

MODERNITY AND FEAR IN *BURNING* (2018): A FOCUS ON WALTER BENJAMIN'S URBAN EXPERIENCE¹

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Abstract

This article examines Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* (2018) through Walter Benjamin's reflections on modernity, focusing on the film's characters and the ways in which they are narratively and spatially constructed. Rather than offering a clear distinction between truth and falsehood, *Burning* adopts the form of mystery to suspend causal explanation and destabilise judgement. In doing so, the film addresses the anger of the younger generation in contemporary Korea without reducing it to individual psychology or explicit social critique.

Drawing on Benjamin's concepts of allegory, montage, and the dialectics at a standstill, this study argues that *Burning* presents Korean modernity as a simultaneity of non-synchronicity, in which multiple historical temporalities coexist within a single present. Through the contrasting environments surrounding the characters, from rural Paju to urban Seoul, the film foregrounds the contradictions of a modernity shaped by industrialisation, militarisation, and middle-class fantasy. The characters of Jong-su, Hae-mi, and Ben are analysed not as autonomous individuals, but as differentiated manifestations of a fragmented subjectivity produced under capitalism.

Ultimately, the article suggests that *Burning* does not seek to resolve the question of "what is real", but instead renders the familiar landscape of Korean modernity strange.

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By doing so, the film reconfigures realism as a critical mode that reveals how anxiety and anger emerge from unresolved historical and structural conditions in the present.

Keywords: *Burning*, *Walter Benjamin*, *modernity*, *Korean modernity*.

Introduction

Lee Chang-dong, a South Korean novelist, filmmaker, and producer, has developed a body of work that engages with a wide range of themes and materials. His narratives span everyday life in contemporary South Korea as well as major historical events, including the Gwangju Uprising and the Sewol ferry disaster. Rather than foregrounding heroic figures or exceptional individuals, Lee consistently centres his films on ordinary people and their actions within contemporary social conditions. More specifically, his works attend to the anxiety and latent fear that emerge as individuals are pushed aside by historical forces beyond their control. This focus on the vulnerability of everyday life constitutes a defining feature of Lee's cinematic worldview. His major films include *Green Fish*, *Oasis*, *Poetry*, and *Burning*.

Lee Chang-dong's sustained focus on anonymous figures living ordinary lives in modern society can be read as resonating with Walter Benjamin's analysis of modernity. Benjamin conceptualises the emergence of capitalism and the formation of urban life through the notion of spectacle, not merely as a domain of striking appearances but as a historically structured mode of perception. In his analysis of the urban spectacle, Benjamin does not remain at the level of impressionistic critique; instead, he approaches spectacle allegorically. By treating the city itself as a text to be read, Benjamin proposes allegory as a methodological device through which the fragmented and transient experiences of modern urban life can be interpreted [Benjamin 2002: 37–38].

Through allegory, Benjamin understands the spectacle of the modern city as an effect of the commodity fetish and, on this basis, analyses the alienation of the subject experienced by modern urban dwellers. In this context, the primary object of Benjamin's allegorical attention is not the spectacle that shines brightly in the present, but the antique, objects that once embodied novelty and brilliance yet now appear obsolete and forgotten within the contemporary urban landscape [Benjamin 2002: 41]. By reading traces of past time from such antiquated objects, Benjamin simultaneously discerns the anticipated future of what appears new in the present. In other words, contemporary commodities and fashionable novelties are revealed as repetitions of the old, leading Benjamin to approach the form of subjectivity under capitalism and modern urban life through the notion of spectrality.

Burning addresses Korean modernity as its central thematic concern. As the director has noted in interviews, the film foregrounds the anger of the younger

generation as a defining affect of contemporary Korean modernity [Na 2018]. Significantly, this anger is not depicted in a direct or realist manner; instead, as the director himself emphasises, it is mediated through the structure of mystery. By deliberately adopting the mystery genre, *Burning* approaches the contradictions and paradoxes of Korean modernity in an oblique yet multilayered way. The narrative unfolds around the disappearance of Hae-mi, who occupies the centre of the film's mystery. Her absence becomes the focal point through which tensions and conflicts among Hae-mi, Jong-su, and Ben are organised. In this configuration, the film allegorically stages the contradictions of Korean modernity through the relations among these three figures.

Accordingly, this article examines Korean modernity as articulated in Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* through the lens of Walter Benjamin's analysis of modernity. It first outlines Benjamin's discussion of the modern city, focusing on his conceptualisation of urban experience and allegorical reading practices. Building on this theoretical framework, the article then offers analysis of how *Burning* renders Korean modernity through its narrative and formal strategies. Particular attention is given to the film's use of the mystery genre, through which it constructs a distinctive form of realism that articulates the contradictions of Korean modernity. Finally, drawing together these discussions, the article considers how *Burning* reflects on Korean modernity as an unfinished and unresolved historical condition.

1. The passage as allegory

Benjamin defines modernity not as the designation of a historical period but as a new phenomenon that is clearly differentiated from the past. This conception becomes more explicit in his distinction between first technology and second technology. The criterion that separates these two forms of technology lies in the opposition between cult value and exhibition value [Benjamin 2002: 105–106]. Whereas the first technology originates in religion, ritual, and magic, and is oriented toward the domination of what may be called the “old nature”, the second technology emerges alongside the Industrial Revolution and refers to a fundamentally different technological relation to reality. Characterised by technological development and reproducibility, the second technology is marked above all by repetition. What Benjamin seeks to articulate through this distinction is not simply technological progress, but the transformed relationship between human beings and nature as a new reality, which he conceptualises as the “new nature”. In other words, Benjamin investigates the human condition under the age of technological reproducibility, identifying repetition as the decisive feature that distinguishes it from the old nature [Benjamin 2002: 110]. More concretely, he analyses the decline of first technology, defined by singularity, narrative continuity, and aura within religious and mythic

frameworks, alongside the emergence of new art forms such as photography and cinema enabled by mass production. Through this analysis, Benjamin explores the ambivalent character of urban modernity brought about by second technology. In sum, he argues that the rise of urban phenomena fundamentally transforms modes of human experience, which he characterises through the loss of aura and the dominance of repetition and transience [Buck-Morss 1989: 80–81].

Benjamin's concept of technology serves to account for what he understands as the "new nature", a reality that is fundamentally transformed in comparison to the past. More precisely, Benjamin does not analyse the emergence of urban modernity solely at the level of conscious perception or visible phenomena. Instead, drawing on Marxian concepts, he traces changes in the mode of production through the differentiated relation between base and superstructure. At the same time, however, Benjamin does not simply follow Marx. Distancing himself from the view that treats the superstructure as a mere reflection of the economic base or as ideology, Benjamin argues that the superstructure articulates the economic foundation with a relative autonomy of its own [Benjamin 1999: 503–504]. Consequently, his analysis of the superstructure does not remain at the level of impressionistic criticism. Rather, Benjamin seeks to disclose the unconscious conditions that structure visual representation and shape the perceptual experience of modern urban life.

In this context, Benjamin understands the emergence of a new mode of experience as urban modernity and emphasises its constitutive ambivalence. This ambivalence does not appear as a simple opposition between two poles; rather, Benjamin conceives it as something that manifests in a montage-like form. On the one hand, technological development and the new modes of experience it produces draw subjects into what Benjamin describes as a "new sleep" of capitalism, characterised by the dazzling spectacle of the modern city. On the other hand, within this very spectacle, Benjamin identifies the appearance of genuine wish-images that hold the potential to interrupt and reconfigure dominant perceptions. Central to this configuration is the mechanism that produces spectacle itself: the commodity fetish. Commodities fill the urban streets with brilliance, and this very visibility becomes fetishised, transforming images into autonomous forces. Benjamin conceptualises this fetishised spectacle as phantasmagoria, in which material abundance, overproduced commodities, and phenomena such as world exhibitions are rendered as a mythology of error or as a new, secular mythology generated by industrial capitalism. Benjamin further argues that individual life is itself drawn into this process of fetishisation and incorporated into spectacle. Just as commodities are abstracted from use-value and subsumed under the capitalist spectacle of progress, individual lives become entangled with capitalist fantasy, absorbed into the luminous urban spectacle, and fetishised in the form of consumers.

Accordingly, the site from which Benjamin reads commodity fetishism and capitalism as a “new sleep” is the Paris arcades, spaces whose period of splendour has passed and the obsolete commodities that have been reduced to antiques. Benjamin approaches these time-worn objects allegorically, arguing that what appears today as the brilliance of the department store already contains its own future as an “aged past”, a future prefigured by the arcades themselves. Yet Benjamin does not regard the glittering present, exemplified by department stores and world exhibitions, merely as a repetition of a ruined past. Rather, he reads from within it the emergence of wish-images that interrupt the continuity of spectacle. To this end, Benjamin interprets figures marginalised by the urban spectacle, such as bohemians, boredom, fashion, prostitution, ragpickers, and gamblers, as allegorical constellations through which wish-images circulate from obsolete commodities [Benjamin 2002: 33–34]. In particular, the gambler, who persists in repetitive wagering while concealing repeated failure, becomes emblematic of capitalist phantasmagoria, which sustains desire precisely by masking its impossibility. More precisely, Benjamin simultaneously reads the myth of modernity that conceals desire and the fundamental desires that nonetheless seep out through antiques and the refuse of the street. In sum, by treating the modern city as an allegory, Benjamin identifies stains that disrupt the apparent coherence of spectacular images and links them to wish-images, or what he calls “dialectical images” [Benjamin 2002: 40].

Through allegorical reading and montage-like techniques, Benjamin develops what he terms a dialectics at a standstill [Benjamin 1996: 341]. The wish-images he discovers in antiquated objects do not point toward a return to a complete or harmonious past; rather, Benjamin argues that dreams of the future are invented in the forms of the past [Benjamin 1999: 470]. In this sense, the dialectics at a standstill does not operate at the level of individual intention or subjective will. Instead, it articulates desire at a structural level, what may be understood as a fundamental desire for emancipation which, Benjamin paradoxically suggests, appears under capitalism in a distorted, ruined, and failed form, against the background of capitalism as a dream-world. Drawing on Proust, Benjamin conceptualises these sudden and disruptive montage-images as instances of “involuntary memory” and emphasises that the dialectical image does not belong to a fully recoverable past but to the concept of the “now-time”, or the present as a charged moment of interruption [Benjamin 2002: 141].

2. The realism depicted in *Burning*

Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* is loosely based on Haruki Murakami's short story *Barn Burning*. Rather than reproducing the narrative of the original text, however, the film appropriates only the motif of barn burning and reconstructs it

into an almost entirely new narrative configuration. The film centres on Jong-su, a young man working part-time at a distribution company, who reunites with Hae-mi, a childhood acquaintance from his neighbourhood. After returning from a trip to Africa, Hae-mi introduces Jong-su to Ben, whom she met abroad, and the story unfolds around the interactions among these three characters. The central conflict emerges when Hae-mi suddenly disappears and Jong-su becomes convinced that Ben is responsible, prompting him to pursue Ben in an increasingly obsessive manner.

The narrative of *Burning* unfolds around the disappearance of Hae-mi and concentrates on the tensions that arise among the three central characters. The film's primary focus is on Jong-su, Hae-mi, and Ben. Rather than foregrounding a series of directly observable events or framing conflict in terms of interpersonal psychology, however, the film persistently displaces attention toward the social and material conditions that shape each character's position. By presenting these backgrounds indirectly, *Burning* renders the source of conflict ambiguous and unsettles the viewer's attempt to locate clear causal relations or moral certainty.

In other words, while the disappearance of Hae-mi constitutes the film's surface-level conflict, *Burning* consistently redirects attention toward the conditions within which its characters are embedded, thereby obstructing straightforward identification or emotional alignment on the part of the viewer. Although the film foregrounds Hae-mi's mysterious disappearance, it ultimately compels the audience to reflect on what kind of tension is released by this absence and what it signifies. In doing so, the film deliberately blurs what initially appears to be clear, drawing viewers into a state of sustained uncertainty characteristic of the mystery form. For this reason, *Burning* refrains from presenting its characters through explicit dialogue or psychologically explanatory events that would function as conventional narrative anchors. Instead, the film offers fragmentary information by situating the characters within their surrounding environments or by filtering their presence through the voices and perspectives of others. Consequently, what demands attention is not simply who these characters are, but how they are introduced specifically, through the backgrounds and social spaces that are captured alongside them.

Turning first to Jong-su, the film presents him as an aspiring writer who once studied creative writing at university but failed to achieve literary recognition and now works as a delivery driver. As noted earlier, *Burning* avoids conveying Jong-su's position through direct self-expression, voice-over narration, or explicit psychological exposition. Instead, the film mediates his situation through a series of concrete images that surround him. Most notably, Jong-su's family home in Paju vividly registers both his material circumstances and his affective state. After his father is put on trial for assault, the family house in Paju is left vacant, prompting Jong-su, who had been living on his own, to return there. His mother left the family long ago, and his sister

lives separately after marriage. When Jong-su arrives at the house, only a single calf remains in what was once his father's livestock farm, standing as a solitary presence within an otherwise emptied domestic space.

The neighbourhood in which Jong-su's family home is located is rendered through images of darkness and deterioration. The house itself appears worn and dilapidated, filled with various old and discarded objects that evoke the sense of time having already passed. Significantly, this is also the site where Hae-mi performs her final dance before disappearing. One of the most defining features of Jong-su's neighbourhood, however, is not primarily visual but auditory: as indicated in Figure 1 (b), the sounds of North Korean propaganda broadcasts continue to resonate across the area, permeating the space despite remaining unseen. This persistent sonic presence situates Jong-su's domestic environment within a broader geopolitical and historical tension that exceeds the characters' immediate awareness.



Figure 1 (a–b). Jong-su's family house in Paju
(a) The deteriorated neighbourhood surrounding Jong-su's family house
(b) The family house in Paju, accompanied by the distant sound of North Korean propaganda broadcasts

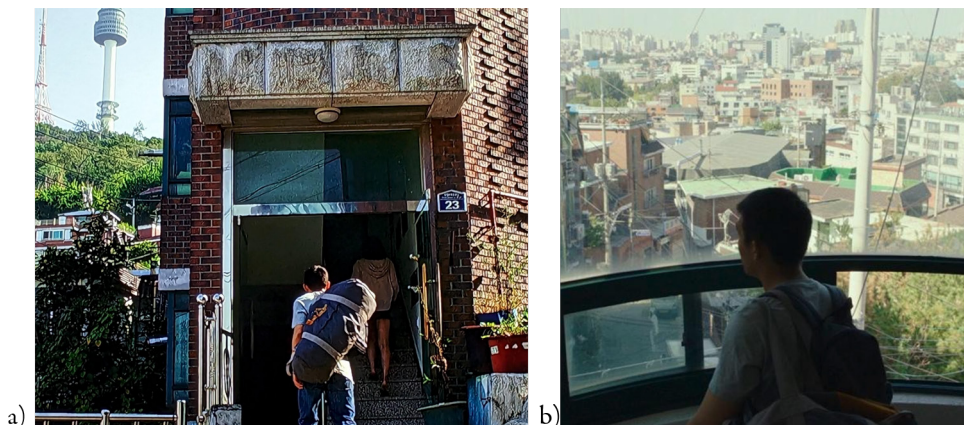


Figure 2 (a–b). Hae-mi's residence in Huam-dong
 (a) The rooftop studio where Hae-mi lives
 (b) Huam-dong as a space where past and present overlap

Hae-mi, Jong-su's former neighbourhood acquaintance, survives through various part-time jobs, including promotional work and other short-term employment. From her first appearance, she is marked by an aura of mystery. When Jong-su and Hae-mi encounter each other by chance, she immediately recognises him, while he barely remembers her. Hae-mi explains his failure to recognise her by referring to cosmetic surgery, suggesting that her face has changed. Yet Jong-su knows very little about who Hae-mi is, and this lack of knowledge extends equally to the viewer. The film deliberately withholds clear information about her identity. Details such as Hae-mi's declaration, during a drinking session with Jong-su, that her dream is to travel to Africa in search of the "great hunger", or the existence of her cat that Jong-su never once sees serve to deepen the enigma surrounding her presence.

Rather than presenting Hae-mi through direct exposition or psychological explanation, the film introduces her by foregrounding the spaces she inhabits, inviting the viewer to imagine her circumstances and inner life through her surroundings. As indicated in Figure 2 (a), Hae-mi lives in Huam-dong, an older neighbourhood in Seoul, in a small rooftop studio from which Namsan Tower can be seen in the distance. As the less visible "backside" of the city, Huam-dong can be read as a palimpsest that resonates with Hae-mi's enigmatic presence. In the film, the area is depicted through a disordered juxtaposition of aging low-rise buildings and towering high-rises, set against the distant landmark of Namsan Tower. This overlapping of Seoul's past and present renders Huam-dong a space in which temporal coordinates remain unstable and difficult to fix as shown in Figure 2 (b). The neighbourhood is further associated with the allegory of the cat whose existence cannot be definitively confirmed, thereby intensifying the sense of mystery that surrounds Hae-mi.

Ben is likewise presented as a mysterious figure within the film. Having met Hae-mi during her trip to Africa, Ben is implied to be a Korean American. Jong-su describes him as suspiciously wealthy for someone of such a young age. When Jong-su asks about his occupation, Ben responds casually that he “just plays”, a remark that further obscures the source of his affluence. Shortly before Hae-mi’s disappearance, during a private conversation with Jong-su, Ben cryptically reveals that his hobby is “burning greenhouses”. Although Ben consistently displays a polite, friendly, and courteous demeanour, this surface civility stands in sharp contrast to his obscure background, unexplained wealth, and secretive pastime, rendering him simultaneously alien and threatening. This unsettling quality is further intensified by the film’s presentation of Ben’s living environment: a sleek, modern luxury apartment complex that serves as a visual extension of his opacity and detachment.

As shown in Figure 3 (a–b), Ben lives in a luxury apartment complex located in Dongjak-gu, Seoul, and is surrounded by affluent friends. This environment stands in stark contrast to the neighbourhoods associated with Jong-su and Hae-mi, which are depicted as markedly different from Ben’s area, characterised by modern high-end apartments and fashionable cafés. Such spatial contrast intensifies Ben’s mystery, rendering him increasingly alien and threatening, and provides the basis for Jong-su’s suspicion that Ben may be responsible for Hae-mi’s disappearance. Yet although the sense of dissonance and Jong-su’s suspicion continue to deepen, this tension never erupts into a direct confrontation by the end of the film. Instead, as illustrated in Figure 3 (c–d), the film offers only encounters and scenes that indirectly suggest Ben’s possible guilt. A particularly significant moment appears in Figure 3 (d), where Jong-su encounters a cat that responds to the name “Boil”, the name of Hae-mi’s cat, in the underground parking garage of Ben’s apartment. The scene does not provide definitive confirmation that the cat is indeed Hae-mi’s; it merely presents an animal that reacts to the name “Boil” within Ben’s private space. Whether the cat truly belongs to Hae-mi remains unresolved until the end of the film. Nevertheless, it is precisely through this unresolved ambiguity that Jong-su’s suspicion hardens into certainty.

Although the film’s conflict appears, on the surface, to revolve around the three figures of Jong-su, Hae-mi, and Ben, overt confrontation or explicit emotional outbursts are largely absent until the film’s final moments. Rather than staging conflict through direct clashes between characters, *Burning* sustains its internal tension through their repeated encounters alone. In this way, the film generates tension not from visible collisions on screen, but from a pervasive sense of uncertainty in which neither the characters nor the viewers can arrive at definitive conclusions. This strategy operates through what the film deliberately leaves unsaid, compelling the audience to speculate, infer, and fill in gaps on the basis of incomplete information.



Figure 3 (a–d). Ben's neighbourhood in a high-end apartment complex in Dongjak-gu

- (a) The luxury apartment complex where Ben resides
- (b) Ben's affluent-looking acquaintances
- (c) A suspicious trace discovered inside Ben's apartment
- (d) A cat encountered in the underground parking lot



Figure 4 (a–b). Jong-su killing Ben and fleeing the scene

(a) Jong-su killing Ben

(b) Jong-su burning Ben's body along with his own clothes before fleeing

As shown in Figure 4 (a–b), the only moment that can be described as a direct conflict in the film is the final scene in which Jong-su kills Ben and flees the scene. Yet this moment functions less as a driving force of the narrative than as its outcome: rather than propelling the story forward, it retrospectively gathers and closes the tensions that have accumulated throughout the film. In other words, *Burning* does not organise its narrative conflict through decisive diegetic events or explicit confrontations between characters. Instead, it presents a series of diegetic conditions and situations, leaving the task of organising narrative conflict to the viewer who interprets them. For this reason, the conflict in *Burning* does not originate primarily in the emotional states of the three characters. Rather, it emerges from the act of spectatorship itself, as viewers are compelled to examine the conditions under which the characters exist. From this perspective, the fundamental source of narrative tension lies with the viewer who interprets the spatial environments presented by the film. Given that these spaces intersect with Korea's modern and contemporary historical formations, close attention must therefore be paid to the cinematic spaces through which *Burning* articulates its vision of Korean modernity.

The narrative tension of *Burning* is generated through the effectively dismantled family situations of Jong-su and Hae-mi, together with Ben's enigmatic behaviour. At the centre of this tension lies Jong-su's sense of inferiority toward Ben. Jong-su explicitly characterises Ben as a "Gatsby", a figure defined by an obscure identity yet marked by conspicuous wealth. For Jong-su, Ben thus becomes an object of envy and resentment. While traces of this envy occasionally surface in Jong-su's words and actions, the film primarily produces tension through the superimposition of three characters and three distinct spaces. In this sense, what the film ultimately foregrounds is the simultaneity of non-synchronicity: the coexistence of multiple temporalities within a single present, articulated through spaces that traverse Korea's modern and contemporary history [Kim 2000: 25]. Situated between the film's

surface reality and the spatial reality apprehended by the viewer, *Burning* deliberately raises the question of what is real, compelling the audience to confront the instability of perception itself.

3. The unfinished Korean modernity

The film's fundamental question, "What is real?" is closely linked to a broader interrogation of Korean modernity. Korean modernity was shaped by a persistent desire for national normalisation, grounded in the belief that a transition toward a "proper" or "normal" order of the state was both necessary and achievable [Lee 2011: 157–158]. This desire for a normalised nation-state is expressed with particular clarity in the notion of realism imagined and cultivated within Korean cinema itself. In this context, Korea has historically positioned the West as its implicit rival, a gesture that can be understood as a form of internalised Orientalism in which Korea is reinvented through the gaze of an imagined Western observer [Ju 2013: 31]. Put differently, within this imagined Western gaze, Korea identifies its own sense of lack and seeks to compensate for it by imitating and supplementing that lack through Western-style spectacle [Kim 2025: 258–260]. The most decisive force shaping this process was the military dictatorship that consolidated power after the Korean War by defining anti-communism and economic development as the foundations of a distinctly Korean form of democracy [Moon 2007: 46–47].

What emerges from this historical process is a specifically Korean desire oriented toward the middle class [Lee 2012: 21–22]. In the Korean context, the middle class has been imagined primarily as a Western-style nuclear family. More concretely, the desired image of the middle class has been articulated through a highly standardised model: a father employed in a salaried white-collar position in Seoul; a mother who manages the household as a devoted homemaker; and children who either pursue higher education or enter modern professions, such as typists in earlier periods. This concrete image of the family, or what may be described as a form of "standardised realism," has persisted as a normative ideal and an object of desire in Korean society, not only during its formative period but continuing into the present [Kim 2025: 234–235]. In short, the Korean middle-class fantasy is inseparably linked to the image of a Seoul-based household organised around a male breadwinner working in the city, replacing extended family structures with a Western-style nuclear family centred on the father [Kim 2025: 259–260].

Burning can be understood as a film that poses a direct challenge to this middle-class fantasy. This challenge unfolds through the formal framework of mystery. In interviews, Lee Chang-dong has offered two reasons for choosing the mystery genre: first, his belief that certain aspects of life ultimately resist explanation, and second, his intention to prevent viewers from approaching the film within the confines of a fixed

genre expectation [Kim 2018]. Lee has also described *Burning* as a film that addresses the anger of the younger generation [Na 2018]. Read together, these remarks suggest that the film engages anger not at the level of individual psychology, but as a structural condition. Desire and the frustration of desire are thus presented not as personal failures, but as effects produced within broader social arrangements, revealing how the affect of anger manifests in the lives of individuals living in the present.

From this perspective, what demands attention in *Burning* is not merely the surface conflict among the three protagonists, but the brief yet significant appearance of Jong-su's father in the early part of the film. His presence gestures toward another fundamental question that underlies the entire narrative. Alongside the film's persistent inquiry into "what is real", Jong-su's father occupies the centre of a more unsettling and unspoken question: who initiated this story in the first place? Positioned at the origin of the characters' diffuse tensions and ambiguities, this figure marks the point at which the film's conflict exceeds what can be openly articulated, entering the realm of what remains structurally obscene and unsayable.

Jong-su's father appears only briefly in the film, during the courtroom scenes in which he stands trial. Notably, the film offers no direct conversation or physical interaction between father and son. Jong-su deliberately avoids his father's gaze, and the film renders this avoidance through a restrained visual composition that emphasises the physical distance between the defendant and Jong-su seated in the public gallery of the courtroom. Jong-su's father is on trial for assaulting a civil servant from the Paju city office. His defence is taken up by an old acquaintance, a friend of his father, who summarises the father's life to Jong-su in a matter-of-fact manner: he graduated from high school, endured harsh labour in the Middle East to earn money, ignored advice to invest in an apartment in Gangnam, and instead returned to his hometown to pursue livestock farming, only to fail. As described by his friend, Jong-su's father once embodied the ideal figure of the model citizen promoted during the period of industrialisation and military dictatorship, a subject who symbolised discipline, labour, and national development. At the same time, however, he is presented as a profoundly realistic figure who has failed to adapt to contemporary South Korean society in the aftermath of industrialisation. The very qualities that once aligned him with the promises of modernisation now mark him as a residual and maladjusted presence within the present, revealing the historical disjunction between past ideals and current social realities.

In this context, the dilapidated and collapsing family home in Paju functions as a postwar relic, an antiquated object from an earlier era whose former significance can now be imagined only faintly through the background sound of ongoing anti-North Korean broadcasts. As Figure 5 (a–b) illustrates, the film's nostalgic framing of Jong-su's family house operates precisely in this sense. The house does not function

as a site of personal memory alone; rather, it accumulates objects and traces that once carried value and promise but now persist as exhausted remnants, stored like unsold inventory. It is this suspension between past significance and present worthlessness that generates the film's particular mode of nostalgia. In a similar manner, the neighbourhood in which Hae-mi lives offers a montage-like image of Korean modernity itself. With Namsan Tower positioned at the apex as a symbol of successful modernisation, the juxtaposition of towering high-rise buildings and deteriorating low-rise structures, unnatural yet unmistakably real, visually registers the layered temporality of Korean modernity, articulated as a simultaneity of non-synchronicity in which heterogeneous historical times overlap within the same present.



a)



b)

Figure 5 (a–b). Jong-su's family house in Paju at dusk

(a) Jong-su's house framed in a nostalgic tone

(b) The father's antiques piled up like unsold inventory, stripped of their former value

However, *Burning* does not stop at merely exposing these contradictions. The film moves one step further by offering a fundamental response to how such a narrative becomes possible, articulated through Hae-mi's remark: "You just have to forget that it doesn't exist." After Hae-mi's disappearance, Jong-su begins to suspect Ben and attempts to trace her whereabouts. What he encounters, however, is not confirmation of the Hae-mi he once knew, but a series of testimonies suggesting that she may never have been who he believed her to be. As Jong-su's investigation deepens and the film progresses toward its final stages, uncertainty intensifies: distinctions between truth and falsehood increasingly collapse, and nothing remains fully verifiable. The film culminates in Jong-su's act of killing Ben, after which he strips off the clothes he is wearing, burns them together with Ben's body, and flees the scene.

Ben, figured as a Gatsby-like presence, can be understood as the object of Jong-su's desire. Alongside Jong-su's father, Ben functions as an obscene symptom of desire, an embodiment of what cannot be directly articulated. As noted earlier, Ben remains persistently ambiguous, and this ambiguity extends to rumours and suspicions surrounding his sexuality or possible perversion. The film occasionally hints at the possibility that Ben may even harbour an interest in Jong-su himself. Yet for Jong-su, such implications are experienced not as recognition but as revulsion. In this sense, Ben materialises the frustrated desires of the older generation and the subsequent desires of the younger generation in the form of a mysterious figure who is wealthy, elusive, and Korean American. When Jong-su comes to realise that "becoming Ben" is fundamentally impossible, his actions escalate toward violence. At this point, the film draws the viewer even deeper into mystery. As Jong-su strips naked and escapes like a ghost, *Burning* destabilises even the most minimal assumptions on which the viewer has relied, transforming questions such as "Did Ben really exist?" into the more unsettling doubt of whether Jong-su himself ever fully existed within the narrative.

In sum, *Burning* does not articulate a clear distinction between truth and falsehood against the background of Korean modernity. Instead, the film destabilises all such boundaries, foregrounding an affective condition in which anger and fear emerge from the impossibility of knowing what is real or of making decisive choices. This condition may be understood in terms of what Benjamin describes as modern subjectivity under capitalism, characterised by the disappearance or erosion of the subject itself. In *Burning*, this disappearance is variously represented through Jong-su's father, who appears in the courtroom as an "old future" that has failed to arrive; through Ben, who embodies desire as an opaque and unattainable object; and through Hae-mi, whose disappearance literalises absence itself. In this sense, the three characters do not represent separate psychological individuals, but rather different manifestations of the same subject as it is fractured and displaced within capitalism.

The scene that most symptomatically crystallises this condition is the moment in which the characters gather at Jong-su's family home to smoke marijuana, a moment in which the boundaries between presence and absence, agency and passivity, briefly collapse.

Figure 6 (a–b) depicts the scene in Paju where the three characters smoke marijuana and watch the setting sun together. The film frames this moment through a seemingly nostalgic atmosphere: wine is shared, marijuana is smoked, and the fading light of the countryside is contemplated in silence. This tableau can be read as a crystallisation of the desires of the younger generation discussed above, a fleeting moment of suspension in which historical burdens appear temporarily softened. Yet this tranquillity remains fragile and provisional. Figure 6 (c–d), which shows Hae-mi performing her “Great Hunger” dance, further sharpens this tension. The dance unfolds to “Générique” by Miles Davis, famously featured in *Elevator to the Gallows*, but the scene is symptomatic precisely because this music does not exist in isolation.



Figure 6 (a–d). Korean modernity as depicted in *Burning*

(a) The three characters gazing at the dusk in Paju

(b) The old house in Paju, marijuana and wine

(c) Hae-mi's dance

(d) The coexistence of North Korean propaganda broadcasts and the “Great Hunger” dance

While Miles Davis's score initially dominates the soundscape, the North Korean propaganda broadcast gradually returns, reclaiming its place as the background sound by the end of Hae-mi's dance. In this auditory transition, the film stages a collision between an imagined, liberated desire and the inescapable persistence of historical and geopolitical reality, revealing how moments of longing are continually overwritten by the unresolved conditions of Korean modernity.

Conclusion

This study has examined Walter Benjamin's reflections on modernity in order to analyse Lee Chang-dong's *Burning*, with particular attention to its characters and the manner in which they are narratively constructed. For Benjamin, modernity was not merely a continuation of the past but a fundamentally new phenomenon that marked a decisive break from earlier historical formations. Technologies of reproduction transformed modes of production, and these shifts, in turn, altered the conditions and forms of everyday life. From these transformed conditions, Benjamin sought to read not only the contradictions of capitalism but also the emergence of wish-images embedded within them. To do so, he approached the Paris arcades, spaces whose former splendour had faded, as allegorical sites through which the "aged future" awaiting the present could be deciphered. In this sense, Benjamin turned to film as an artistic form and a mode of mass culture uniquely attuned to new technological conditions. His emphasis, however, lay not in emotional immersion or identification, but in a Brechtian logic of distancing and defamiliarisation, through which cinema could disrupt habitual perception rather than reinforce it.

Burning addresses the anger experienced by younger generations in contemporary Korea. Rather than diagnosing the cause or substance of this anger, however, the film refrains from offering explanatory clarity. Instead, by adopting the formal framework of mystery, it suspends causal certainty and renders all elements unstable, compelling viewers to hesitate in their judgments. Direct confrontation appears only once, near the end of the film, and even this moment functions not as a causal event that drives the narrative forward, but as its terminal point. This reversal further disorients the viewer, transforming what had seemed self-evident into something questionable. In doing so, the film redirects attention away from individual psychology and toward the environments surrounding the characters – spaces that are inseparably intertwined with Korea's modern and contemporary historical conditions.

Burning does not seek to reconstruct how these spaces once existed in the past; rather, it shows how they are layered and reappear in the present through montage, articulated as a simultaneity of non-synchronicity. Put differently, instead of resolving the conflicts among the three characters through direct explanation, the film situates them within heterogeneous environments, allowing the resulting strangeness of these

landscapes and the tensions they generate to come into view. In this way, *Burning* links the anger of the younger generation to the structural conditions of Korean society. Rather than attributing this anger solely to social injustice or assigning blame in a straightforward manner, the film situates it within the constructed narrative of Korean modernity itself, revealing how this anger manifests in the present. By calling into question the axioms that are commonly taken as natural and self-evident, *Burning* renders the familiar landscape of modernity strange. From this defamiliarisation emerge experiences of mismatch, disorientation, and denial, affective responses that ultimately crystallise as anxiety and anger.

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