that the director makes could be interpreted as nods to the source material for his story, as in both the movie and the short story Miles Davis is the chosen score for this moment. However, I argue that the director Lee Chang-Dong uses Hae-mi's interpretive dance, set to Davis' song "G n rique," to critique the toxic masculinity displayed by Ben and Jeong-su. By considering textual and paratextual material, I demonstrate how Lee plays with non/diegetic sound, as well as narrative and metaphorical signifiers of class and power, to simultaneously express and nullify Hae-mi's agency and ultimately place her at the heart of the narrative. Since I will be analyzing the English translation of this movie, I find it important to focus specifically on the music which is accessible across language barriers. In conversation with Murakami, Lee, and the musical context he establishes, a close reading of this scene can provide a better understanding of how exactly a Miles Davis song could invite the audience to believe that perhaps burning greenhouses is not as fantastical as they may initially believe—but that it may be far more sinister.

Dialectical Diegetics

There are several scenes throughout *Burning* that force the audience to question what is true, what is metaphorical, and what is simply imaginary. Towards the beginning of the film, Hae-mi pantomimes peeling a tangerine in front of Jeong-su and explains, "What you do isn't make yourself believe that there are tangerines there. You forget that the tangerines are not there" (Lee 2018, 7:54). Her pantomiming reminds us of the dialectical relationship between something and nothing, that something exists only because the absence of that something also exists (Chen 2019, 581-584). The tangerines, then, are perhaps a metaphor for how

we can choose to believe something is or simply choose not to believe it is not, thereby setting up the central mystery of the film: do we believe that Ben is a murderer or do we simply forget to believe that there is no evidence that he is not? In a similar manner, Ben's discussion with Jeong-su about the morality of burning greenhouses presents us with the same dialectic. He says to Jeong-su, "There is no right or wrong there, just the morals of nature" (Lee 2018, 1:17:32). His contradictory statement illuminates the meaning of the greenhouses: that it is not about whether or not they are real; they are simply a metaphor, a conceptual vessel to be filled with its own meaning. Both of these examples, along with Hae-mi's maybe-real-maybe-not cat, share an ambiguity that the audience is meant to resolve on its own. However, as we will see later, Lee does not let his camera remain objective. By forcing the audience to question what is real and what is metaphorical in these scenes, Lee sets up Hae-mi's dance and the ensuing conversation as an uneven battleground for the truth.

One of the many tricks of the dancing sequence is the reversal of a common comedic trope that involves how a song is interpreted as being heard. Audiences have been conditioned to accept non-diegetic sound, music or sound effects that have no discernible source within the film, as an inherent part of the film experience; we don't question when orchestral strings emerge to highlight the drama of a scene. Directors employ the diegetic switch, often for comedic effect, by revealing to the audience that the music they had previously assumed to be "outside" of the movie, just like the title card and the end credits, actually has a source after all. This trope is often employed to pull us out of the cinematic world we have been conditioned to inhabit while watching a film, thereby reminding us that we are in fact sitting in a room staring at a moving picture (Biancorosso 2009, 11). We have been tricked and now that the seams are showing, we can laugh at how silly the whole process is in the first place. However, in this scene, Lee reverses the switch. We hear Ben turn on the source of the music, which is in this case a car, and we hear the music as the characters do. But slowly, as Hae-mi begins to dance, the music shifts and suddenly, we no longer hear the

ambient noise of the Korean countryside, nor her footsteps in the gravel. The music fills the entire aural field and we no longer hear the music as the characters do—we *experience* it as they do.⁵ In this case, it actually brings us further into the world of the film, and further into the liminal spaces that Murakami’s writing can so easily create. We are invited to enter into the exposed seams, rather than experience them from an ironic distance. Lee asks that we double-down on our sincere investment in his cinematic world by breaking apart the dichotomy and opening up a pathway through the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic.

This sequence captures what is so elusive about Murakami’s writing: these dream-like sequences that feel simultaneously mundane *and* surreal. Often, characters in these sequences will question what is happening, but without any sense of disbelief or fear, as in another scene from *Kafka On The Shore*, when a cat speaks to the protagonist and they enjoy a rather amicable conversation about how such a thing is even possible.⁶ These moments force us to question our own experience as well as that of the characters’ experience; it is as if the characters become momentarily aware of their fate as characters-in-a-story, and Lee plays with this as well. At the end of her dance, Hae-mi reprises the Great Hunger dance and breaks down in tears, as if she is aware of her fated disappearance and mourning the fact that she did not have the chance to satisfy her Great Hunger. In addition, the editing choices add to the mystical quality: where is the sound really coming from? As an audience, we can infer that it is coming from the car speakers, as Ben walks to the car, the door opens, the music is only heard in one ear coming from the direction Ben walked off to. However, once the dance starts, the music seems to travel from its starting place to a new position, where it occupies this kind of in-between state: it is both within the movie and “above” the movie, where we hear it as simultaneously a part and apart of its original context, destabilizing the dialectic between diegetic and non-diegetic and symbolizing Lee’s interpretation of Murakami’s liminal spaces. Like Murakami’s fourth-wall breaking dream sequences, we are left to wonder who is hearing what and how we are to interpret their experience in relation to our own as an audience.

The quasi-surrealist atmosphere that Lee successfully reproduces in this scene sets up the conversation that follows between Ben and Jeong-su about burning greenhouses. By giving us an entry point into the world of the film through the seams, and by convincing us that it is both realistic and unrealistic at the same time, Lee creates a liminal space where Ben can tell Jeong-su that he burns down greenhouses as a hobby, and we as an audience can find both the truth and the metaphor in his declaration (Gorbman 1987, 79). The rest of the film finds Jeong-su searching desperately for the literal truth of what Ben has told him, in an attempt to prove the metaphor we have been asked to believe in. By “creat[ing] a setting in which nothing is strange,” we are reminded of our role as audience members, while also invited to fully inhabit this cinematic world that Lee presents us with (Maher 2018). Just as Murakami allows us to find the Great Hunger in the mundanity of real life by exploring the world as a metaphor, Lee asks us to inhabit and critique the perspective we view his world through.

Signifiers of Class in South Korea

Lee plays on our expectations and ideas of class in a number of ways, but most significantly through the use of the song “Générique” from the French New Wave film *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*. *Ascenseur* was made in 1958 and is considered one of the first films of the *Nouvelle Vague*. As one of the inheritors of the Korean New Wave, Lee is perhaps making an ode to the kinds of “New Wave” film movements that define a country’s cinematic development and allow space for artists like Lee to emerge. This interstitial historical narrative allows us to interpret the seemingly random choice of Miles Davis as connected to larger socio-historical themes; that is, if someone had read Murakami’s “Barn Burning” they would know why a Miles Davis song was chosen for this scene and what would happen next in the plot, but if they had only seen *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* they could perhaps even still predict what would become of Hae-mi. *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* translates to “Elevator to the Gallows,” and in fact, this is the title most often used in place of “Générique.” The song title functions as a simple bit of narrative foreshadowing for this

is the final sequence of the movie in which Hae-mi is still present. However, as Murakami tells us, his world is one of metaphors and Lee's choice of song is no exception. While it does serve a literal narrative function, alerting the audience to what is about to happen to the dancer, it also serves a metaphorical function, in this case to signify the class distinctions that underlie our characters and their motivations. Before we can get into how the music reinforces these class distinctions, let us first examine how the film positions us to believe certain things about our characters and their positions within Korean society.

The primary way that class signifiers are set up may be lost on non-Korean audiences watching with English subtitles. In Korean, there are various levels of formality and politeness in speech; the most common difference in speaking is between *jondaemal*, formal speech, and *banmal*, comfortable speech (literally, half-language). There are many rules governing how these levels of speech can be used, but I will quickly focus on two ways the film uses these distinctions to illustrate the relationships between characters. First, Ben is older than both Jeong-su and Hae-mi, so traditionally, he would not be expected to speak in *jondaemal* with either of them, especially not Hae-mi, who he is intimate with. However, throughout the film, Ben speaks in *jondaemal* with both characters, which could be interpreted as a sign of coldness or a way to distance himself. Even during a conversation in which Jeong-su reveals to Ben some of his most intimate memories, Ben responds in *jondaemal*. Additionally, Hae-mi would traditionally be expected to speak in *jondaemal* with Ben, as he is the older male in their relationship, but she only speaks in *banmal*, illustrating how comfortable she feels with him. The impression that Ben is cold and impersonal can also be attributed to his outsider-status; he has an English name, alludes to travelling often, and listens to Western jazz music. Even when meeting Jeong-su for the first time, he extends his arm for a handshake, rather than a bow, as Jeong-su does. All of these nuances lay the foundation for the kinds of relationships these characters have with one another and can deepen our understanding of their interactions in the context of Korean social class.

There are other examples of how these characters navigate the social relationships between them, including one scene where Jeong-su and Hae-mi are smoking on Ben's deck and he tells her that he thinks Ben is like, "the Great Gatsby," a comparison between the famous Fitzgerald story and Jeong-su's perception that there are many such Gatsbys in Korea, those "mysterious people who are young and rich but you don't know what they really do" (Lee 2018, 56:12). He questions how Ben, being only so much older, can afford to live in a spacious condo in the wealthy Gangnam neighborhood in Seoul, drive a Porsche, and travel all over the world; he goes so far as to wonder aloud why he is dating someone like Hae-mi. When the three attend a dinner and meet with Ben's friends, they are all upper-class socialites, funny and interesting, somewhat aloof, like Daisy and Jordan lounging about in Gatsby's house. It is unclear what any of them do to support their lifestyle, but then again, it is somewhat unclear what Hae-mi and Jeong-su do as well. We know Jeong-su is a writer, but we only see him at a keyboard for a few brief scenes and there are a few allusions to Hae-mi being a dancer because she fell into great debt. At the dinner party, Hae-mi performs her dance of the "Great Hunger," to Ben's friends' stifled ridicule. In her retelling of her experiences in Africa, Hae-mi lets on how meaningful this dance was for her and how much the dance of those who are hungry for the meaning of life resonated with her. As she performs the dance, Jeong-su looks at Ben's friends and sees their condescension, and then at Ben, who yawns, as if her little dance is not amusing to him anymore, as if he is uninterested in the search for the Great Hunger, as if he already has the meaning of life figured out. Jeong-su on the other hand, is still preoccupied with the Little Hunger, as he struggles to make a living and take care of his family's farm.

Finally, I personally find three words, *mysterious*, *sophisticated*, and *sultry*, helpful in describing the music playing during Hae-mi's dancing sequence that not only color our interpretation of the rest of the film, but also aid our interpretation as to how the music enacts class struggle. It is first and foremost *mysterious*, alluding to the kinds of mysteries at the heart of the narrative and adjusting how we interpret the scene. This aspect of

the music represents Ben, who is careful never to reveal too much about himself. During the initial scene when Jeong-su tells Hae-mi about the *Gatsby*'s of Korea, American jazz music emanating from Ben's apartment is what is always heard in Ben's apartment. In *Burning*, jazz is always what plays to signify *sophistication*: it plays in Ben's beautiful condo, it plays from the speakers of his expensive car, and it carries connotations about its intended audience. Sophisticated people do not actively think themselves to be sophisticated; note that it is Jeong-su who comments on jazz as a signifier of upper-class sophistication. Finally, it is *sultry*: "Générique" has a rather charged nature, undertones of some elusive suggestion, which also illuminates connections to Hae-mi's past. There are allusions throughout the movie that point to Hae-mi's financial situation as one that is dire; her sister tells Jeong-su that Hae-mi "...can't come home until she pays off her credit card debt," just as one of her coworkers tells him that "commercial hostesses are just a step up from prostitution, an eroded step at that" (Sussman 2018). Her sexually charged performance implies her place in society as something to be looked at, just as the music suggests that we partake in doing so—Jeong-su's insult as she leaves confirms this implication. These three descriptions (*mysterious*, *sophisticated*, and *sultry*) illuminate not only how the music signifies larger themes taking place throughout the film, but also how these signifiers produce assumptions about social class in Korea that carry broader significance for how we interpret the film overall. The music reifies the atmosphere of the film, which up to this point has contained moments of mystery, scenes with the Korean upper class, and sexual charge; the music is then reified back throughout the remainder of the film, which only amplifies the mood established through the music in this scene. Relating music to both description and mood is one of the primary ways Lee invites his audience to interpret certain characters and their actions through the lens of class.

Burning Men

As Hae-mi dances topless, silhouetted against the sunset, I argue that the musical elements enact a political metaphor employed throughout the entire film. Taking a tactic from Murakami, Lee

uses Hae-mi as a metaphor to represent all that Jeong-su is jealous of Ben for having. The real discussion may be that Jeong-su views Ben as being able to do whatever he wants because of his wealth and status without any repercussions, including going so far as to become convinced that Ben is a murderer who will not be prosecuted under the law, unlike Jeong-su's father; and just like his father, Jeong-su's rage begins to consume him. However, this is not a story about these two men: it's a story about masculinity itself, a critique of a world that does not care about Hae-mi, as a metaphor or as a person. After all, Jeong-su is not searching for Hae-mi throughout the second half of the film, for if he really believed Ben to be a murderer, why not go to the police? The answer is threefold: first, he has a complicated relationship with the authorities due to his father; second, he believes what Ben says to him, that the police do not care about missing women; and third, he is not searching for her—he is searching for what he desires, what was taken from him, and why (Lee 2018, 1:15:51).

We meet Hae-mi in the first two minutes of *Burning*, dancing in front of a storefront. She is the initiator of contact between herself and Jeong-su; as our passive protagonist, he remains aloof until the final scene where his rage and jealousy boil over. I mentioned previously how Lee constructs Murakami's liminal spaces, but there are a few other elements of Murakami's fiction that he also weaves into this film—most notably, Murakami's controversial treatment of female characters in his writing (Iyer 2017). In many of his books, women are simply narrative objects that propel the male protagonist forward in the story and many female characters, when they are truly central to the plot, go missing, thereby prompting the male protagonist into action.⁷ In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Murakami explains that women serve as “harbingers of the coming world. That's why they always come to my protagonist; he doesn't go to them” (Wray 2018). Another trope that Lee borrows is the idea of sex as a “skeleton key” that unlocks a new world, as in this case, the narrative “begins” when Jeong-su and Hae-mi hook up (Kawakami 2019). Another is the individualism of the narrator that Murakami is so famous for, the “superflat” objective direction of the first half of the movie obscures the fact that we

are experiencing the plot rather solipsistically through Jeong-su's perspective (Harrison 2017). Lee plays into these tropes, but subverts them in a few ways, the first being that Hae-mi is the character we know the most about and therefore, the character whom we can most relate to as an audience. Lee has expressed in interviews that the core of the film revolves around who Hae-mi is, whether she is lying, why she disappears—that this is ultimately a story about her (Thrift 2019). This act of recognition is one of the ways Lee grapples with the legacy of Murakami's fiction without women: by letting them dance freely (Kawakami). This is also a result of Jeon Jong-seo's incredible performance as Hae-mi, a role she landed just three days after joining a talent agency, where she lights up every scene she is in with her warmth and charm; she is the first character we can recognize as a real person. It should be noted that while the dance scene was scripted, it was not choreographed, making it that much more vital and authentic (Cronk 2018). It would be a much less compelling story if we did not care for Hae-mi, for this is a story about a young girl trapped between two men from opposite worlds, both convinced that they are owed something.

The dance sequence is one of the more manifest examples of how Lee represents the struggle for power between Ben and Jeong-su, and this scene particularly symbolizes Ben's success in "winning" Hae-mi from Jeong-su. The most obvious way this is portrayed is in the fact that when Ben turns the music on, Hae-mi reacts as if she is in a trance. When he turns his sophisticated jazz music on, she gets up, takes her shirt off, and dances for the men. In one interpretation, it feels like a test, an exercise to see how much power Ben holds over her. It is significant that her earlier dance at the request of Ben's friends is not set to diegetic music, except the clapping provided by the dinner party, as at that point, she had not been completely swayed to Ben's control. However, it could also be argued that her dancing is just the opposite: an act of her own agency and a representation of her free-spiritedness and joy on what she describes might be her "best day ever." Perhaps this freedom is what both Ben and Jeong-su are initially drawn to about her (Lee 2018, 1:05:50). As she reprises the dance of *Great Hunger* at the end, the visual and aural elements coalesce to

“capture a woman seeking the meaning of life between these two men” (Cronk). Her dance becomes a microcosmic representation of all the contradictions of the film and ultimately reveals Ben’s victory over Jeong-su in the quest for Hae-mi’s love: we are hearing the music from Ben’s apartment playing at Jeong-su’s farm. Hae-mi is dancing in front of both men, but she is only performing for one of them. In *Burning*, Hae-mi only has the agency to react to the actions of her rich, older boyfriend, as he turns “Générique” on for her to dance to, a direct parallel with many female characters in the works of Murakami.

Throughout Hae-mi’s dance, there are multiple examples of the male gaze, as theorized by Laura Mulvey, being expected and exploited (Mulvey 1989, 14-26). I use “male gaze” here in all three of its meanings: within the film itself, the two men gaze at Hae-mi, who becomes the object of their gaze; second, we, the audience, gaze at her as she dances; and third, there is the gaze of the director, Lee, observing her through his camera (Walters 1995, 57). However, as Manohla Dargis argues in her review of the film, while “[s]he is dancing for the men...mostly she’s dancing in what feels like ecstatic communion between her and the world” (Dargis 2018). This “ecstatic communion” is representative of Hae-mi’s free-spirited attitude toward life, which is also reflected in the improvisatory nature of the jazz music that accompanies her. Ultimately, it is the interplay between her elated dance and the various perspectives through which it is viewed that illuminates how we are supposed to interpret the rest of the film. This dance exploits the male gaze by displaying Hae-mi as Jeong-su’s idealized object of desire: a beautiful, naked woman, dancing in front of him. We know that Ben does not idealize Hae-mi in this way. The music, then, becomes the vehicle by which we are most enticed to empathize with Jeong-su, as it enhances both his and our experience of her performance. Of course, we cannot fully empathize with him, not after we see how quickly his desire transforms into rage, as he rebukes Hae-mi for dancing topless before she drives away with Ben. Jeong-su is an anti-hero, not in the sense that we are rooting for him in spite of his flaws, but because we are forced to empathize with him despite his obvious biases. It’s clear from this moment on that this is Jeong-su’s story,

which leads us to an even bigger question: how are we to interpret Ben's behavior? Are the clues that Jeong-su uncovers suspicious, effectively proving that Ben is a murderer? Or are we seeing a representation of Ben through the perspective of an insecure, vulnerable man, jealous of all Ben has that he does not? This is toxic masculinity, as Jeong-su feels he has to compete for Hae-mi's love, unable to express his feelings of inadequacy in the face of Ben's charisma and admit his jealousy. Lee forces us to watch this film through Jeong-su's lens; he is the underdog, losing once again, but convincing himself that the idealized version of Ben in his mind is actually not as perfect as he fears.

Finally, the scenes after the dance include some of the most striking moments of rage Lee meant to elucidate in this film, outside of the final climactic sequence. Ben tells Jeong-su, in describing the greenhouses he burns down that, "the Korean police don't care about those sorts of things," for they are "useless, filthy, unpleasant-looking" anyhow (Lee 2018, 1:16:06). This language is bold, but it takes on a sinister implication if we are to believe, as Jeong-su does and as we have been led to, that the greenhouses are metaphorical. In addition, consider the fact that Ben's comment follows Jeong-su's admission that as a child, his father forced him to light a pile of his mother's belongings on fire. On the other hand, Jeong-su is revealed to hold the same capacity for hurt: as Irene Hsu and Soo Ji Lee point out, "[d]uring childhood, he calls [Hae-mi] ugly, driving her to shell out for plastic surgery years later. Then, right before her disappearance, Jeong-su calls her a whore for dancing topless" (Lee and Hsu, 2018). This last moment is particularly revealing. Again, the masculinity being performed here is toxic in that, as Phoebe Chen argues, "The same impulse underlies both Ben and Jong su's performances of masculinity as an *act of taking*; it is just that one of them has the guts to take a little more" (Chen 2019). In other words, as the male gaze contains "power of action and of possession," it is part of a larger system of male authority that desires female submission: Hae-mi dances *for* Ben, and Jeong-su looks on with jealousy that she will not dance for him (Kaplan 1983, 31). These moments of desire reveal a rage boiling underneath the surface of the film. Where they differ is in what

their desire leads them to do: Ben's desire manifests as apathy, demonstrated by his cold, removed demeanor, whereas Jeong-su's desire manifests as a violent assault, ultimately leading him down the same path as his father. Ultimately, both men misunderstand themselves to be at the center of the narrative, the rightful heirs to something taken and something disposable, for Jeong-su and Ben respectively. Here is how Lee uses music to reveal where both characters are wrong: at the pivotal moment in the film, the climax of the first act, they are missing from the screen, displaced by the character whose story Lee is truly interested in telling, if not for the desires of men.

Conclusion

At the end of their discussion at Jeong-su's farm, as he explains why he burns down greenhouses, Ben points at his heart and says, "I feel a bass sound right here. A bass that rings to my very bone" (Lee 2018, 1:16:32). Every scene in *Burning* has a double meaning, a twin interpretation. The greenhouses are metaphorical, but a metaphor for what? In Jeong-su's eyes, they were a metaphor for not only Hae-mi, but all the things Ben wanted in this world and could have that Jeong-su could not. Lee places Miles Davis' "G n rique" in this scene to illuminate the contextual and metaphorical details he has set up throughout the film, this scene acting as the nexus through which all other points must pass through to make sense. Constructing a liminal space through sound editing techniques allows for the audience to enter the world of the film and experience the central contradictions of the film playing out in real-time, as three characters battle for agency, power, and satisfaction. Playing with the connotations of jazz music, Lee refracts the narrative through a suspended moment where Hae-mi dances to confront the male gaze, symbolizing how Ben has "won" Hae-mi over Jeong-su. As the music fades out, Hae-mi begins to cry and Lee's camera pans to the darkened sky, signaling that this is a story he would rather he did not have to tell. He would rather her dance continue forever, unencumbered.

Endnotes

1. Murakami's title is taken from a story by William Faulkner, though the two share little else in common. Lee's work, however, draws heavily on Faulkner's original story, though that is beyond the scope of this paper.
2. In an interview with director Lee Chang-dong, Oh Jung-mi explains, "A greenhouse, rather than a barn, came to our minds, because it is more commonly found in Korea . . ." (Lee 5).
3. See Brzeski, Lee, Cronk, Frater, Lim, Thrift.
4. Neither Ben, nor Jeong-su, consider whether Hae-mi is comfortable smoking, despite the enormously imbalanced social and legal repercussions. Smoking marijuana is illegal in South Korea and results in a prison sentence or hefty fines that only the wealthy can afford. In addition to these financial repercussions, women also face social repercussions just for smoking cigarettes in public. According to the OECD, only 4.3% of women smoke in Korea compared to 31.6% of men; see OECD (2020).
5. Some reviewers have even suggested that the dance is not literal, but rather, ". . . represents Lee's own understanding of the character . . . ;" See Kohn (2018).
6. Cats in Murakami's fiction, along with wells, often indicate that things are about to get weird. While neither appear in "Barn Burning," Lee employs both symbols in his film to make us question who is telling the truth.
7. In Lee's story, Jeong-su's mother is revealed to have abandoned him as a child. Lee complicates the structure of Murakami's trope—just as Hae-mi goes missing, Jeong-su's mother reappears in his life.

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