



If You Were Me: On the Realistic Criticism of the Film *If You Were Me*

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Abstract

Aimed at the social reality of South Korea, *If You Were Me*, a film completed by six famous contemporary directors from South Korea, is full of realistic criticism. This article interprets *If You Were Me* as a realistic film. Through revealing the theme of the film and analyzing characters and plot and the creative approach used by the directors, the author explores the realistic criticism in this film, so as to have a deeper understanding of South Korean society.

Key words: Realism; Criticism; Discrimination; Human Rights; Value

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INTRODUCTION

Realism is a wide concept corresponding to romanticism. Aristotle once pointed out, "As Sophocles said, he described men as what they should be, while Euripides did this as what they really were." (Wang, 2000, p.352) According to this statement, we are able to have an intuitive understanding of the difference between realism and romanticism: description of realism is in accordance with what people really are, focusing on objectivity and representation; while description of romanticism is in accordance with what people should be like, focusing on subjectivity and performance. And such understanding applies to all arts.

For the art of film, the realism is not only a creative principle, but also a creative method. In the author's opinion, the creative approaches of realistic films can actually be more diverse, but they must firmly adhere to the principle of creation. Completed by six renowned contemporary directors in South Korea, the film, *If You Were Me*, is a realistic film which sticks to realistic creative principle with a variety of creative methods. Six directors, with their own unique vision, have selected ordinary slices of social life in South Korea, and shot into several separate and independent stories, which constitute the film with strong uniformity in an extraordinary way. The uniformity is that all the six short films are shown in the form of comedy to a certain extent, but they profoundly reflect the pathetic social reality of South Korea. Going directly to the deep theme of "human rights", the film is full of realistic criticism.

1. "HER" WEIGHT: DISCRIMINATION AGAINST THE BODY

The first short film is "Her" Weight, directed by Soon-rye Yim. It is the story about the encounter and distress of a fat girl Sun-kyung at school, home and job field. With a simple plot, the short film is a comedy. Presenting characters in a vivid way and always amusing, the short film reveals discrimination against the body in a real society of South Korea.

In school, when calling the roll, the teacher speaks highly of students who have become beautiful after successful double-fold eyelids surgery and weight loss, and solemnly says,

Before you graduate, it is extremely important to learn skills for finding a job, but in order to be realistic, you should focus on something else, which is more important. That is body, nothing except the body. Make yourself beautiful in front of the mirror, and there will be not any problem to get a job. This is what I want you to know that on the first day of school.

This causes a commotion among students with sighs. But this is exactly the reality. Students have no choice but to sigh. Unexpectedly, without a nice body, the teacher has taken the initiative to ask the students how to lose weight, which is funny enough.

In English class, the teacher mocks Sun-kyung's shape. Cannot stand any more, Sun-kyung begins to refute, "Do not make fun of me, for your tummy is not ordinary." The only response from the teacher is "there is no problem with what men look like but there are problems with what you look like." The thought of gender inequality should come from a teacher, which is really pathetic. When measuring weight, the teacher tells the students another severe reality, "Many companies do not interview people weighing more than 50 kg."

This is school education accepted by Sun-kyung. On the first day of the new semester, teachers do not encourage students to study hard, instead, they directly show students discrimination against the body in reality. Not to mention whether this kind of education is successful or not, the repeated stress of the body made by teachers, whose role is to impart knowledge to students to make them out of talents promoting social progress, shows the urgent social reality. This is because there is discrimination in reality, and teachers are unable to change, they have to teach them to adapt. Seizing this point, the director successfully discloses such social ill.

Students around are all making efforts to have a nice body, including Sun-kyung's deskmate, who only takes a kind of expensive diet pills as food (in fact, the diet pills are harmful. This is a satire made by the director to show diet pill abuse in the society). With contradictory mood, Sun-kyung goes home and asks her mother if she can seek double eyelid operation and join in slimming club. But she fails to get support from her mother, or her sister, who cannot find a job due to obesity and can only stay at home to lose weight. What's worse, her sister responds to her with irony. Getting no help from her own family members makes Sun-kyung very upset, therefore, she just has to depend on her own and earn money herself.

However, the reality is the same as the teachers said. She is refused over and over again because of her fat body. In desperation, Sun-kyung and her classmates have no choice but to become barmaids, suffering from humiliation and laughter from customers. Finally, she got a chance to interview, with other four girls of different appearance. The interviewers are apparently focusing on their appearance. Thus, the first girl, who is wearing glasses, is rejected; the second girl, who is wearing braces, is refused; the third girl is accepted because she is tall and beautiful; the fourth girl is not considered for she is short and fat; the fifth girl, Sun-kyung, is laughed at by all people in the interview room because she only has one eye with double eyelid (she has not earned enough money to do for two eyes). Humiliated, Sun-kyung escapes from the interview field full of discrimination as fast as she can.

The end of the short film is also a comedy, which shows an interesting sidelight: A curious passer-by asks what is filming. When someone tells him it is about the human rights, he is puzzled and asks: "Human rights? Is there such film?" He also asks who is the director. When someone points to a middle-aged woman, he laughs, "Is that fat woman the director? Really? Impossible!" How ironic!

The director uses such a simple and ordinary story to expose the body discrimination in South Korean society, and expresses the problem in the form of comedy. Therefore, with profound realistic criticism, the short film is quite thought-provoking.

2. THE MAN WITH AN AFFAIR: DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PEOPLE WHO HAVE MADE MISTAKES

The Man With an Affair, also known as *Man With Bad Reputation*, by director Jae-eun Jeong, similarly shows a simple and ordinary moment in life. It tells the story of a man who was bed-wetting in his childhood. The director intends to make a contrast between the man and the boy who is himself in the childhood, so as to powerfully reveal the discrimination against people who have made mistakes in South Korean society. And the criticism is conducted with the use of symbolism.

The man lives in an almost closed circular building, and the boy, who is himself when he was young, also lives here. The man walks through the floors alone, but he is ignored or even regarded as a strange man by others including the boy because on the door of the man, there sticks a paper with words "naked sex offender". Although this accusation belongs to the past, yet people are still wary of him. There are also large characters on the wall of the floor, reading "Who is your neighbor", "protect your children from him" and so on. The man has to endure the pain of being regarded as the "otherness" and exert himself to throw cans to relieve his dissatisfaction to such environment.

The boy, who is the man's own self in his childhood, also suffers the same situation. The little boy is always thirsty and loves to drink water, and yet always wets the bed. This cannot be tolerated by the boy's mother, who forced the boy to wear diapers to sleep at night. But the boy hates wearing diapers and continues to wet the bed. The director presents the whole process of the boy wetting the bed with the camera, which is quite funny. His mother finally gets angry and shouts out the boy without any pants on. As punishment for wetting the bed, he has to ask his neighbors for a full bucket of salt in order to go home.

What an embarrassing thing to ask neighbors for salt without wearing pants! What eases the boy's mind is that the child neighbor brings him a glass of water and tells him a lot of children here is bedwetting. But why does he and only he have to ask for salt? The little boy,

with puzzlement and embarrassment, rings the doorbell of every neighbor to beg for salt, which is regarded as insignificant by others. For he needs the simple “salt” to end the punishment from his mother. However, all the adult-neighbors comment or laugh at his bed-wetting, with no one helping him, because he has made the mistake of wetting the bed. But this mistake is not only made by the boy, but many other children. Why can’t the grown-ups forgive him? The boy is depressed and wandering under adults’ scolding when the man silently walks by. At this time, words appear on the wall: “Retaliation is worthy of thinking” and “believe in your own judgment”. The boy begins to hesitate whether to ask the man for help or not. But when he becomes brave enough to ring the doorbell of the man, he gets no help from him, which means they discriminate each other’s mistakes.

At the end, the little boy’s mother is smoking alone on the balcony, with a gigantic balloon which is as bright and pure as the moon rising behind her. The director gives this balloon a special symbolic meaning of hope, the hope that people will understand each other and forgive each other’s mistakes. But the mother ignores the hope, which can only rise higher and higher, thus becoming dim and remote.

The director has made a good use of wide-angle lens to create many abnormal frames, giving a weird, strange and deformed sense, so as to reflect the mutual indifference of people in the building. In addition, symbolism is used to convey a profound meaning. The short film has deeply expressed the theme of criticizing and satirizing people’s discrimination and indifference against those who have made mistakes in South Korea, which is highly realistically critical.

3. CROSS THE CONTINENT: DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Directed by Kyun-Dong Yeo, the short film focuses on the life of vulnerable groups—people with disabilities in the society, with distinctive theme. Adopting 11 subtitles, it tells many stories happened to and around a mentally retarded person with physical disability. Through this, the short film criticizes the discrimination against persons with disabilities, which is quite thought-provoking.

“Resume”: Wen is a mentally retarded person with physical disability, however, he needs to work. Therefore, he has to have a decent photo of his resume. But there is no satisfactory photo, which makes him very painful.

“The first time to go out at 18 years old”: He used to watch the outside world through the cat eye on the door. And finally in the year when he is 18, he struggles to open the door with the help of crutches, moving toward the outside of the house with twisted body. Then he shuts the door and leans on it. When he hears the sound of footsteps, he quickly pulls out the key, pretending that

he has just come back and is about to enter his house. Then the neighbor who has passed him would stop. After greeting, the neighbor would help him go into the house. That’s what he calls to go out, truly painful!

“Do you know this affection?”: Although he is a mentally retarded person with physical disability, yet Wen still has the courage to tell his love to a woman. He expressed very tough, very trying, but the woman, with similar disability, cannot understand him and tells him not to talk about strange things. Who can understand his affection?

“Friend”: It is very lucky for people with disabilities to have a friend. But when Wen praises the wisdom of his friend and talks about his distress, his vulgar friend only repeatedly ridicules his failures and dirtiness.

“With no luck”: This part is quite funny. When Wen comes out of the underground passage, he accidentally drops his coins, which scatter over the ground. He struggles to lean over to pick up the coins, but people around him turn a blind eye, without giving a hand. Yet a passer-by mistakenly thinks he is a beggar and drops some coins in front of him, which embarrasses Wen a lot.

“I see”: When eating at home, a demonstration carried out by persons with disabilities to ask equal access to traffic rights is broadcast on television. Wen sees his disabled friend is among them and is arrested by the police. This seems to offer some enlightenment to Wen.

“Music appreciation time”: This part shows a warm and harmonious picture, which is perhaps the result of demonstrations carried out by people with disabilities, which affirm the self-worth of people with disabilities.

“Engagement ceremony”: It is such a pleasant thing that his sister gets engaged. The whole family begins to be busy with the ceremony. Only Wen is left alone at home, and then he begins to think about what he wants.

“Rehearsal”: He may understand what he wants, and starts to train himself to cross the road on crutches. Pedestrians are puzzled by his behavior and try to persuade him to stop. However, he is determined to continue his exercise.

“Self-shot”: He takes a picture of his foot, “this ugly foot, my burden”, as he always says. He leaves this self-shot to encourage himself to go across the continent tomorrow. He watches the camera with his firm eyes, what a determination!

“Across the continent”: he walks toward the middle of the road on crutches, with cars roaring around him but bypassing him. When the police come to stop him, he laughs out loud, and perhaps only at this moment has he gained a real happiness of being paid attention to. And this is exactly what he wants, others’ attention.

With the seemingly disordered pieces, the director properly shows the hardship and inner pain of the disabled. It not only reveals the reality that people show indifference to the disabled, but also deeply interprets the theme “call for human rights and protect the rights of the disabled”, which also manifests distinct realistic criticism.

4. TONGUE LIE: AFFIRMATION TOWARD THE VALUE OF ENGLISH

Directed by Jin-pyo Park, this short film *Tongue Lie*, tells the story of a little boy, Zhenyu, who is forced to do a painful surgery when he is 7 years old. Through this the director presents the affirmation of the South Korean toward the value of English, and also satires the social phenomenon that people advocate English blindly.

The little boy Zhenyu is happy because he was born in a wealthy family. His parents afford to let him participate in English activities with foreign children. But it is also English that causes him to suffer a painful surgery.

This is a cozy operating theater, with interesting animation on television and nurses dressed as cartoon characters. With doctors and nurses as well as his mother standing aside to encourage him, the boy is still groaning with pain. The director intentionally shows bloody operation screen, so as to make a strong shock power. Cannot bear the bloody picture and her son's suffering expression, even his mother turns over her head. During the surgery, the boy's father calls to ask how things going on. But this does not relieve the pain of the child, only to disturb the surgery, and doctors have to do it all over again. The boy continues to groan.

The surgery is finally over and the boy is fainted. When a nurse brings the toy his toy, he angrily throws it on the ground. He probably does not know why he has to do this kind of surgery, or why should he bear so much pain. When his mother holds him tight, the kind doctor tells him the answer: his pronunciation will be more excellent when he learns English after he has grown up. Can this soothe the pain of the boy? No, this is the pain that his parents impose on him, who is still unconscious.

"What if this was my earth, so that I didn't have to speak English."

"As long as I see Thomas, the English teacher, I feel like vomiting."

"If you want to be a great man, you must speak English well."

It is the English in children's eyes. Most of them hate English, but they have to learn because adults have identified English to be valuable. They impose this on children, regardless of their feelings. The director calls the short film *Tongue Lie*, which is also quite interesting. Is it the tongue's fault that children's pronunciation is not excellent? Even the name is full of satire, which shows the director is really imaginative.

5. FACE VALUE: AFFIRMATION TOWARD THE VALUE OF LOOKS

Adopting almost absurd method, director Kwang-su Park shoots this film *Face Value*, which tells the story of an

amazing encounter of a playboy and a pretty woman, to criticize and satire the affirmation toward face in South Korean society.

A drunk man is lying in the parking lot. When he wakes up gradually, he begins to complain about his own fault: Once he was drunk driving and killed a woman. However, when he is ready to leave the parking lot, he meets a woman. The woman, who is very beautiful, is just a toll collector of the parking lot, which surprises the man. Because in his values, beautiful women are able to find any job. Why would such a beautiful woman be willing to be a toll collector? He stops complaining about his fault and starts to talk with this beautiful woman, whose pride attracts him.

So he re-enters the parking lot to invite her, but the pretty woman rejects him; He enters the parking lot again, wondering why he continues to meet with her and where he intends to go? He is going to attend the funeral of the woman killed by him, but now he does not want to go, because in his values, the date with a beautiful woman is more important than attending a woman's funeral, who was killed due to his mistake. When he came to the beautiful woman again, she asked in a sardonic way, "You are a playboy. I should be careful." The man is speechless, terrified, and quietly leaves the parking lot.

When he really leaves the parking lot, he accidentally discovers that the beautiful woman he met just now is the one that he killed. He re-enters the parking lot, puzzled. But what can be heard is only a burst of screeching of brakes and a woman's shrill laughter. The same mistake is made again.

The plot of the short film seems to be absurd, but it's quite expressive. The change in mood from being depressed after being sober to become delighted shows the man is rather adulterous. By arranging repeated dialogues between the two people, the director has exposed the wrong value in South Korean society to closely associate face with jobs, which are realistically critical.

6. NEVER ENDING PEACE AND LOVE: AFFIRMATION TOWARD THE VALUE OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF FOREIGNERS

Directed by Chan-Wook Park, the final short film, *Never Ending Peace and Love*, tells a story about a Nepalese woman's embarrassing experience in South Korea. Though the plot is quite absurd, yet it is adopted by a real story happened to a real person.

The Nepalese woman is called Chandra• Cumari• Gurung, who works in a textile factory in Seoul. Once she leaves the factory after a quarrel with other workers. Then she enters a world which is totally strange for her. She orders a bowl of noodles in a small restaurant. But she finds her purse missing when she is about to pay. The owner of the restaurant cannot understand her language,

so she calls the police. As a result, Chandra begins her embarrassing experience as long as six years and four months.

The police takes her to the police station, but because they do not understand the Nepalese dialect, they mistakenly think she is mentally ill. Then she is sent to a mental hospital. Sadly, people in the hospital cannot understand the Nepalese dialect, either. As a result, doctors diagnose her as “nerve retardation, mental retardation, depression”. The hospital asks Nepal embassy in South Korea for help, but they only get the response from the embassy that nobody in Nepal embassy is able to speak Nepalese, which is rather ridiculous. In desperation, the hospital contacts the police, who then sent her to the Women’s Rescue Center. But she is sent back to the mental hospital again before long and is forced to undergo drug treatment. Imagine the pain she suffers during this period. However, the director does not show any of her expression to the audience, just letting the audience follows the woman’s view. Those who are truly mentally ill finally become her solace. Eventually with the help of a Pakistani, she is able to be identified, and then to return home in Nepal.

With the tone of black humor, the director tells this sad fact. The funny background music and distorted lens set off each character of the film to be twisted and weird. Simulating the perspective of the Nepalese woman, the film shows what South Korean society is like in a foreigner’s eyes. Besides, the film is also interspersed with a large number of documentary-style interviews, interviewing each character in this event, among which are people who pass the buck. In South Korean society, which

is highly developed inhuman civilization and where people say they are concerned about human rights, a foreigner should be confused with person with mental illness. The director spares no effort to express irony with this.

In *Yeoseotgaeuisiseon* (*Picture of South Korean Lifestyle*), also translated as *Sights of Six People* or *If You Were Me*, the six short films, through the interaction of six directors, converge into a thought-provoking picture of lifestyle. The six directors focus their sights on stories happen around each South Korean. By virtue of their artistic insight and applying various patterns of manifestation such as comedy, symbolism, absurd and black humor, the directors expose all kinds of thought-provoking and mournful facts and ruthlessly criticize the society where people hold high the banner of human rights but various discrimination and inequality still exist.

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