THE LOGIC OF PAIN IN TALKING BODIES:
AN APPROACH TO *HAN* IN THE FILMS OF HONG SANG-SOO AND LEE C
HANG-DONG

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1. INTRODUCTION

The awarding of the 2020 Oscar for Best Picture to *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019) was one of the biggest milestones in the global circulation of South Korean audiovisual productions, a phenomenon that has emerged as a singular object of study both for the aesthetic representations it has disseminated and for the multiple narrative forms and structures it has articulated. The global impact of South Korean audiovisual culture in the context of *Hallyu*—also known as the Korean Wave—has attracted considerable attention in film studies. Examples of *Hallyu* range from the widely popular aesthetics of K-pop music videos to the massive audiences generated by South Korean TV series (from niche K-drama to mainstream successes such as *Squid Game*) on SVoD platforms. However, while these fashionable cultural products have often overshadowed South Korea's substantial production on the art-film circuit, South Korean film auteurs offer some of the most insightful explorations of the malaise of contemporary South Korean society.

The purpose of this article is to explore the representation of grief and its translation into stories that tell us about the internalized past of individuals in a state of perpetual sorrow in two contemporary Korean films: *On the Beach at Night Alone* (Bamui haebyun-eoseo honja, Hong Sang-soo, 2017; hereinafter, *OBNA*) and *Burning* (Lee Chang-dong, 2018). The article focuses on the concept of *han* (恨) in the cinematic universes of two *auteurs* of the 386 Generation: Hong Sang-soo and Lee Chang-dong. The concept of *han* is an inherent element of the modes of representation in South Korean cinema and considered to be an essential feature of Korean culture. A legacy of the colonialist era, *han* takes us from the individual to the collective, on an endless search for recognition by the Other. The loss of the object of desire in an unwanted separation for the protagonists of both films—Young-hee in *OBNA* and Jong-su in *Burning*—can only be understood within a framework that considers the historical precedents involved in the consolidation of *han*. In this article, this framework is applied to support an analysis of the mise-en-scène and narratives of both films, to explore how the poetics of their discourse constitutes a dialogic event in which the known and the different engender each other.

To explore the cross-cultural nature of the concept of *han*, this study correlates it with the psychoanalytic model of melancholia, an emotion with which it is intrinsically related. Like melancholia, *han* reflects a loss of identity and inhibition of the self. The findings of this analysis reveal that the existential pain of the main characters of both films establishes a dialectic between *han* and empty spaces. Through this dialectic, the narration in *OBNA* creates labyrinths where repetition will give rise to a pain contained on the threshold between the spaces of its empty world. Similarly, through a series of POV shots, the narration in *Burning* conveys the idea of an absence.

The characters in these films verbally express their ability to dialogue with memory and access the trauma caused by their loss of self. As spectators, we have access to their past through their memories: in *Burning*, those memories remain lost and reduced to oblivion, while in *OBNA*, they can only be found in lines in the sand on the seashore—where Korean poets write. This is where pain is born: out of the inability to fulfil the unconscious desire—or, in itself, the inability to accept the absence of a loved one.

2. GENEALOGY OF *HAN* AND SOUTH KOREAN CINEMA

2.1. Colonialism, Independence, and Censorship

Han could be translated as pain, grief, anguish, or the longing experienced on the Korean peninsula in the course of a history of repression and censorship:

> The concept of *han* emerged in an attempt to reflect the oppression experienced during the colonial period due to political governmental authoritarianism, as well as Western imperialism; this shows that the agency of Koreans is still subject to Japanese colonial discourse and has been shaped by it[1].

The arrival of cinema in Korea dates back to 1918. At that moment, the colonization of the consciousnesses of subjects subjugated to the order of the political elites began. This process would lead to a constant quest to reconstruct Korean tradition in the search for symbols of national identity:

> Today, while the infiltration of Western ways and ideas into almost every sphere of Korean life is undeniable, the need to preserve some corner of national identity that resists this penetration is often keenly felt[2].

The idea of desire as an illusion doomed to dissolve gave rise to a fantasy to be constructed: a national identity based on anti-Japanese sentiment and drawing on imaginaries of Western philosophy, religion, and literature "that had long been captivated by narratives of penetration, in which a hero overcomes a formidable obstacle"[3]. In an attempt to challenge the repression of colonialism, Korea thus found an escape, a form of resistance. Lee's and Hong's films both

express this resistance, establishing a correlation between memory, remembrance, and the stanzas of a poem. Spectators are drawn into the game of memory by means of the resemblance between *han* and melancholia: "*han* is the ghostly excess remains of trauma that cannot be assimilated"[4]. With this in mind, this study attempts to focus on how the memories of the characters traversed by the grief permeate the representation.

South Korean cinema, distinguished by its solid narrative components and meaningful settings, makes use of the stories it tells to explore separation, in an effort to delve into different forms of pain. The rift on the Korean peninsula could only be understood through an approach to the historical precedents involved in the consolidation of a very specific form of pain. The projection of an image of an identity that the world seemed unaware of required the recreation of virtual images of the past. These images would ultimately become a metonymic vehicle used for the purpose of representing Koreans' ongoing search for modernity and a post-authoritarian identity[5]. The abundance of South Korean productions on SVoD platforms highlights the need to attempt a reading of its discourses and the scenarios they propose, as the cross-cultural quality of *han* allows us to view it as something that is "transcultural, intercultural and extant in all human communities […] it is not the uniqueness of *han* that makes it untranslatable, but the unique experience of suffering that in and of itself is always untranslatable and that melancholia marks any colonial and postcolonial context"[6].

2.2. *Han* and Melancholia

The loss of a sense of collective identity is key to the transculturality of *han* and the melancholic condition implicit in it:

> Melancholy is not unknown in the world of colonialism and postcolonialism. The concept of *han*, therefore, has to be understood in this context of intercultural, transcultural, intertextual movement, with the blending as well as crossing-over of ideas, beliefs, and meanings of other cultural works and ideas[7].

The beginnings of Korean cinema were marked by the lack of a voice, whereby repression and separation were established as signifiers, laying the foundations that would later turn Korean cinema into a tool for empowerment. Early Korean film productions sought to compensate for the deficiencies of national identity that could not be overcome by the heavily censored cinema of the liberation period[8]. The first relations between the subject of domination—the subjugated—and the colonial master were thus articulated. This dialectic would become one of the main features of contemporary South Korean narratives. From Hegel's perspective, the master is expressed in the colonizer, who projects himself onto the slave; the slave, in turn, is the only active subject of history and therefore the one on whom the development of history depends[9].

Lacanian psychoanalytic theory conceptualizes the master's discourse based on the relationship between the master (Japan, the United States) and the slave (Korea): the hidden truth of the master is that he is castrated, a desiring subject whose lack cannot be satisfied by what the slave produces, as like the slave, the master is also subject to symbolic law. From this it follows that the master's interest is that all things should be equal for everyone; as the master has no interest in knowledge, the master's discourse is a discourse of unknowing, and thus a discourse of the unconscious[10].

The first of the analogies between *han* and melancholia can be found in the loss of a loved one or of an abstraction, such as the homeland, freedom, or an ideal[11]. The melancholic condition thus produces a peculiarly phantasmal formation of the self, retaining the loss of the love object by identifying with the phantasm of the Other, the lost love object. Melancholia therefore implies a loss of self-identity: "the central aspect of *han* is not emotions, but loss of identity. What unites Koreans is that they lack a collective identity"[12]. This specific sense of *han* particularly affected the generations after the Civil War (1950-1953), who grew up in a divided country.

2.3. A Matter Of Identity: The 386 Generation

After the assassination of dictator Park Chung-hee in 1979, attempts to establish democracy were marked by the turmoil caused by successive *coups d'état* and the struggle for independence. A revolutionary younger generation provided the perfect context for the rise of a new politically active group of artists, the so-called 386 Generation, who led the left-leaning anti-dictatorship student movement in the 1980s[13]. The 386 Generation took shape around the Eden of memory, of absence, and of the loss resulting from the massacres of this tumultuous period:

> The *386 Generation*, also known as the generation of the collective auteur, began to explore new ways of converting memory to the screen, of generating and reversing its virtuality, in the never-ending mutability of the display of pain. It is this generation to which directors such as Bong Joon-ho, Lee Chang-dong, Hong Sang-soo, Kim Ki-duk or Im Kwon-taek belong: "all made work that featured similar visions of Seoul as a place of nomads, dislocation, and extraterritoriality"[14].

The purpose of this collective was not to delve into the past to explore ordinary life, but to explore the painful transition from the realm of the public into the private. It is here, where the movable condition of pain uses the narcissistic condition of the self as a channel, where a disconnection is established between the jouissance of the self and the suffering of the Other. The ideas of decolonization, cultural independence, and sovereignty would effectively challenge the hegemony of Hollywood, and it was in this way that South Korean cinema created its own audience in the late 1990s.

Globalization began to have an impact on South Korea in the late 1980s. After 1988, when film directors were no longer required to submit their scripts to censors for approval, a certain degree of social critique began to emerge[15]. The changes to film production policies thus created a new scenario where independent producers were able to enter the industry. Each movement of upheaval and political turmoil created a new opportunity for a cultural renaissance. In this context, *Hallyu* came to bridge the gap between the individual and the collective[16]. The liberal policies that allowed the influx of foreign cultural influences shaped *Hallyu* with its narratives defined by state policies and socio-economic factors[17]. This latter influence marked the development of an identity understood in mimesis with the Other. Cinema would eventually become a cultural medium through which Korea established itself as a new power sustained by its own audiovisual production[18].

Thus, the cultural phenomenon of *Hallyu* constituted an interweaving of two elements: an aesthetic *auteurist* revolt against both the waning forces of Korean nationalism (*minjok-juui*) and the legacy of the authoritarianism (*kwonui-juui*) that had characterized South Korea throughout much of the latter part of the 20th century; and postmodernism, typified by lavishly produced, standardized multi-genre blockbusters targeting a pan-Asian audience[19].

Based on the above considerations, it is clear that Hong and Lee explore literary forms in film as starting points for the exploration of suffering and the representation of *han*. The presence of poetry in *OBNA*, and the Japanese heritage of Haruki Murakami's writings in *Burning* reflect the consolidation of Korean identity as a result of an influx of foreign cultures[20]. It is in the empty worlds these filmmakers create that *han* will ultimately lead to tragedy in two ways: the negation of the master's discourse, and the use of repetition. The existence of these empty worlds defines both *OBNA* and *Burning*, and in both films the traumatic event is linked to loss. On the border between a desolate space and a cosmopolitan fantasy realm, we witness the tale of a death foretold (Hae-Mi, played by Jeon Jong-seo in *Burning*) and the burial of a memory beneath the suffering of the present (Young-hee, played by Kim Min-hee in *OBNA*). Both are "Antigonesque" characters in a permanent state of transition, on a journey toward foreign spaces where they will seek an identity distinct from the one that has been attributed to them through *han*.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study offers a textual analysis of *OBNA* and *Burning* with the aim of identifying analogies between the main object of study, *han*, and the concept of melancholia. As a starting point to the analysis of the pain embodied in the plotlines of separation and the symptom of social abjection, it is necessary to identify the narcissistic vision of the self. To this end, the methodology for this study is based on the approach proposed by Marzal Felici and Gómez Tarín: to break down the most important sequence of each film into its constituent elements, and to establish relationships between these elements in order to explain the mechanisms that unite them as a "signifying whole"[21].

The logics of *han* are to be found in language, which serves as a symbolic space where the speaker anticipates the tragedy: language now indicates the direction of a force, and the spectator needs to be able to recognize forces and traumatic actions directed by signs[22]. *Han* emerges in the dominant themes of the two stories, somewhere between abjection and mimesis, in the essence of the tragedy, and in the connections between the characters.

3. ON THE BEACH ALONE AT NIGHT

Hong's cinematographic world unfolds in the spaces of everyday life with a soft, attenuated tone. In Hong's films, ordinary spaces are populated by intellectual subjects expelled from their conventional lives on a quest to find authenticity in a foreign setting. This conception explains Hong's interest in disrupting the events in his films by playing with repetition and altering the chronological order of the narrative. At the level of the character'' discourse, the questioning of a profound crisis of language constitutes the main theme. Misunderstandings of language constitute a spiral that main characters cannot escape. The inadequacy of language is the organizing principle of the everyday life represented in his films. This is one of the keys to Hong's cinema: "since two can no longer speak to each other, the only way to communicate is by going outside the domain of language"[23].

Hong alludes to the capacity of literature for expressing suffering by naming his film using the title to a poem by the American author Walt Whitman: "On the Beach at Night Alone." Indeed, Whitman's poem contains what could be the definition of the spaces inhabited by the characters in Hong's film, as "the beach represents standing on the shore of eternity or afterlife"[24]. The distances between bodies, identities, and their souls are contained in the lines of the poem, and they will all be combined together with this narrative in order to explore its branching pathways and construct the story out of possibilities, imagining, rewriting, and repeating the search for that which has disappeared.

4.1. Otherness in the Mise-En-Scène

The protagonist in *OBNA*, an actress named Young-hee, is in Hamburg visiting her friend, Jee-young (Seo Yeong-hwa). Young-hee's decision to go abroad in a quest for desire will trigger a tragedy: the loss of her beloved, the filmmaker Sang-won (Moon Sung-Keun), who made her a promise he cannot keep: to go in search of her. The film's narrative poses a question about grief in a cosmopolitan world: What is left when language is not enough?

At the beginning of the second part of the film, Young-hee has returned to Seoul. It is here that she will return to the beach, the space of eternity, and where the story will split into two fragments: the dreamlike encounter with her beloved, and the real space where the fantasy dissolves and the heartbreak heals. Hong's characters assume the role of *flâneurs*, traveling paths where repetition serves to construct those spaces that can only be created in the form of the dream-image.

The use of repetition here offers a way of revealing the character's grief over an unwanted separation and the implicit loss of the love object. The resulting structure of the film reveals how the autobiographical elements implicit in Hong's films (in the characters' thoughts and actions) and his use of the rhetoric of confession (testimony, poetry) consolidate the relationships between the characters and the different points of view existing in the filmic space.

4.2. Empty Spaces and Idle Times

In her pursuit of desire and her search for identity, Young-hee escapes into the foreign setting. The film's narrative portrays strangeness and the search for identity through the foreign, in the long walks where the camera remains static, tracking the movement of bodies through the threshold into the unknown. The awakening of Young-hee's memory, her confession of the reason for her flight abroad, is also the confession of the reason for her pain. Desire is outside, in the exterior world, where the first of the differences between the spaces is established: while the world beyond is alluded to in the composition through the depth of field, the interior spaces are expressed through the word. In this way, Hong constructs the space that the tragedy will occupy, playing with zoom-in and -out and introducing pan shots to establish a dialogue with the world beyond, where desire will be laid to rest and tragedy will be unleashed.

It is in this way that the narration in *OBNA* articulates the spaces outside the present story. As in other films by Hong, an ode to memory is intoned by a riverbank. The frozen river in *Hotel by the River* (*Gangbyeon hotel*, Hong-Sang Soo, 2018; figure 1) renders explicit the same act of rewriting over a past that has been frozen or drowned under a rising tide, through the traced lines of recollection that awaken Young-hee's memory in *OBNA* (figure 2).

Figure 1. Hong Sang-soo illustrates the landscape of the memory on the riverbank of *Hotel by the River*, (Sang-soo, 2018)

Figure 2. Young-Hee formulates the desire to reunite with her beloved in *On the Beach at Night Alone* (Sang-soo, 2019)

The space between the real and the oneiric can only be crossed by the Unkwown Man as a stranger (figure 3). The exchange of glances with the stranger, who seems to be able to transgress the limits of the frame and the limits of time, reveals the intricacies of Young-hee's memory. It is here that we are given a clue about the protagonist, who, as she wanders, crosses the threshold into the unknown: whoever crosses this threshold undergoes a transformation[25] . In crossing the threshold, Young-hee experiences the pain resulting from the denial of her loss. It is on the threshold between these two spaces that the fantasy of the arrival of the Other is sustained[26]. Her

love object, Sang-won, is always present between her words, exposing the narcissistic wound of her attachment to an idealized Other.

Finally, we witness the space where she lays down her desire. Unable to assimilate the failure of her beloved to arrive at the meeting point, Young-hee ends up drawing his face in the sand. In her recreation of Sang-won's appearance, Young-hee leaves an imprint, as if she were trying to revive the memory of the Other between the shores of Hamburg and Seoul. The absence of the love object compels her to give her body to the sea, as she is incapable of ridding herself of her pain, a pain by which she defines herself at every moment: The *han* consists in the absence of her beloved. It is on that horizon where, perhaps, her voice will be answered, on a far shore where she will meet the absent lover.

The first episode of this film ends in a peculiar way. The one to whom we could not assign an identity, qualifying him as the Unknown Man, is now a familiar character. The Unknown Man who makes the impossible crossing (figure 3) over the temporal space is the one who ends up carrying Young-hee's body (figure 4) after her encounter with her beloved among the traces of memory.

Figure 3. The first appearance of the Unknown Man and the evidence of the first fracture of time in the plot of *OBNA*

Figure 4. The fall of Young-Hee facing the impossibility of her desire

4.3. The narration on the shore of the absent lover

We return to the shores, but not the same ones. Crossing different thresholds, doors that lead us from one place to another, we meet the Unknown Man again (figure 5). He remains trapped in Young-hee's dream, as no one has any notion of his existence. Now he finds himself cleaning the glass that separates us from the other shore, the space where the implicit dream will take place, a dream of the encounter with the lost love object. The Unkwown Man is thus no more than a sleepwalker who traces the boundary between the implicit dream and the space of reality. His presence contains something of Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image:

> The crystal is expression. Expression moves from the mirror to the seed. It is the same circuit which passes through three figures, the actual and the virtual, the limpid and the opaque, the seed and the environment[27].

The seed whose silhouette we can see behind the glass introduces us to a game of reflections, where the past converges with the reflection of the present: a virtual image. It is an image that only the spectators witness and that no longer forms part of the present; it is no longer trapped in the space of the virtual but in the dream-image of the protagonist, outside the frame of perception of the characters. It is here that the present is broken, open to make room for a world beyond, which only the spectator can see. And it is here that the specifics of the tragedy will occur, and where the power of its horrifying and moving effect resides[28].

Figure 5. The Unknown Man tracing the limit between the oneiric and the real

This crystal will give way to the experience of the oneiric. The dream expands to become the threshold between the two absences: the loss of the love object with the arrival of the idealized subject (the filmmaker, Sang-won) in Hamburg, and the consequent loss of the self, Young-hee, in the Other. It is here that desire crumbles (figure 6). When she wakes up, an assistant to Sang-won immediately recognizes her from the sketch of the filmmaker's face that she has traced in the sand. Young-hee, yielding once again to the pain of an ill-fated love, surrenders herself to the sea.

Figure 6. Young-Hee returns to the shore in another attempt to reimagine her desire daydreaming

Hong's use of editing juxtaposes fragmented memories out of chronological order. Repetition is used as the only clue for reordering the memories belonging to different timeframes: that of a continuous present and an unassimilated past. In this context, *han* emerges as a bridge between geographical settings where the narrative responds to the need to dialogue with memory, a legacy of the narratives of the 386 Generation. In the film's next sequence, poetry is used to express the pain from which Young-Hee wants to escape. Young-hee decides she does not wish to be identified with her wound, with what the Other has marked on her body.

The banquet scene (figure 7) features the first appearance of the beloved, the director Sang-won, who recites poetry. This is the language that pain adopts; what cannot be expressed with the characters' own voices is left to the voice of poetry, to the words of an anonymous writer. Once again, desire is established between close-ups, inserted between pan shots where the silence of the other characters gives way to Young-hee asking herself: "is he in pain?". The beloved, in pain, has arrived at the wrong time. He is not even capable of expressing his love with his own words, and so he must search for the words of others to which he can lend his voice. In this substitution of the gaze of words for the unrequited gaze of Young-hee, Sang-won recites his pain between verses, connecting memory to the logic of *memento mori*.

Figure 7. Sang-wong and the reconciliation that only occurs in the dream-image

The poem, which is addressed to Young-hee, belongs to a past time, to something lost. Young-hee, like Antigone, is swept away by passion. In her reverie of the reunion with her beloved we see the melancholic component: she holds onto the image, the face of that idealized Other, but reconciliation will only be possible in the dream-image. The "emptying self"[29] surrenders to the reason of the empty world, as Sang-won's fragment of poetry fails to sustain their love.

Once again, we return to the shore, the setting where the story will end. As the camera glides to the right, a panning movement reveals the final destination of desire (figure 8). It is a desire that warns of the danger of the sea, of the rising tide. The voice that interrupts the noises of nature manifests itself in a virtual-image, as the same Unknown Man—who in the dream-image is identified with the director's assistant—wakes Young-hee up. This is the moment when we witness the only testimony of reality: it was all a dream; she was fast asleep. It is at this moment that all poetry is lost at sea (figure 9). We have witnessed a love which, like that sleepwalker wandering around the crystal-image, is trapped in reality, a reality we will never be privy to because it cannot be recreated.

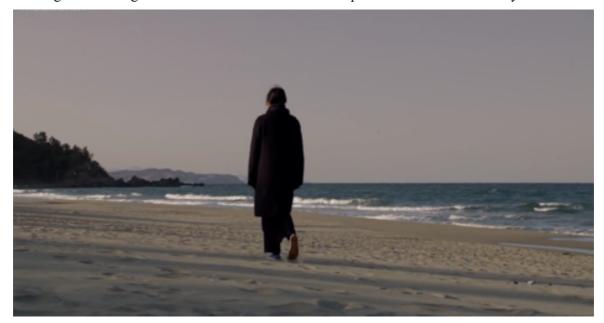Figure 8. Young-Hee's desire banishes and she collapses into the realm of reality

Figure 9. Is in the impossibility of Young-Hee's desire where *han* is revealed again

5. *BURNING*

In postmodernist thought, trauma and the mutability of its symptomatology place the advent of the tragic between the time of the self and the personalization of pain, where there is no room for considering the demands of others. These are the articulating motifs of Lee Chang-dong's most recent narratives. *Burning*, an adaptation of the Japanese short story *Naya wo yaku* (Haruki Murakami, 1983), explores the question of memory, inviting viewers on a journey through cityscapes of Seoul where memory is revealed amidst the flashes of neon lights, and the darkness that rises between rural villages, to the rhythm of voices between borders.

    A disoriented young writer crosses the pavements of Seoul in a cloud of cigarette smoke. Hiding his face behind the goods he has to deliver, Jong-su (Yoo Ah-in) is recognized by a young woman in disguise, dressed up as a dancing flight attendant at the doors of a shopping mall: It is Hae-mi (Jeon Jong-seo), a former classmate and neighbor from his hometown of Paju, who is working there as a hostess in a street raffle. This is how the story of *Burning* begins, as time stands still after the protagonist's reunion with the one who will become the trigger for his melancholia. After a series of encounters, Hae-Mi leaves to Africa in order to find her identity in the territory of the foreign, just like the protagonist in *OBNA*. However, after her overseas search of her lost self, Hae-mi returns accompanied by Ben (Steve Yeun), a Westernized stranger who reveals something of the order of the sinister—*Unheimlich*—when he confesses to a penchant for burning barns. For Jong-su, Ben's confession will eventually awaken the memory of his mother's abandonment, and it will also arouse his suspicions of Ben's involvement in Hae-mi's subsequent disappearance. Throughout the story, as he struggles to deal with the loss of Hae-mi, Jong-su hunts for clues as to her whereabouts, leading him again and again to a topography of absence in his quest for the truth. The desire to express his love for Hae-mi in words will ultimately lead him to pursue Ben.

5.1. Pursuing the impossible: mise-en-scène in *Burning*

The first allusion to the film's title in *Burning* is the smoke that wafts through empty space in the opening sequence. This is when we are introduced to the protagonist, Jong-su, who passes through various sets of doors as the scene progresses. In this setting on the outskirts of Seoul, he meets Hae-mi, a friend from his childhood, whom he does not remember. This is the first of the knots that the spectator will have to untie: Jong-su is unable to remember his past, and the narration will not reveal anything about it in images. The spectators will only be privy to his past and the pain implicit in it through words, portraits and objects in a rural village on the border between North and South. The film's narration charts the loss and subsequent disappearance of the love object

that will constitute the triggering element of Jong-su's melancholia, or *han*, and the state of abjection that it produces.

An unrecognizable Seoul is the first of the spaces presented in the film, lost in the overabundance of dynamic space and expressive depth. Jong-su crosses the avenue at a rhythm marked by a tracking shot that underscores the close dependence between what the spectator sees and what the spectator knows. This sets the pace for his first encounter with Hae-mi. The diegetic sound stops, and we enter a world of naturalistic sound: the hustle and bustle of a city. We hear a female voice. It is Hae-mi's voice, which will guide us through the expressive topography. In this encounter, Jong-su is reunited with his past.

She gives him his prize in the raffle—a pink watch—while they stand under a sign bearing the slogan "Time for everyone" (figure 10). He then gives it back to her as a gift, and from this moment Hae-mi will carry it with her. The motif of the watch will mark every event in her story, punctuating the timeline of her appearance, absence, and disappearance. In this way, it stands as a metaphor for the time limit set on Hae-mi's life. She has never had a watch before, has never been given time, but now that she has one it only serves to count out the time she has left until the execution of her death sentence.

Figure 10. The first encounter between Jong-su with Hae-mi

As we move through the world of *Burning*, we are introduced to the order of the protagonists' inner worlds in an empty world. In the third sequence, we enter Hae-mi's inner world. Between the greasy plastic awnings of a bar, we are shown the signifier for her identity: the rhetoric of mimesis. Hae-mi accompanies her speech with mimetic gestures to express her desire, locating her identity in a field of the symbolic. Even now that she has removed her performer's disguise, she wants to become someone else; she inhabits the limbo of the imaginary of what is no longer there, of absence. Her pantomime style of theatrical gestures, performed in the absence of stage, costume or props, is her way of expressing her pain, and thus her identity. Hae-mi's inner world

is presented in this way through two motifs: the time remaining on her pink wristwatch, and her desire to find her own identity in the Other. The use of mimesis is what Lee offers us in the construction of his thread of narratives where redemption and reconciliation represent the ongoing search for a post-authoritarian identity in Korean society.

5.2. The symptomatology of the word of love

This section outlines the relationships between the characters in relation to the discourse of the master and the causes of Jong-su's melancholia: the arrival of the complete Other (Ben) and the loss of the love object (Hae-mi).

Hae-mi's journey to the Kalahari Desert leaves Jong-su shaken. When she returns, she is accompanied by Ben, who sets himself up as the master to Jong-su's slave, the one who will rob Jong-su of the only thing he values in his life. Ben's status as the Westernized Other that Jong-su himself aspires to be is revealed from the outset in his European name. This Other of the melancholic is a perfect, whole, self-sufficient, Other: the non-castrated Other[30]. As the Korean subject who has managed to mimic the West, Ben will present himself as the master: he wishes to be recognized as master, but he is confronted with someone dependent and not free, therefore, his request directed towards the slave will always remain unsatisfied no matter how many gifts the latter offers him[31].

Ben is revealed to be the subject of the gaze, the one who will ultimately show each of the other characters their place in the world. For Jong-su, it is unbearable to see himself reflected in the reality of a completely different gaze[32]. The wound is reopened. Hae-mi abandons Jong-su. She is now absent, just like his estranged mother and his imprisoned father. Jong-su denies the rupture and with it the possibility of reconciliation with his past through a person from that past. It is here that the narcissistic wound[33] comes into play, as the narration plays with a series of external focalizations that reveal to the spectators the gesture of pain, the manifestation of the body bearing the *han*. Jong-su, as a tragic hero, enters a phase of mourning.

The last time Jong-Su sees Hae-Mi is during an informal dinner at his rural retreat, where she dances into the sunset. Empty chairs on the porch invite Jong-Su and Ben to attend her performance. Jong-su sets the stage to accept the pain that has taken hold of him. As spectators, we witness a sound outside the diegesis, after the day has fallen, where, in the shadows, the melody of *Génerique* by Milles Davis creeps in. To the rhythm of this piece, Hae-mi (figure 11) dances under the South Korean flag in the wind in the territory to which her childhood belongs, a place that holds her past, and therefore her memory.

Figure 11. *The body of the dancer never lies.* Hae-mi's farewell will take place in the movement between the borders of her past, announcing her will to disappear.

The young woman sways with undulating movements in the wind, in a tribute to Pina Bausch's dance *Café Müller*. This dance is her farewell to Jong-su. Hae-mi's disappearance is represented between blurred shots, a dramatic device used by Lee to represent the moments when the absence emerges. She already belongs to another world, a world that Jong-su will not be able to locate on the map. It is in the moments of rupture with our assumptions that we witness the destabilization, hinted at in circular crosscuts and out-of-focus shots. At this point in the story, a key element is introduced, when Ben expresses his desire in the territory of Hae-mi and Jong-su. He confesses his liking for burning barns. For Ben, the barns are empty spaces that deserve to be eliminated.

5.3. Unbearable lightness

When Jong-su meets Ben, the dissonance of their gazes in the elevator, the correspondence of the reflections evoked in the mirror (crystal-image), and the time preserved in the drawer of lost objects all foreshadow the tragic outcome. The analogy between the point-of-view shots denotes one of this Korean filmmaker's key concerns: to question the subjectivity of the audience, undermining their ability to maintain a constant opinion of their own throughout the film[34]

Figure 14. Jong-su finds Hae-mi's watch locked away in a drawer at Ben's home

Her desire to disappear seems to have been fulfilled. Her soul, like Antigone's, now belongs to the world of the dead. It is here in the interweaving of shots that the analogous condition of the two protagonists is revealed to us. The aesthetic of the "games of pain"[35] is articulated in the dialectic of the shots of the two interdependent subjects (figures 15 and 16), whereby the metamorphosis of Jong-su, who sentences the master of his pain to death, is thus reflected in the mirror.

Figure 15. The mirror of Ben's apartment sets the space where to stablish a mimic between him and Jong-su

Figure 16. Jong-su will now occupy the space of the master's discourse

In the final denouement we witness Ben's murder at the hands of Jong-su, bringing a definitive end to the master's discourse. The pan shots are all that bear witness to the end of this game of pain. Jong-su has ultimately become a "lost being"[36]. Through the opaque glass of the windscreen, all we can see is Jong-su weeping for the first time in his life. We return to the beginning: We do not recognize his face, as we only see it illuminated in the fire in which Ben's body is burning. Like his father did before him, he decides to burn the memory of the absence of his love object, as well as the representation of one of his memories in his dreams (figures 17 and 18). Murder is the only way for him to attain his identity, to free himself from melancholia. Jong-su is reborn, once again, in another empty world condemned to the tension of the tragic.

Figure 17 and 18. The first traumatic experience of Jong-su is materialized in his dreams

6. CONCLUSIONS

The narrative resources and the mise-en-scène of *OBNA* and *Burning* offer an opportunity to explore the forms taken by the logic of pain in South Korean *auteur* cinema. Its images serve as a nexus between *han* and the psychoanalytic model of melancholia. With this in mind, the following conclusions can be drawn in relation to the forms of *han* that exist in the spaces described in this study.

1) The logic of pain can be found in Young-hee's and Jong-su's journeys through empty worlds. Both characters are subjects in permanent flight, fleeing from grief. Unable to assimilate their loss, they eliminate the emptiness it causes in different ways. In *OBNA*, Young-hee flees from her lack; she is caught between two shores, exterior spaces where her desire lies, a desire that can only be accessed through a fantasy, a dream, inserted into the order of reality. In this way, Hong creates labyrinths where repetition will give rise to a contained pain on the threshold between spaces of the film's empty world. Similarly, in *Burning* a series of point-of-view shots reveals signs of absence. Jong-su exposes a contrast between the desire implicit in a daydream and the reality in which that desire fades. The pain that inhabits the empty worlds of both stories ultimately suppresses the advent of desire. The encounter with the absent love object takes place in a fantasy. Ultimately, repetition and fantasy scenarios are the spaces where the relationship with pain can be represented. Jong-su and Young-hee both move through these spaces from a state of ignorance to a special knowledge that is the "knowledge of the soul," an experiential knowledge that cannot be expressed in words[37]. In this way, the games of pain facilitate a dialectic between *han* and the empty spaces.

2) *Han* is expressed in the bodies of Hae-mi and Young-hee, bodies caught between two absences. In its original conception, *han* generally takes the woman's body as a carrier body, thereby identifying the condition of women as subjects doomed to tragedy. Michael Shin points

out how the *pansori* genre of musical storytelling traditionally attributes pain to women's bodies[38], associating the beauty of pain with the feminine. *Pansori* stories, expressed through chanting, use the soloists' voices to determine the tone of the narrator's pain. In this way, the pain attributed to *han* would be borne by the souls of the soloists. The sound of *han* is expressed in the presence of Hae-Mi's and Young-hee's voices, both of which are trapped between two absences: between the loss of the object of desire and the loss of self. Both characters escape to the space of the foreigner: one faces her loss in the frozen silence of Hamburg and the other confronts it in the emptiness of the Kalahari Desert, so that each character reconstructs her identity in absence. Indeed, absence is key to understanding the concept of *han* in relation to the psychoanalytical model of melancholia. Consequently, both protagonists will be overwhelmed; unable to fulfill their desire, taken over by pain, both will give in to the death drive. Yong-hee and Hae-mi disappear due to the impossibility of eliminating the emptiness again.

3) *Han* engages in a dialogue with memory, while also offering a glimpse of the pain between words. The literary influences of both films studied here are undeniable. The presence of poetry in Hong's film and Murakami's prose in Lee's remind us that literature may sometimes offer us the only way to understand pain. The use of a poetry recital to express the loss of a love (in *OBNA*) or the adaptation of a short story for the screen (*Burning*) points to the fact that the quality of language is intrinsically linked to the experience of *han*. A dialogue with memory and access to the trauma caused by the loss of self is put into words by the characters of these narratives, whose past is conveyed to us through their memories. In *Burning*, those memories are lost, repressed, and reduced to oblivion. In *OBNA*, they can only be found in lines in the sand on the seashore, where all Korean poets write. This is where pain is born: out of the inability to fulfil the unconscious desire, or in itself the inability to accept the absence of a loved one.

As noted above, the arrival of modernity in South Korea was marked by a series of upheavals. The first of these occurred during the Japanese colonial era, but it was after the dissolution of the colonial order that the pace of modernization became frenetic. This study has explored the establishment of *han* and the variability of its signifiers in two South Korean films: *OBNA* and *Burning*. Future research could expand the analysis to include other titles, in the interests of further exploring Eastern spaces and their emptiness; empty spaces, yet filled with pain, where the voices of absence remain trapped.

1 Moon, "Genealogy of the Modern Theological Understanding of Han," 426.

2 Killick, "Jockeying for Tradition," 59.

3 Killick, "Jockeying for Tradition," 58.

4 Kim, "Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of 'The Beauty of Sorrow'," 269.

5 Villarino, "Leap into the Void."

6 Kim, "Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of 'The Beauty of Sorrow'," 217)

7 Moon, "Genealogy of the Modern Theological Understanding of Han," 432.

8 Marcos Molano & Pérez Matesanz, "Censura en el cine coreano," 334.

9 Han, *The Scent of Time*.

10 Palao Errando, *La profecía de la imagen mundo*, 68.

11 Freud, "Duelo y melancolía," 58.

12 Shin, "A Brief History of Han"

13 Jeong, "A generational spectrum of global Korean auteurs," 361.

14 Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, 31.

15 Paquet, *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the waves*, 22.

16 Kim, *The Korean Wave*.

17 Deltell Escolar and Folgar Arias, "Hallyu (한류) in Spain, audience, fanbases and new ways of consuming audio-visual media."

18 Chung and Diffrient, *Movie Migrations: Transnational Genre Flows and South Korean Cinema*.

19 Chua and Iwabuchi, "Introduction: East Asian TV Dramas: Identifications, Sentiments and Effects," 4.

20 Moon, "Genealogy of the Modern Theological Understanding of Han," 432.

21 Marzal Felici and Gómez Tarín, "Interpretar un film," 35.

22 Romano, *La cuestión del deseo según Hegel y Lacan*, 137.

23 Kim, *Virtual Hallyu*, 126.

24 Willow, "Walt Whitman's On the Beach at Night Alone."

25 Han, *The Expulsion of the Other*, 57.

26 Recalcati, *Entre depresión y melancolía*, 44.

27 Deleuze, ""The crystals of time," 71.

28 Alomo and Muraro, *Antígona entre dos muertes*, 41.

29 Recalcati, *Entre depresión y melancolía*, 36.

30 Recalcati, *Entre depresión y melancolía*, 42.

31 Romano, *La cuestión del deseo según Hegel y Lacan*, 136.

32 Han, *The Expulsion of the Other*, 73.

33 Recalcati, *Entre depresión y melancolía*, 42.

34 Villarino, "Leap into the Void."

35 Alomo and Muraro, *Antígona entre dos muertes*, 48.

36 Recalcati, *Entre depresión y melancolía*, 37.

37 Bodner, "Ficción y comprensión de la literatura y el psicoanálisis."

38 Shin, "A Brief History of Han."