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FIRE City: *Paju* and *Burning*

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Abstract

Both set in the South Korean city of Paju, Park Chan-ok's *Paju* (*P'aju*, 2009) and Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* (*Pŏning*, 2018) document the troubles of late developmentalism as the frustrated emotional development of young people who come to realize that they are part of a growing surplus population that no longer have a place in the economic world they inhabit. This article suggests that a crucial backdrop for the fires within each film's diegesis is another kind of fire, namely the FIRE economy. This is the acronym for a groups of capital accumulation strategies that prioritize Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate, all of which are business sectors that have typically emerged in the wake of manufacturing decline, providing opportunities for capitalists facing declining industrial revenue as part of what David Harvey has termed a capital switching strategy. Although the pun in the acronym does not of course work in Hangul, the industries became particularly prominent in South Korea after the IMF Crisis as part of broader wave of financialization. In both films, the determining power of this socio-economic backdrop is displaced within a melodramatic frame that prioritizes emotional over economic attachments, but nevertheless abides in material traces.

Keywords: Bildungs-romance, *Burning*, FIRE, land development, New Town, Paju, urban development

Both Park Chan-ok's *Paju* (*P'aju*, 2009) and Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* (*Pŏning*, 2018) tell stories in which transformational economic phenomena are narrated via melodramatic love triangles involving young people, for whom the possibilities for fulfillment are radically circumscribed. In blending narratives of coming-of-age with love stories, in a hybrid we might term *Bildungs-romance*, these films give aesthetic shape to otherwise abstract operations of capital in the form of ambivalent love stories. But though melodramatic spectacle draws our attention, the films cannot help but index compulsively the deep economic frames that circumscribe more than just the romantic relationships they narrate. In both films, the setting of the drama in Paju, the satellite city north of Seoul, very near the North Korean border, points back to these economic transformations. Although relegated to the background in stories that seem more concerned with interpersonal relationships, the specificity of Paju as a setting nonetheless serves as an important structuring frame for the characters, even if they do experience transformations in emotional rather than material terms. As such Paju represents what Youngseo Baik describes as a "core location," which functions (as Laam Hae and Jesook Song have glossed) to reveal "the contradictions, disparities, and unevenness that people in the periphery suffer from, but also provide[s] an alternative epistemology for forming a common ground among people and intellectuals across different places who take global transformative politics seriously."[1]

Designated as a city in 1997, Paju was developed in the manner of the *New Town* projects that were designed to address the lack of housing due to the overconcentration of the national population in Seoul. This was done, however, in a manner that abetted the neoliberal imperatives in South Korea beginning in the 1990s that led real estate speculation to take precedence over the needs of residents.[2] After waves of urban development, which had ramped up in intensity since their beginnings in the 1960s, Paju was part of a later phase in the process when much of the urban core of Seoul had been redeveloped and New Town projects in satellite cities, most visibly Songdo and Sejong City, took center stage. This second development effort adopted a form of utopian urbanist rhetoric, using the contradictory banners of sustainable growth and free

economic zones.[3] Songdo, for example, which was built on reclaimed land from the Yellow Sea, near Incheon, claimed to be the most high-tech city in the world, a claim befitting its initial, perhaps overoptimistic, aspirations to serve as a global financial hub.[4] In contrast, Sejong City, which is about an hour-and-a-half (by car) south of Seoul, was the newly planned seat of the national government. While many agencies have relocated there since 2012, its citizens will have to wait until 2030 to witness the completion of the transfer. In both cases, however, critics have questioned their designation as *smart cities*, as both have proved to be in practice increasingly unsuited for their appointed functions and have fallen short of their utopian visions.[5]

The development of Paju featured a number of new creative-industry attractions like the *New Book City*, the *English Village*, and the Korean motion picture industry. A new LG Philips plant opened with much fanfare as well in 2006. These ventures, however, proved either to be modest in scale or short lived.[6] For example, the LG Philips plant was forced to scale back its operations after LG Display posted a loss of over a billion dollars in 2019 in the face of competition from Chinese manufacturers.[7] Paju's prospects were hampered from the start by its proximity to the most policed border in the world, the demilitarized zone separating North and South Korea, as well as the legacy of U.S. military occupation, which includes Yongjugol, a notorious site of camp town prostitution. Even more troubling than this legacy, however, was the development of Paju itself, which became just the latest episode in the brutal history of South Korean land development. According to urban geographers Hyun Bang Shin and Soo-Hyun Kim, this development relied on displacement strategies as "the core of this transformative process" in order to convert neighborhoods and "close the rent gap."[8] Shin and Kim here refer to the theory in urban geography that describes gentrification as propelled by a disparity between a property's current and potential rental income, a process which attracts developer investors who seek to realize that potential. Such a strategy requires ruthless land acquisition strategies, since there is a strong incentive to pay as little as possible for the land in order to maximize the profit. And though the theory is quite beautiful from the point of view of the balance

sheet, the actual practice is much uglier, involving not only the violent displacement of existing residents and landowners but also the absolute minimal amount of compensation to the displaced former residents. With developable land close to Seoul becoming scarcer, real estate development has been the real growth opportunity in Paju despite the efforts of the state and of developers to highlight the other attractions of the region.

Furthermore, unlike in Gangnam, the development of which created a ritzy neighborhood that would soon be inhabited by Seoul's elite, the unideal satellite location of Paju, over an hour away from the core of Seoul by bus or train and close to the North Korean border, would soon relegate the new city closer to the status of what Mike Davis has described as the new form of global urbanization. Unlike the previous incarnation, which was a product of rapid industrialization and the need for a large labor pool in the urban core, this newer form of urbanization, particularly prominent in Asia, emerges in formerly rural locations, and is generally decoupled from industrialization or any other kind of development (aside from the real estate itself).[9] So, in addition to displacing the residents of the homes they are replacing in the quest for maximizing rental outputs, these new secondary cities like Paju also plan for the more permanent displacement of its future residents from the growth opportunities in late capitalist economies, since these no longer require cooperation from a large labor pool in order to facilitate their accumulation strategies.

Accordingly, in addition to the shared setting, both *Paju* and *Burning* also foreground *fire* as crucial plot element: *Paju*'s fire is the one that claims the life of Eun-mo's (Seo Woo) sister and creates the occasion for the insurance payout, which Joong-shik (Lee Sun-kyun) passes on to Eun-mo, though she eventually makes her own arrangements. Implied in the film's very title, fire, of course, is even more prevalent in *Burning*, both in Ben's (Steve Yeun) perverse hobby and in the film's climactic ending when Jong-su (Yoo Ah-in) metes out revenge by killing Ben and then burning his body inside his fancy Porsche. I want to suggest, however, that the crucial backdrop for these fires is another kind of fire, namely the FIRE economy. This is the acronym for a group of capital accumulation

strategies that prioritize Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate. Historically speaking, these business sectors have typically emerged in the wake of manufacturing decline, providing opportunities for capitalists facing the problem of diminishing industrial revenue. This process forms part of a larger strategy of what David Harvey has termed *capital switching*, a process in which investment in built environments is a response to problems of overaccumulation.[10] Although the pun in the acronym, FIRE, does not work in Hangul, these industries nonetheless became particularly prominent in South Korea after the IMF Crisis, which began in 1997, the same year that Paju City was established, as part of a broader wave of financialization.[11] So while I am not suggesting that the films are self-consciously invoking the acronym, I am arguing that the financialized business ventures that compose it constitute a crucial backdrop for each film's despairing sensorium and that the expression of these ventures as literal fires captures their destructive implications.

Indeed, the development of Paju is an example of these new FIRE industries working together, as a real estate venture reliant on cheap credit financing and hedged by insurance policies. Although opportunities for capital accumulation might be considerable in the industries that fall under the FIRE rubric, they require far less labor than more traditional manufacturing ventures. As a consequence, they provide significantly fewer opportunities for workers and those who control minimal amounts of capital and thus cannot share in the financial benefits. Furthermore, because these are all economic ventures that involve speculation on a fundamental level, their operations are often occluded. They require specialized forms of knowledge and access to privileged information that greatly benefits those economic actors that already occupy advantageous positions, thus reinforcing social inequality and denying opportunities for social mobility. Set in the city of Paju, *Paju* and *Burning*, I want to suggest, both document the frustrations of this late-stage developmentalism as the frustrated development of a series of young people—frustrations of romance and maturity—who come to realize that they are part of a growing surplus population that no longer have a place in the economic world they inhabit, a world which has been set ablaze or, as it were, is on FIRE. In both films, the determining power

of this backdrop is displaced within a melodramatic frame that prioritizes emotional over economic attachments, but is nevertheless seen to abide in the traces it leaves. Here, the *Bildung* of young people, the question of their emotional development, and the late capitalist milieu in which they come of age, epitomized by real estate development, become separated. The latter form of growth stunts the former.

Delusions of Growth

Park Chan-ok's *Paju* takes its title from the name of the city itself. The film's backdrop is what Shin and Kim have described as "state-led, new build gentrification." In this process, developers engage in a state-sponsored effort to build large-scale housing developments in order to maximize the profit potential of the ground rent at the expense of the former residents who are, often forcibly, displaced from their homes without sufficient compensation.[12] Amidst a struggle between developers and protestors who dig in at the demolitions site, which then becomes a battleground reminiscent of military conflict, a young woman named Eun-mo contemplates her uncanny relationship with her brother-in-law, Joong-shik, who also leads the protestors. She has known Joong-shik since she was a young schoolgirl when he began a relationship with her sister. At a certain point, the sister tragically dies in a fiery gas explosion at the couple's house. For a while, Eun-mo then begins to imagine taking her sister's place as Joong-shik's romantic partner. We learn later that Joong-shik harbors deep-seated feelings for Eun-mo as well, but the potential relationship ultimately sours under the cloud of Eun-mo's suspicion that Joong-shik killed her sister in order to receive the insurance money. Although she turns out to be mistaken and the truth is that it is she herself who is in fact responsible for the gas explosion that caused her sister's death, Eun-mo never learns the truth because Joong-shik shields her from it. The relationship between the two thus occupies a vexed emotional terrain that navigates the complex array of feelings that suffuse their strange bond. Eun-mo is ultimately spared of the incriminating knowledge of her own guilt by Joong-shik who sacrifices himself for her well-being, even as she betrays him and the protest

movement he leads by abetting the developer's plot to move forward with the demolition.

In the promotional interviews for the film, writer and director Park Chan-ok was frequently asked if she had in mind any specific incidents of struggle between land developers and protesters. While asking this question, most of the interviewers probably had in mind the 2009 Yongsan disaster, in which a group of tenants occupied a building in the central Seoul neighborhood that was set to be redeveloped as a protest against the insufficient compensation offered to the former residents. In the event, the group was raided by riot police and six people eventually died in the fire that broke out as a result. Park said that she did not. Although the screenplay was written before the event, Park did, however, research for the film on the redevelopment struggles in Korea.[13] And while her selection of Paju as a setting for the film had nothing to do with a specific struggle, the area for the director was indeed suffused with the memory of historical struggle. Specifically, a lot of casualties from the Korean war are buried in Paju: their bodies are said to emit the phosphorus that creates the fog that is an important leitmotif in the film.[14] But while the drama of the film obscures the ghostly presence of these other victims in the manner of fog, they persist at the margins of the diegesis.

Paju is very explicit about the role of real estate development in the immiseration of the local population, and an insurance policy and the company that manages it play a key role in the plot, ultimately serving in a complementary fashion in the developer's attempt to evict the protestors. Nevertheless, the film ultimately mystifies these processes by re-imagining the conflict between the developers and the protestors within the melodrama of Eun-mo's own development as a young woman, which the film embeds within its uncanny love story. The displacement and dislocation of the residents becomes translated into a corresponding, but more inchoate, emotional language of guilt, obligation, and betrayal. Although Eun-mo initially takes the side of the protestors, led by her brother-in-law, she ultimately abandons them, when she helps the insurance company falsely prove that Joong-shik committed insurance fraud, leading to his arrest, imprisonment, and displacement as the

group's main leader. This is very much a betrayal: the shady developers even thank her as she leaves town, flush with the cash that she has pocketed from the sale of her parent's home to those same developers.

In the diegesis, this is the second time she has left Paju with ill-gotten money in hand: the first time was when she used the money that Joong-shik had saved for her college tuition for a trip to India instead. As in her previous departure, Eun-mo leaving Paju at the end of the film registers as a moment of individual development in what is finally a perverse *Bildungsroman*. Her maturation and departure from her childhood home depends on the sacrifice and suffering of others, most crucially that of Joong-shik, who chooses to stay in prison rather than reveal Eun-mo's guilt in her sister's death. Citing the Biblical parable of the lost sheep to his minister father, Joong-shik makes a case for the value of saving the one lost sheep over the safety of the other ninety-nine. A sentiment that might seem to hold the moral high ground, however, in the context of a Biblical parable becomes more troubling and, in fact, anti-communal in the context of a set of ruthless housing developers who use water cannons and other aggressive siege tactics to force the protestors out of their homes. *Paju* thus pits Eun-mo's emotional development within the antagonisms of its story of urban development, such that Eun-mo's growth seems to come at the expense of a social disaster, which is in turn authorized by Joong-shik's sacrifice.

Toward the end, we see Eun-mo walk in slow motion through the warzone on her way to see Joong-shik in a strange scene that seems to aestheticize and thus distract from the harsh realism of the circumstances, with the ominous extra-diegetic music splitting the difference between the somnolent affect of the slow-motion walk and the diegetic sounds of Molotov cocktails exploding and people fighting on the street, heard through the music. The stylization here attempts a bold displacement: a re-imagining of the social conflict between the residents fighting for their homes and those that would profit from their dispossession as a personal drama. This is because the scene's aesthetic conceits seem more keyed to Eun-mo's emotional drama as the camera follows her oddly unbothered walk through the battle zone rather than to the spectacle of struggle that now recedes into the background. The film seems to make a self-

consciously impossible request: it asks the audience to ignore the struggle that might indeed be too brutal to be subordinated to film aesthetics in the way that the conceit demands and to view the story instead as one about a young woman's growth.

The resolution of the plot is similarly ambivalent. Instead of adjudication at the end of the film, the traditional function of parsing right and wrong is swapped for an insurance adjustment. As a result, instead of the finality of closure, we get the aesthetic equivalent of a *settlement*, a form of closure in which resolution is brokered in the most modest possible terms—and at the cost of full disclosure. In contrast to a juridical judgment, a settlement seems to be more of an expedience, in which proceedings are prematurely ended with a payment (rather than a criminal sentence) serving to balance the scales, but these are almost always negotiated and executed in private. This is to say that there is no properly determined public justice at the end of the film: Joong-shik remains in prison on his own volition for a crime that he did not commit, but for which he prefers to accept responsibility in order to protect Eun-mo, who walks away with a payout. The institution of the prison notwithstanding, justice is negotiated in the film not through the police or the courts, but in the backrooms of nightclubs by developers and their henchmen and correspondingly, by insurance adjusters who decide to reopen or close cases in a somewhat arbitrary fashion. Justice, in short, remains a private matter.

The film ends with a shot of Eun-mo leaving town on the back of her friend's scooter, a scene which contrasts directly with the film's opening in which she sits in traffic in a taxi returning to Paju with a shot of the brake lights of the car ahead, not-so-subtly signaling her stagnant prospects. In so doing, she accomplishes what Joong-shik has long failed to do, that is, to leave the small town for broader vistas. Retreating from his past as (in the eyes of the authorities) a North Korean sympathizer wanted for his role in various protests, and as well from a horrific incident in which his lover's child suffered burns from a pot of boiling water due in part to his negligence, Joong-shik has previously told his father that he was unable to leave Paju and return to Seoul. Eun-mo's final departure thus reads, on the one hand, as a successful attempt to

overcome past traumas and to move beyond them. On the other hand, however, her progression beyond her formerly frustrated development, haunted by the uncertainty surrounding the death of her sister, depends not on legitimate resolution but on the sacrifice of Joong-shik and the others who must suffer so that she can remain innocently suspended in her mistaken understanding.

Capital at Play

The theme of extra-legal adjudication is even more pronounced in *Burning*. Without even confronting Ben with the fact of his crime or culminating the investigation that Jong-su has undertaken since Hae-mi's abrupt disappearance, Jong-su (who lacks the settlement options available to Eun-mo) simply invites Ben to a remote rural location and wordlessly kills him, decisively and without fanfare. The scene echoes the earlier scene of Jong-su's father's sentencing, at which neither Jong-su nor his father utter a word, despite the momentous occasion. Indeed, there is nothing to say in the face of these determined fates. In both cases, guilt seems obvious because it follows from one's class position: Jong-su's father, even in his subdued state in the court room, embodies impoverished rage just as Ben, with his polite if vacant smile, smugly figures the fact that he is immune from the crimes he knows that he is guilty of committing. But *Burning* is an expression less of proletarian anger, and more of its final limit. There are no frustrated appeals to societal mechanisms for justice, which we know to be identical to the mechanisms of capital in a society radically tilted toward wealth. Instead, Jong-su's act at the very end of the film marks the point where the subordinated class figure simply can no longer abide. Here retribution no longer requires justification, just deep suspicion and rage. And though he seems to serve as the proverbial hand of justice in this case, his actions resemble the more literal settlement that we saw in *Paju* in the sense that the standard for justice here is not public and juridical but rather Jong-su's own private sense of having been wronged.

In stark contrast to Jong-su, Ben is a cosmopolitan, a wealthy young man who lives in Banpo, a fancy neighborhood in Seoul. Ben drives

a Porsche and travels globally on a whim. Crucially, the source of his wealth remains vague; and whereas we regularly see Jong-su working (as a delivery man or on his family's farm), Ben's day-to-day life is one of leisure. Meeting on a trip to Africa, Ben and Hae-mi become a couple upon their return, much to the consternation of Jong-su, who had begun a relationship with Hae-mi before this trip. Growing suspicious about the source of Ben's wealth, Jong-su asks him what he does for a living. In response, Ben is evasive. "Just this and that," he says before cryptically elaborating, "You probably wouldn't know even if I told you. Simply put, it's playing. … Nowadays there's no distinction between playing and working for me." This mysterious quality causes Jong-su to later describe him as a "Gatsby" after F. Scott Fitzgerald's iconic figure of enigmatic wealth and to locate him within a set of larger social trends in Korea: "There are too many Gatsbys in Korea."[15]

Burning is thus even more equivocal about the economic frame that determines the lives of the three main characters that constitute the film's love triangle. Ben is clearly as rich as Jong-su and Hae-mi are poor, but what remains unarticulated are the conditions that enforce the lack of social mobility that makes the gap between them impossible to bridge. Instead, we become immersed in the personal narrative that pits Ben and Jong-su in romantic competition, which turns out to be no competition at all, given Ben's wealth—even though he is ambivalent about his relationship with Hae-mi, who we learn is just one of many young women that he has dated before each of them has met with a mysterious fate. Indeed, the only real enthusiasm that Ben shows for any of his personal ventures is when he speaks of "burning greenhouses," which we come to suspect is his euphemism for quietly serially killing each young woman he dates and making room for the next one.

But while we, like Jong-su, very much sense the fact of Ben's guilt as we proceed through to the film's conclusion, Ben's crime, like his job, remains unclear. This is because the film skips past any adjudication process directly to the punishment. What we do know, however, is that his advantages in life—and those of each of his rich friends—are immutable and impossible to overcome except through extreme acts of violence that radically supersede the bounds of social decorum, bounds

which are designed to protect the privilege Ben enjoys. His evasive answer about his work seems to allude to speculative ventures connected with FIRE economy businesses, in which capital is hard at work, even if the capitalist is not. In contrast to Jong-su and Hae-mi, who we see toil in various venues (from agricultural work to mindless service labor), Ben is constantly, to use his own term, "playing," engaged in various forms of leisure (sitting in coffee shots, traveling, smoking marijuana). Each of these activities appear to belie the accumulation of capital clearly occurring on his behalf, an accumulation which seems not to require his participation. Even his euphemism, "burning greenhouses," seems to signal the kind of fungibility that makes the FIRE industries possible.

Importantly, Ben's "playing" (referring here to whatever it is that earns him money) and his hobby, "burning greenhouses," are both performed off-screen. We see the fruits of his wealth and we see the new young woman who has replaced Hae-mi after her disappearance; but in both cases, we do not witness the actions that effect these changes. This pairing of dramatic change with the lack of visible action is part of the general low-affect aesthetic in *Burning*, an aesthetic that it shares with *Paju*. Jong-su's dramatic murder of Ben at the end of *Burning* is the exception here that proves the rule. In general, the most important events from Hae-mi's meeting Ben in Africa to her presumed murder, are left to our imaginations.

In a similar vein, Ben's affective engagements with the people and the world around him are also understated. Ben is unfailingly polite—the worst we see from him is an embarrassed yawn when Hae-mi belabors her performance of African dance—even when he can see that Jong-su has come to view him with suspicion. His generally flat affect and underperformed emotions give rise to situations in which, as Lauren Berlant has articulated, "apprehension matters dramatically more than expression." Berlant continues: "in the realm of underperformed emotion, incidents are sensed, and it remains to find a form of the disturbance."[16] Berlant connects this flat affect and underperformed emotions to Raymond Williams' famous concept of a "structure of feeling," which for Berlant, "indicates a collective experience that mostly goes without saying for something about belonging to a world."[17] Because it is

underperformed, flat affect devalues expression and thus triggers our efforts to apprehend and adumbrate what "goes without saying" in the worlds we find ourselves inhabiting. In *Burning*, Ben's flat affect, I want to suggest, underperforms the brutality of the FIRE industry operations that seem to be the basis of his wealth. What the film's aesthetic portrayal of Ben and the industries themselves share is an understated quality that masks brutal violence. We come to understand Ben's polite demeanor then as paradigmatic for actions, like burning greenhouses, that are presented as a form of play despite their violence and destructiveness.

Significantly then, the site of Ben's enigmatic "confession" is Jong-su's house in Paju. Jong-su lives not in the developing urban section of the city but rather in the rural area, close enough to the North Korean border that he can see North Korean land from his driveway and hear the propaganda blasted over loudspeakers daily.[18] When Ben and Hae-mi come for a visit, Ben suggests that they smoke marijuana as the sun sets on the horizon. This is another mark of Ben's cosmopolitanism, as marijuana remains a tightly controlled drug in South Korea with severe penalties for anyone caught using it. In contrast to Ben's nonchalance, Jong-su is very hesitant to partake, and coughs violently at his first toke. But later after Hae-mi falls asleep, Jong-su and Ben continue to smoke and become relaxed as they sit together in front of Jong-su's house. They both fall into confessional dispositions, Jong-su confessing his hatred for his father, and the anger that caused him to make Jong-su burn his mother's clothes when she left the family. Ben picks up on the trope (of burning) and the confessional mode, telling Jong-su that he enjoys burning greenhouses periodically, despite the fact that it is a crime, which he compares to smoking marijuana. He justifies his avocation by pointing out that there is an abundance of dirty greenhouses in Korea. "If feels like they're just waiting for me to burn them," he says, with the camera remaining focused on Jong-su, implying that the surplus of useless greenhouses in Korea serves as a figure of the kind of surplus population that Jong-su and Hae-mi represent. Living on the margins of a capitalist expansion that has left them behind, they become disposable, waiting to be burned like the greenhouses in Ben's monologue.

The conversation turns more philosophical and abstract when Jong-

su questions his right to judge which greenhouses are unnecessary. Ben at this juncture pivots into naturalism: "I don't make judgments. I just accept it," he responds, "It's something like rain." The rain does not judge, but rather signifies the "morality of nature," which he describes as having "simultaneous existence." That is, nature does not distinguish between right and wrong but rather expresses itself in simultaneous and often contradictory ways. This point is somewhat convoluted, to be sure a kind of "stoner" philosophy, but he becomes more lucid in the ensuing moments when he proceeds to compare himself with this natural simultaneous existence. "I'm here, and I'm there. I'm in Paju, and I'm in Banpo. I'm in Seoul, and I'm in Africa." This is an example of Ben's flat affect (aided certainly in this instance by the narcotics), through which the implication of wanton destruction in burning greenhouses becomes diffused and understood as part of a natural cycle, authorizing Ben to align his own agency with that of an omnipresent nature. As we might say, Ben contains multitudes. We might think of the fire used to burn greenhouses in relationship to the capital that fans the flames of the FIRE industries. While we suspect Ben to be confessing his serial killings through the euphemism, "burning greenhouses" (and one that is ultimately not too different from Silicon Valley neologisms like "creative destruction"), we may also think of his confession as naming the operations of transnational capital accumulation on which his Gatsby-like wealth is based, an accumulation process which works simultaneously in multiple locations and may seem as natural as the falling rain. These are operations that in fact produce the surplus populations that in turn become the fodder for Ben's homicidal or capitalist appetites.

This is to say, more simply, that Ben here is using a metaphor: "burning greenhouses" is intended to stand in for some other activity, whether it is serial killing as is strongly implied but not entirely confirmed in the diegesis or the processes of the FIRE-industry capital accumulation as I am suggesting in my interpretation. Crucially throughout the film, Jong-su has exhibited an inability to suss out metaphors. Earlier in the film while preparing a meal at his fancy apartment, Ben tells Hae-mi to ask Jong-su, who is an aspiring novelist, to explain to her what a metaphor is. Jong-su changes the topic and asks where the bathroom is. And indeed,

after Ben's confession about burning greenhouses, Jong-su proceeds to monitor the area around his house (Ben has confessed that the next target is nearby), checking all the greenhouses in order to thwart Ben's plan. All of these efforts, however, fail because, we suspect, Ben was speaking metaphorically and not literally. The viewer is left in the same ambiguous position that Jong-su occupies, uncertain about Ben's meaning, and left to infer its metaphorical significance, particularly in light of Hae-mi's disappearance.

Jong-su is thus like the aphasic with a "similarity disorder" in Roman Jakobson's famous study of metaphor and metonymy. Constitutionally unable to understand metaphors, this sort of aphasic "can switch neither from a word to its synonyms or circumlocutions nor to its *heteronyms* (equivalent expressions in other languages)" and thus has difficulty grasping the metaphoric category of words.[19] One of Jakobson's examples returns us to Ben's metaphoric invocation of rain in *Burning*. Jakobson writes that for this kind of aphasic, "The sentence 'it rains' cannot be produced unless the utterer sees that it is actually raining."[20] Of course, it is not raining on that evening in Paju when Ben and Jong-su have their stoned conversation; and this is the point at which Ben ramps up what Jakobson terms "metalanguage," or language that speaks to the nature of language. For Ben, rain is not rain, but rather a figure for his own omnipresence, something he attempts to align with nature itself but which comes to seem more like capital, endowed with radical fluidity and mobility, rather than any kind of specific embodiment. Not only is Jong-su, like Jakobson's aphasic, unable to follow Ben's metalanguage, this failure relegates him to a subordinate position in Ben's natural hierarchy; unlike Ben, Jong-su must remain in one place, stuck on the farm in Paju, faced with a set of bleak prospects for the future. Like Hae-mi, Jong-su is relegated to a position among the surplus population, an eminently replaceable unit in an underemployed reserve army fated to remain on the sidelines of global capital.

Thus, rather that attempting to determine "what really happens" in the film—indeed, the film leaves any definitive determination unsatisfied—I want to conclude by suggesting that *Burning* connects the capacity for substitution in metaphor to the concept of "fungibility"

in finance. To be sure fungibility is not the same as metaphor. The instrumental fact of the interchangeability possible in fungibility is not the same as the more nuanced relationship of equivalence in metaphor. What they do have in common, however, within the specific context of *Burning*, is the concept of substitution thematized in the film under the metaphoric rubric of "burning greenhouses." That is to say, in *Burning*, metaphor is reduced to fungibility. Finance in many respects depends on fungibility, which names the interchangeability of goods or assets so that they can be exchanged in transactions. While the metaphor of burning greenhouses in *Burning* may ultimately remain indeterminate (though our suspicions may be as strong as Jong-su's), what remains more certain is the sense of fungibility implied in the metaphor. We see this interchangeability most powerfully at the end of the film in Ben's very quick replacement of Hae-mi in his life with another young woman, and the suggestion (through the evidence collected in his bathroom) that there have been many young women who eventually disappear before her. If Hae-mi, metaphorically speaking, is the latest greenhouse to be burned, this is true because she is eminently replaceable. Real estate—and indeed many of the assets protected by insurance policies (including one's life)—is by definition a non-fungible asset. That is, one's house or one's life are sufficiently unique that they cannot be simply traded for equivalents, whether another house or a sum of money or a new girlfriend. But in the modern finance of the FIRE industry, what might have been regarded as non-fungible becomes so through vehicles like Collateral Debt Obligations (CDOs) and life insurance securitization, which transform such assets into tradeable entities on the financial markets.[21]

Conclusion

As epitomized by Ben's underperformed affect, FIRE industry ventures become visible in these films only in sublimated form, including literal fires, as something other than what they actually are. In both films, the city of Paju serves as a primary site of this rerouted inscription, as a battleground for development in Park Chan-ok's film and as a location that contrasts markedly with Ben's posh neighborhood in *Burning*. In

both films, Paju is also the location of literal fires that function to index the more inchoate operations of FIRE, which encompass industries that are ambivalent to labor. As a result, they allow for a good deal of capital accumulation without providing very much in the way of employment opportunities—thus exacerbating rather than repairing social inequality. After all, not even Ben works very hard. In contrast, Jong-su and Hae-mi do what they can to scrape by but even they are relatively unmotivated by work; they seem to know that hard work is more of an ideological fool's errand and that they are destined to fill the role of surplus population. Both Hae-mi and Jong-su attempt to find a measure of aesthetic autonomy that might mitigate their clear fates. For this reason, though the film opens with a depiction of the way in which their lowly service jobs (Jong-su, as a delivery man; Hae-mi, as a dancer for store promotion) cause the former childhood acquaintances to intersect, we learn that they have artistic interests that carve out spaces of possibility despite their class positions—Hae-mi as a mime and amateur dancer and Jong-su as a novelist. But their expressions of artistic freedom always seem to function simultaneously to confirm their marginal positions. Hae-mi turns out to be just another fungible victim in Ben's serial game, which seems less motivated by the kind of pathologies that we usually associate with serial killer narratives and more by the cold logic of the elimination of overcapacity in the work force. In this context, Jong-su's return to the agricultural life in the countryside seems to repeat the missteps of his father, who instead of buying real estate in Gangnam, as his lawyer friend once advised, decided to pursue farming at the precise moment when the system of globalized agriculture undercut forever the sustainability of the small Korean farmer. Like Hae-mi then, Jong-su too is a figure of overcapacity, and Ben's euphemism, burning greenhouses, encompasses the way in which both are extraneous; a young woman in a world where men like Ben are ambivalent about marriage and families and a young farmer in a world dominated by large producers. Only Eun-mo emerges from this *Bildungs-romance* in an advantageous position, but as we know this is only because she has aligned her interests with those of the insurance adjuster, who prosecutes Joong-shik for a fraud he did not commit, and those of the real estate developer that wants to

ruthlessly displace her friends and neighbors.

Both *Paju* and *Burning* are stories in which there is real profit but little growth. The simple result of this disparity is that capital accumulation *requires* the consuming fires that turns everyone and everything into fungible kindling. This is a world in which, as Chang Kyung-sup suggests, "South Koreans' poverty is increasingly manifested through financial entrapment ensuing from heavy personal indebtedness to banks, kin members and friends, and the worst of all, private usurers" and as part of a "state-driven expansion of consumer debt to industrially disenfranchised and underemployed people." This functions ultimately as "a macroeconomic measure for sustaining national economic vigor and a quasi-industrial policy for boosting the financial industry" that simultaneously serves as a measure for "making economically precarious or surplus population remain incorporated in the confines of market capitalism."[22] In this way, the true horror of the fires in *Paju* and *Burning* is not that they are unfortunate or perverse byproducts of the FIRE economies but rather that they have become the primary strategies through which accumulation is violently secured.

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Notes

[1] Laam Hae and Jesook Song, "Introduction: Core Location, Asia as Method, and a Relational Understanding of Places" in *On the Margins of Urban South Korea: Core Location as Method and Praxis*, eds. Jesook Song and Laam Hae (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 11. Hae and Song refer to Youngseo Baik, *Rethinking East Asia in Core Locations: A Task for a Co-Habitation* [핵심현장에서 동아시아를 다시 묻다: 공생사회를 위한 실천과제] (Paju: Changbi, 2013).

[2] See Sang Keon Lee, Heeyoun You, and Heeseo Rain Kwan, "Korea's Pursuit for Sustainable Growth Cities through New Town Development: Implications for LAC," *Inter-American Development Bank*, June 2015, 1; and Byung-Doo Choi, "Developmental Neoliberalism and Hybridity of the Urban Policy of South Korea" in *Locating Neoliberalism in East Asia*, eds. Bae-Gyoon Park, Richard Child Hill, and Asato Saito (Chichester: Blackwell, 2012), 101–08.

[3] See Laam Hae, "Against the Construction State: Korean Pro-greenbelt Activism as Method" in *On the Margins of Urban South Korea: Core Location as Method and Praxis*, eds. Jesook Song and Laam Hae (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 74.

[4] See Sofia T. Shwayri, "A Model Korean Ubiquitous Eco-City? The Politics of Making Songdo," *Journal of Urban Technology* 20, no. 1 (2013): 39–55.

[5] Lee You Ju-hyun, "Once a boon, New Town projects beleaguer GNP," *Hankyoreh*, April 6, 2011, https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/PRINT/471681.html.

[6] See Shameem Black, "Duty-Free in the DMZ?: Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries, the Heyri Art Valley, and Peace Tourism," *Social Text* 33, no. 2 (2015): 59. Black's characterization of the Heyri Art Valley as suffused with "ambivalent formations" is useful for thinking more broadly of the recent history of land development in and around Paju.

[7] Kotaro Hosokawa, "LG Display Ends South Korean Production of LCD Television Panels," *Nikkei Asia*, February 1, 2020, https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Electronics/LG-Display-ends-South-Korea-production-of-LCD-television-panels.

[8] Hyun Bang Shin and Soo-Hyun Kim, "The Developmental State, Speculative Urbanisation, and the Politics of Displacement in Gentrifying Seoul," *Urban Studies* 53, no. 3 (2016): 555.

[9] Mike Davis, "Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Proletariat," *New Left Review* 26 (2004): 9–10, 23–24.

[10] David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 7–20.

[11] See Jon Moore, "Economy and Society: Geographic Views on Restructuring and Social Mediation" in *21st Century Geography: A Reference Handbook, Vol. 1*, ed. Joseph P. Stoltman (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2012), 390; and Jamie Doucette, "Flexible Exportism? Situating Financialization within Korean Political Economy," *Marxism 21* 15, no. 1 (2018): 248–82.

[12] Shin and Kim, "The Developmental State," 540–59.

[13] Joo Seong-cheol, "Park Chan-ok: I wanted to make a movie like a movie [박찬옥: '영화 같은 영화'를 찍고 싶었다]" *Cine21*, November 3, 2009, http://www.cine21.com/news/view/?mag_id=58430.

[14] Ko Kyung-seok, "Director Pak Chan-ok: '*Paju* is a simple and clear love story' (Interview) [박찬옥 감독 '〈파주〉는 간단 명료한 사랑이야기' (인터뷰)]," *Asiae*, November 9, 2009, https://www.asiae.co.kr/article/2009110908420891340.

[15] For a reading of the film's intertextual engagements with literary antecedents, see Björn Boman, "The Multifold Intertextuality in Lee Chang Dong's *Burning*," *Social Sciences and Humanities Open* 3 (2021): 1–6.

[16] Lauren Berlant, "Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28 (2015): 195.

[17] Ibid., 194.

[18] For an account of Paju in relation to North Korea, see Kosuke Fujiki, "Adapting Ambiguity, Placing (In)visibility: Geopolitical and Sexual Tension in Lee Chang-dong's *Burning*," *Cinema Studies* 4 (2019): 79.

[19] Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" in *Language in Literature*, eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 103–05.

[20] Ibid., 101.

[21] Cf. Aiwa Ong, *Fungible Life: Experiment in the Asian City of Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1–26. Although Ong's title certainly encapsulates the point that I am trying to make here in a materialist vein, her project with its biopolitical interest in genomics tracks in a different (though not incompatible) direction.

[22] Chang Kyung-Sup, "Financialization of Poverty: Proletarianizing the Financial Crisis in Post-Developmental Korea" in *Risking Capitalism*, ed. Susanne Soederberg (Bingley: Emerald Group, 2016), 127–28.

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