

“East Asianess”: The Aesthetic Resonances and Narrative Strategy of the South Korean TV-Drama *LTNS**

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This article takes the South Korean streaming platform TVing 2024’s TV drama *LTNS* (short for “*Long Time No Sex*”) as the analysis text. In the form of black comedy, this series portrays the survival difficulties faced by young families in South Korea, who are facing marital crisis, heavy debt burden, and unemployment pressure. The deeper reasons for the difficulties faced by these individuals actually come from the deep-rooted problems of social stratification and wealth disparity. It offers a sharp critique of social realities and contemporary concerns, showcasing diverse values. As a typical representative of current Korean realism TV drama, it inherits the excellent tradition of realism in Korean dramas and draws on the aesthetic style of American and European streaming media films. Analyzing this work allows us to gain insight into the complex contradictions between the cultural traditions and contemporary social life of East Asian societies, as well as the public mindset when facing these contradictions. It also reveals why contemporary Korean critical realism dramas can have a widespread influence in East Asia. The East Asian characteristics of the story, the appeal of the narrative, and the sharp criticism wrapped in interesting stories collectively constitute the reasons for the influence of Korean dramas.

Keywords: “East Asianess”, South Korean TV-drama, *LTNS*, aesthetic resonances, narrative strategy

Introduction

Dramas and movies not only function as a mirror that reflects the collective unconscious of an era, but also serve as a conduit that enables the public’s discontent to be safely expressed. The utilization of realism as an artistic expression approach in audiovisual works remains consistently popular. In recent times, Chinese youth have avidly embraced Japanese and South Korean films and TV series that embody the “East Asian realism” style, fulfilling the aforementioned roles. A prime example of this trend is the recently released series, “*Long Time No Sex*” (abbreviated as *LTNS*), which premiered in 2024 on the South Korean local streaming platform TVing. The series is jointly penned and helmed by two independent film directors, JEON Gwoon (전고운) and LIM Dae Hyung (임대형), boasts a star-studded cast featuring E Som (이솜) and Ahn Jae-Hong (안재홍). It narrates the tale of a couple grappling with the seven-year itch and financial strains, who stumble upon a means of amassing wealth through blackmailing those engaged in extramarital affairs. As they embark on this illicit journey together, they are unexpectedly compelled to reassess their own relationship. The drama takes the

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blackmail process of the hero and heroine as the main line, providing a vivid portrayal of the diverse lives that exist within contemporary Korean society. In contrast to the revenge, rebirth, and suspense narratives popularized by international streaming giants such as Netflix, and the family and career-centric themes prevalent in traditional Korean dramas, *LTNS* not only adheres to the Korean tradition of local realism but also explores more intimate subject matter—sex and marriage. This resonates with audiences across various East Asian nations and evokes a profound sense of aesthetic empathy. An analysis of this work not only enables us to comprehend the expressive tactics employed by contemporary East Asian realist dramas but also functions as a lens through which we can observe the cultural traditions and contemporary social realities of East Asian societies in conflict, as well as the public mindset shaped by such tensions.

What Is “East Asianess”?

Although the South Korean TV series *LTNS* is not officially broadcasted on Chinese media, many viewers are still managing to watch it through other means. On Douban, China’s premier film and TV drama review platform, more than 130,000 users have rated it with a score of 8.4. Given that Douban’s rating is on a scale of 10, this score is undoubtedly high, meaning *LTNS* is a masterpiece among TV dramas. The top thumb up comments about the drama are as follows: “All the hard-earned money from extorting people ends up either being spent on celebrating Dad’s birthday or paying for niece’s piano lessons—what kind of East Asian mindset is this, engraved in one’s DNA?” (8311 likes). “Oh my god, East Asians timing their lunch breaks down to the minute, eating while sneaking in a quick meetup with their lover—it really makes me feel like life is pretty miserable...” (8020 likes). “Pretty good theme. I haven’t seen a Korean comedy about sex in a long time. Our East Asian Bonnie and Clyde, after robbing money, the first thing they do is buy some nice food and booze for Dad’s birthday and pay for their niece’s extracurricular classes. How perfectly that reflects the current mindset.” (5,488 likes). As pointed out by existing research, “The overriding success of Korean dramas across Asia has been attributed to concepts around cultural similarity, but what is being ‘similar’ warrants debate.” (Leung, 2021, pp. 184-195). “East Asian” emerged as a central term in the top-liked comments, signifying that the survival state of the characters depicted in the series has acutely resonated with the real-life struggles and mental landscapes of the general public in East Asia today. In recent times, the notion of “East Asian” has recurrently surfaced in various social happenings, trending discussions, and critiques of films and television series, with the public often utilizing the term imbued with a poignant irony in their assessments. What, then, are the multifaceted implications of the widely adopted concept of “East Asian” in public discourse? Obviously, it refers not only to a geographical concept, such as China, Japan, and South Korea, or a class of ethnic concepts, but also to a cultural tradition. Meanwhile, when the public employs this term on internet media, it often becomes exceedingly vague and one-sided. This concept tends to serve more as a conduit for the expression of collective sentiments, rather than a nuanced evaluation of East Asian culture and its realities. What the audience and netizens debate as “East Asianess” (东亚性) essentially encompasses merely a fragment of the traditional Confucian culture in East Asia, along with certain attributes of the present social landscape in East Asian nations, particularly Japan, South Korea, and China. The traditional aspect specifically revolves around the Confucian family outlook, which embraces patriarchy, male dominance, filial piety, and the concept of achievement, emphasizing the value of education, the pursuit of excellence, and a bureaucratic value system. As for the current situation, it primarily pertains to the vast wealth disparity, the rigidification of social strata, the anxiety arising from competition and elimination, and

the subsequent individual doubts and struggles. The spiritual core of works that can evoke the audience's "East Asian" sentiment is rebellious and critical, that is, in these works, the audience/readers see the author's exposure, reflection, and criticism of cultural traditions and practical issues.

In fact, when observing contemporary Korean culture as a whole, it can be found that the globally influential Korean pop culture (K-pop), Korean movies, and the recently widely acclaimed Korean women's literature, highlighted by the Nobel Prize in Literature won by Korean female writer Han Kang (한강) in 2024, are all on the same spiritual spectrum. They care about the diseases of the eras and society, such as criticism of patriarchy, anger towards the dark side of the economy and politics, sympathy for women's experiences and situations, etc. This spiritual power has resonated emotionally among the young population in its neighboring country, China. The acceptance and criticism of Korean literary works by Chinese audiences actually reflect their own spiritual needs. Subconsciously, they regard Korea as a precedent, and China's tomorrow will be similar to Korea, which is like a prophecy. Therefore, contemporary literature and art in Korea are representatives of contemporary new cultures in East Asia.

Taking *LTNS* as a case study, it can be found that "East Asianess" not only refers to the East Asian characteristics of the theme and story, but also to a fusion of aesthetic elements, that is, to connect Western literary, artistic, film and television aesthetic techniques with East Asian themes and stories, forming a new narrative strategy and aesthetic expression. This is the meaning of this article starting from "East Asianess".

The Integration of Eroticism, Comedy, and Social Criticism

In East Asian society, marriage has always been a valued and time-honored topic, yet discussions related to sex are often sensitive and carry a taboo connotation. *LTNS* is similar to the Japanese drama *Hirugao: Love Affairs in the Afternoon* (2014), delving into the dilemmas and changes of gender relations in modern society. It focuses on analyzing the relationship between marriage and sexuality, the individual and society, rather than using extramarital affairs as mere embellishments to stories of family, love, or revenge. On the surface, it tells the story of how the male and female protagonists blackmail adulterers, but beneath that, it reveals the collective portrait of people facing countless life challenges within the realm of marriage systems and family communities.

Affairs are a suitable subject for showing the hidden sides of love and people. We have also brought to the forefront many couples who are not typically visible in the media, such as elderly or homosexual couples. By showcasing a diverse range of human figures, we aimed to enhance the realism of the drama. (Yoo Da-yeon, 2024)

The series breaks through the limitations of traditional family dramas that only focus on marital relationships, distilling, and presenting social phenomena such as extramarital affairs and mismatched sexual needs, depicting the myriad faces of ordinary people against the backdrop of an era. Thus the seemingly personal and sensitive topic turns into a universal social issue. At the same time, the creators also followed the TV shows strategy: "However, we reached a consensus on establishing a fundamental principle of not discriminating based on gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on, even before creating the work. Therefore, we aimed for expression but sought to avoid explicit exposure." (Lee Ja-yeon, 2024). Therefore, within the scope of the film rating system, the series confronts the theme of desire while maintaining the restraint and composure of an omniscient perspective, leaving ample room for thought and imagination for the audience. Choosing and creating controversial themes stem both from the artistic pursuits of the writers and directors and also take into account the dissemination characteristics of streaming television series and the audience's receptivity.

“When writing the script, we shared the idea of trying out ‘black comedy’. We had a common interest in liking ‘black comedy’. I wanted to write something funny.” (Park Soo-jung, 2024). The term “black comedy” referred to here differs both from the “black humor” genre unique to American literature during the Second World War and the Cold War, and from the “film noir” of the 1940s Hollywood crime detective films as defined in film history. It blends certain characteristics and core elements of these two styles and combines them with indigenous Korean culture, thus giving rise to a completely new aesthetic style. In addition to the traditional crime theme, the black style in Korean film and television series also includes the darkness of politics and society, the hardship of ordinary people, and the pessimistic and desperate mood. Drape “black” with the cloak of “comedy”, revealing the tragic fates of the nobody through humorous plots, thereby more profoundly highlighting the artistic charm and profound connotations of the work. Aristotle’s *Poetics* says comedy invokes laughter and pleasure, thus purging those emotions (catharsis), in a manner parallel to the description of tragedy (Aristotle, 1987).

In the genre of black comedy, the “black” is as important as the comedy itself. It should not just be about lightly laughing and moving on; it must be able to satirize the zeitgeist and pose questions to the audience. (Lee Ja-yeon, 2024)

Comedy presents these universal experiences—whether they are happening now or have happened in the past—in an objective form through the imitation of painful or ridiculous events on the actors. After watching these performances, the audience experiences an emotional catharsis. Their sympathy for the actors is actually a resonance with their own circumstances, and their laughter at the actors is also a form of self-deprecation. In laughter, people achieve self-awareness, and pain is alleviated or even be purged. From this perspective, comedy has similarities with tragedy; both can achieve the dual function of social criticism and spiritual purification (catharsis).

From Individual to Society and Ethnicity

The innovation of *LTNS* lies not only in the choice of its theme and style, but also in its deconstructive criticism of the reality.

Individual Dimension: Revealing the Tension Between Desire and Marriage

The drama’s central characters are a middle-aged couple who have celebrated their seventh wedding anniversary and have fallen into a “sexless marriage”. A recurring theme in literary depictions of matrimony is the notion that “marriage is the tomb of love”, suggesting that marriage and love exist in a state of conflict or incompatibility. Nevertheless, the series diverged from conventional narrative clichés in its second episode, presenting the two principal characters not as devoid of love and sexual relationships, but as individuals in love with each other without engaging in physical intimacy. This unique configuration offers a credible impetus for the protagonists’ subsequent actions. This was not directly revealed to the audience but was gradually perceived by them through the progressive unfolding of the plot. Even though they no longer share physical intimacy, Lim Bak Samuel (임박사무엘) still carefully folds his wife’s clothes, gently massages her shoulders, and labels her as “My Love Woo Jin (우진)” in his phone’s contact list. When they embarked on a criminal path together, extorting those engaged in extramarital affairs and suffered beatings, with the husband bruised and battered, he said, “Fortunately, it wasn’t you who was beaten”. After being beaten to the point of hospitalization, the wife’s first concern was, “How is my husband?” Through these scenes and dialogues, the audience will gradually

understand the true essence of the profound love between spouses. This deep bond does not always need to be confirmed through verbal “I love you” or sexual relations, which makes the old assertion that “marriage is the tomb of love” become more complex.

In their efforts to sustain their marriage, the husband and wife transcend traditional East Asian roles. The wife, a dynamic character, is both the one who succumbs to physical infidelity and the primary architect of the marriage’s salvation. Conversely, her husband, Samuel, embodies a reserved, conservative demeanor, reliant and gently guided by his wife’s support through life’s tribulations. This dynamic not only showcases the couple’s varied roles but also invites the audience to ponder and reflect upon the conventional gender role stereotypes. “Korean dramas serve as platforms for exploring shifting perceptions of masculinity and femininity, reflecting broader societal changes.” (Gatchalian, et al., 2023, pp. 92-98). Creating stronger, independent, and anti-traditional female characters in TV dramas has become a major hallmark of Korean dramas.

The series’ standout feature is its nuanced portrayal of “betrayal”, presenting the female protagonist’s physical infidelity and the male protagonist’s emotional unfaithfulness in an unconventional and surprising manner. The wife, Woo Jin, longs for her husband’s closeness but finds it unattainable, leading her to succumb to a mix of shame and anger as she reaches out to her ex-boyfriend and has a one-night stand. Those familiar with melodramatic tropes might anticipate the ex-boyfriend to be a former lover, yet he proves to be a philanderer. This setting lays bare the profound vulnerabilities and sorrows within the heroine’s character, enriching her persona while also unveiling the truths that are more frequently encountered in real life. Husband Samuel embodies simplicity, honesty, gentleness, and humility. He finds himself drawn to the proactive and amiable female neighbor, whose demeanor starkly contrasts with that of his robust and competent spouse. Nevertheless, their “affair” is quite unconventional—not characterized by romantic trysts or intimate nights, but rather by the shared act of cleaning side by side, mops in hand. This complicates the issue of “infidelity” as well: it was originally thought that both physical and emotional infidelity was unforgivable, but the series shows the complexity and limitations of human nature, as well as the hidden dangers present in everyday life. These issues have refreshed the audience’s understanding of “love” and deepened their perception of the complex relationship between love, sex, and marriage: the pursuit of love and family happiness is one of the most primitive motivations of humans, but this process is filled with various complex variables, and there may be various paradoxes between behavior and intention.

The show does not simply promote a return to traditional marriage values. The story of a small restaurant owner who, having never been kissed and never felt loved by her husband, throws herself into an extramarital affair in her sixties, illustrates how within seemingly ordinary East Asian family life, there are hidden societal stereotypes and expectations regarding gender roles in marriage. She spent her entire life diligently supporting her family and raising her children, living up to the traditional image of a good wife and mother, yet she was treated like a rice cooker—useful but does not need to be concerned. A marriage without love and mutual respect loses the temperature of the inner emotion and leaves a functional shell, but the individual always yearns for love and to be loved, for respect and to be respected. In this case, marriage is no longer the guarantee of happiness, but a source of restraint and repression. This leads to betrayal and crisis in marriage, and also inspires the audience to think critically about individual desires and marriage ethics. The play appears to revolve around a series of extramarital love stories, yet each character embodies unique motivations, behaviors, and outcomes. Through these narratives, it unfolds the inherent tension between the values of diversity and openness.

Social Dimension: Deconstructive Criticism of Urban Poverty

In the series, the characters and their plight are placed in a clear historical background and a specific social situation. The sexual disability of the male protagonist, Samuel, is not only a physiological problem, but also a social problem. His sense of powerlessness and deprivation came from unemployment, financial stress, and mental depression. He is portrayed as a promising individual from a humble rural background, who has studied hard since his youth. Graduating from Seoul University, one of Korea's top institutions, he initially had a job at a prominent corporation. However, he became unemployed due to mental health issues, and his subsequent entrepreneurial ventures also failed. He now makes a living driving a taxi, which was purchased with a loan from his wife. The female lead, Woo Jin, also originates from a low-class family, has a mother who is "clearly not favored by men", and seemingly grew up without the constant presence of father. In the story, Woo Jin is a hotel receptionist, working in two shifts at day and night. In order to build a love nest, Woo Jin and Samuel took a loan to buy a house. However, the housing prices then plummeted, and to pay off the loan, they could only afford to eat salted vegetables with rice every day, couldn't afford to buy coffee, and dared not turn on the air conditioning. To add insult to injury, during a night of heavy rain, their car slid into the river and was damaged by the water. However, because the male protagonist had lazily parked in a no-parking zone, they were unable to claim insurance, thus their debt increased by another level. At the same time, they do not have wealthy parents or siblings to rely on, so external economic and survival pressures are transmitted to the marriage and family, leaving the protagonist facing dual crises both internally and externally.

In addition to revealing the social status quo through the identities and class settings of the two protagonists, the director and screenwriter also cleverly enhance the portrayal of social reality by meticulously depicting the characters around them in this play. The daughter of the heroine's sister possesses a remarkable talent for playing the piano, yet this talent, instead of becoming a beacon of hope for the entire family, has transformed into a burdensome challenge. The reason lies in the fact that the sister has been through multiple divorces, making it exceedingly difficult for her to support herself and her children financially. As a result, there is simply no money available for her daughter's further musical education, causing the once-cherished talent to be viewed as more of a liability than an asset. Underprivileged children, despite their innate talents, are often predestined to face bleak futures, mirroring the rigidification of Korean societal strata and the profound despair that exists between the wealthy and the impoverished. On the contrary, the daughter of a wealthy friend resides in an expansive single-family home. She has her own spacious studio, several large screens, and an impressive amount of capital to invest in the stock market. The income she generates monthly is sufficient to astound the heroine. The first episode of the series highlights the anxieties of the affluent and the indigent through the dialogue between Samuel and his friend: the wealthy friend is having an affair and is worried about being cheated on by his mistress, while Samuel is short of money and can't pay his debts.

The direct exposure of poverty and social injustice, especially revealing the predicaments faced by ordinary people behind the glitz and glamour of developed countries' metropolises, is not common in contemporary East Asian film and television works. Moreover, the character Samuel in the series is portrayed as graduate from the top university in South Korea, an uncompromising setting that undoubtedly highlights the writer's keen insight and bold strokes. According to statistics, the upper class households in South Korea with an annual income between 200-255 million account for only 14% of the population, while low-income households account for over 80%. After experiencing rapid growth in the last century, the South Korean economy has entered a development

bottleneck, and the rising housing prices in South Korea have plummeted in 2021. The housing prices in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province, which have the highest population density, have plummeted by 30%, causing a heavy blow to many working-class people who bought houses at high prices. Due to high loan interest rates, South Korea has the highest level of household debt in the world. The news of young people committing suicide due to financial collapse is not uncommon. Good people commit crimes because of poverty, a classic theme in nineteenth-century literature of critical realism that is reproduced in the play. However, unlike Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, the life predicament of Samuel cannot be attributed to the flaws of the social system, but rather stems from a severe misalignment between the cyclical decline of societal development and individual life expectations. A society with weak economic development, severe internal competition, and great disparity between rich and poor is the typical environment of new critical realism in South Korea, and Samuel is the typical character among it.

Ethnicity Dimension: A Lament for Love and the Hardships of Survival

An excellent work of realism never merely represents the unique problems of individuals; its characters and stories inevitably possess the universal significance of the era and a reflection on the overall human condition. And marriage issues are never just about emotions; the mental state of each individual, views on relationships, and behavioral decisions are all constrained by social structures and the trends of the times. In the play, the two main characters are 36 years old. They were born in the 1980s, and grew up during a time of rapid economic growth, when individualism and consumerism were in full swing, and internet technology was advancing rapidly. When such a generation enters marriage and establishes families, what new confusions and problems will they face? The play seriously explores these issues. The influence of individualistic values is subtly displayed in the home environment: twin beds placed side by side in the bedroom tell the audience that they choose to sleep separately in their daily lives; in the living room, two completely different sofas each stand alone, further emphasizing their independent and autonomous attitudes towards life. The details of the scene are intentionally designed, "trying to depict the increasingly personalized nature of people's lives." (Kang Joo-hee, 2024). The negative impact of personalization on intimate relationships mainly lies in the fact that individuals may tend to be self-centered, finding it difficult to let go of their own interests and rights. However, in relationships such as love or marriage, it often requires both parties to invest time, energy, and emotional effort, and to consider the other person in any decision-making or problem-solving. If an individual has difficulty accepting this, or lacks a holistic perspective and long-term vision, being overly concerned with details, then they will find it hard to truly love and to manage a marriage well.

Furthermore, the urbanization process often tends to breed a pervasive sense of depression, which is profoundly reflected in the characters' lackluster expressions and the consistent somber tones throughout the series. Despite the dazzling lights of the bustling city nights and the striking modern urban landscapes, the people living within them seem like soulless corpses. Beneath their calm exteriors, they conceal endless exhaustion, resentment, and unspoken desires for love that cannot be fulfilled. In the bustling city, ordinary people are like batteries constantly discharging, day after day they immerse themselves in work, strive for a living, give their all, while also balancing family and self-care. To maintain this vitality of life, they urgently need "recharging"—this is not just a matter of material replenishment, but also of deep affection and comfort for the soul. True recharging often comes from the warm care of others, the joy of travel brought by financial ease, and the leisurely contentment of free time. In the play, the infidelity experienced by various characters is actually a reflection of

some deep-seated needs within. They all explore beyond their established life paths, with a deep desire to fill their inner emptiness through new emotional connections, using this as their unique way of recharging and extending their lives. As the male and female protagonists cried out after sampling the stolen marijuana: “We’ve been screwed for ages, don’t you know? Loans, crime, no sex—life is just at rock bottom.” In this extreme state of depression, the protagonist still struggles for survival. They are so calm yet so desperate, so defeated yet so striving. The more effort is made to highlight the protagonist’s struggle to maintain life, the more it underscores the underlying sadness.

In this play, the absence of offspring serves as a poignant symbol, cleverly encapsulating humanity’s love and the struggles of survival.

When it comes to stories about couples, children are always included, but Woo-jin and Samuel do not have kids. I believed that simply telling the story of the couple, who wants to have child but cannot afford it, could reflect the zeitgeist. (Kang Joo-hee, 2024)

In the current realist literary works of South Korea, the phenomenon of declining birth rates has become deeply ingrained, and can be naturally accepted by the audience without the need for additional background setup. No longer having children is not just about individual choice or changes in beliefs; its impact extends far beyond the realm of personal life, even touching the fate of nations and ethnic groups. The profound sorrow lies in humanity’s resistance to the most primitive and powerful force of life—reproduction—and a questioning of the sublime and sacred nature of life itself. When a species actively chooses to give up the continuation of life, it is akin to voluntarily stepping towards the abyss of extinction.

Perhaps the most desperate and most selfish attitude towards the world is to claim that “We are the last generation”. It is most desperate because they believe that not only my generation, but also my next generation are unable to change the necrotic world, and it is most selfish because it is a complete abandonment of the collective home of mankind and the public responsibility to heal the world. In my opinion, this is the biggest national dilemma of our time, and perhaps also the biggest human dilemma. (Tao, 2023, p. 29)

In many movies and TV works in recent years, immigration and infertility have become the two main behavioral characteristics of the Korean people’s resistance to the real dilemma. The fundamental reason why this popular TV series has received high praise from audiences is that it not only tells a curious marriage story, but also serves as a universal metaphor for the human condition.

Formal Features and Artistic Expressions

Structure and Suspense

“Style and structure are the essence of a book, great ideas are hogwash.” (Bowers, 1982, p. 23). The structure of *LTNS* reflects exquisite design. The series is a typical group portrait story, with a surface structure like a necklace. The series starts with the story of the couple Woo Jin and Samuel, who act like the string in the necklace, skillfully connecting the stories of the three couples they are blackmailing. These three couples’ stories are like three shining beads on the necklace, each independent yet resonating with each other. In the end, the story returns to the main couple, achieving a perfect closure of the bead-stringing. It introduces characters who initially seem unrelated and out of sync in time and space, in a reasonable and smooth manner onto the stage, while creating captivating plot suspense and a tight, powerful rhythm. The plot continuously breaks the audience’s expectations, with twists and turns. Initially, the audience might mistakenly assume that this is a sex comedy focused on the

protagonist's marital relationship and family life. However, in the second episode, the plot dramatically shifts to characters unrelated to the protagonists, leading the audience into a completely new external world. When the plot turns to the first couple of adulterers, the audience realizes that many more relationships will follow, each with its own unique story. However, only two couples are explored, and before the third story concludes, the focus quickly shifts back to the main character as the person catching the adulterers finds their own husband in the act. When the audience's attention is focused on the subtle relationship between the male lead and his female neighbor, and they deeply empathize with the misfortune of the female lead, the plot unexpectedly shifts focus to the seemingly morally impeccable female lead, revealing her past infidelity as a wife. At this moment, the most intense conflict of the entire play is vividly presented, prompting the audience to deeply consider the direction of the plot: How can a "happy ending" that meets the expectations of the masses without seeming abrupt also be profound? As the series comes to a close, it cleverly arranges a cooling-off period for the two main characters, particularly delving into the male lead's tranquil and simple life in the countryside. Subsequently, the two met again, and the wife apologized proactively. In the end, on a romantic Christmas Eve, the husband arrived quietly and knocked on his wife's door. This ending is fast-paced and filled with warmth and beauty. However, if one looks closely at the last scene, it can be seen that the reunion of the two characters is shown through the blurred reflections on the glass window. The director once said: "However, after filming, I realized that the final scene looks somewhat like Woo Jin's fantasy." (Choi Soo-bin, 2024). Therefore, the play actually presents an open ending, neither a pure tragic conclusion nor a traditional happy ending, but full of imaginative space: if this were truly happening, perhaps a new cycle would quietly begin; and if all this were just fantasy, then the miserable life would continue, all of which would be borne by the protagonists alone.

Non-instrumental Images

This series features two main protagonists throughout, with each episode introducing two additional main characters and at least three supporting characters closely related to them. Within limited time, how to depict these complex characters vividly is indeed a significant challenge for the directors and screenwriters. Furthermore, the play also features numerous minor characters who have brief appearances in a few scenes or just a few lines of dialogue. These minor figures do not merely serve as ancillary elements to the unfolding narrative or as counterpoints to the main protagonists. Instead, each one, through their singular identity, well-crafted entrance scenes, and pithy utterances, leaves ample room for the audience's imagination. This effect is achieved from the literary creation idea of "image-centered". Actions are important, but the vividness of the characters is even more important. Flaubert once asserted, "I maintain that images are action." (Letter to Louise Colet, 15 January, 1853). Characters serve as functional roles for the plot, or characters possess independent vitality and existential value, which is an inevitable concept issue that literary and artistic creation must confront and choose. In many works of fiction, characters are only roles, meaning their appearance and existence mainly serve to advance the plot. However, in great works, the characters are alive, and creating real, vivid, and typical characters is an end in itself. Creating vivid characters requires many details and techniques. For example, instead of directly narrating the backgrounds of the male and female protagonists, you can hint at them through conversations, scenes, or even names. Each pair of unfaithful lovers' social status, personality, mental characteristics are also communicated through various means such as dialogue, sexual preferences, and scenarios. Through intense arguments (dialogue scene), it profoundly reveals the sorrow and helplessness of bank employees as "corporate slave". Through the letter of the elderly female shop owner (interior monologue), we get a glimpse into the long and lonely life of a

traditional housewife, and her desperate and courageous actions when she encounters true love. With the perspective of a peeping Tom, we also witness the adulterous prosecutor drinking the most expensive wine, driving into the grand procuratorate, and living beyond the grasp of punishment. We also witnessed the traffic police repeatedly reminding Woo Jin to move her car, at last were shocked by her indifferent attitude towards the accumulated fines. Before departing, he muttered to himself, “I really wish I could be cool like her.” The traffic police officer, as a rule-enforcer, found himself envious of the rule-breaker, Woo Jin, for her seemingly “wealthy and unburdened” attitude. This ironic setup breathed life into this character, who appeared fleetingly in just a few scenes. All the marginal characters are meticulously crafted to ensure the realistic presentation of details, rather than merely serving as tools for plot development. This approach is one of the significant distinctions between serious literature and popular literature. And this streaming TV series, which originally falls within the realm of pop culture, has greatly enhanced its overall quality by cleverly incorporating the artistic essence of pure literary creation.

The director once mentioned that when designing characters, “it took a month just to name them” (Park Soojung, 2024). The male lead’s name 사무엘 is Samuel’s Korean pronunciation, which may seem overlooked at first glance, but with a little attention, one may wonder: why does a Korean man use this name? When we saw the cross hanging on the wall behind him during a video call with his family, we understood that he should come from a Christian family, and Samuel was his given name. And this name also carries a metaphorical and symbolic meaning—Samuel is the only innocent person in the *Bible*. This also allows us to have a deeper understanding of the male protagonist, and to comprehend why he turned back promptly on the brink of infidelity, and why the female protagonist persistently chose him as her husband. The scene of the male protagonist returning to the countryside after divorce, with a calm and serene demeanor, not only embodies the traditional Eastern style of returning to simplicity and the countryside, but also adds the color of Christian love and tolerance.

Poetic Dialogue

Robert McKee, the godfather of Hollywood screenwriters, said in *Dialogue: The Art of Verbal Action for Page Stage Screen*:

No matter how lavish a play’s production, how vivid a novel’s descriptions, how lush a film’s photography, character talk shapes the deepest complexities, ironies, and innerness of story. Without expressive dialogue, events lack depth, characters lose dimension, and story flattens. More than any other technique of characterization (gender, age, dress, class, casting), dialogue has the power to pull a story up through life’s multilayered strata, thus lifting a merely complicated telling into the full array of complexity. (McKee, 2016, p. 2)

Dialogues in a broad sense include any words spoken by any character to anyone in the work. The dialogue in a great work must shape character, express desires, and point towards action, which is particularly important for TV dramas. “The film emphasizes imagery, while the drama highlights dialogue. I suggested that we write each line of dialogue with an edge, aiming to express sexual themes directly and realistically, without being overly evasive.” (Shin Young-eun, 2024). This drama features some classic lines that resonate with the audience and have been frequently discussed on social media. In the second episode, when Samuel was tailing the extortion target, he pointed out that the woman in the extramarital affair looked a bit pitiful. Woo Jin said, “There are no unpitiful women in South Korea.” Samuel asked, “Have you also dated a scumbag?” Woo Jin replied, “Of course, in a country full of scumbags, how could I be spared?” Those dialogues are cool and self-deprecating, making people laugh while feeling bitter. This kind of dialogue is not everyday, but poetic.

Ingenious Scene Arrangement

Show, don't tell, is particularly important in the art of cinema and television. In the first episode, the scene subtly transitions from the sweet period of passionate love to the seventh year of marriage, cleverly symbolized by a button that falls off—the very button that was once pulled off in the heat of passion, now lies quietly on the floor, waiting to be sewn back onto the old shirt. This button serves not merely as a connector of the plot, but also as a symbolic representation of the transformation in the relationship between the husband and the wife, shifting from passion to a state of tranquility. For another instance, the portrayal of Samuel's spiritual infidelity is introduced with a memory that starts with a lighthearted and slightly comical song. The car window in the darkness is covered with white foam, which is then washed clean with water, and the scene returns to a year earlier when Samuel first met his female neighbor in the underground parking lot. At the time, the two people were standing on either side of the car, each holding one end of a large towel, which they unfurled to slide over the front window, over the roof, and down the back window. This scene displayed a rhythm, accompanied by a background music that was suspenseful and subtly seductive, suggesting the convergence of the two people's unspoken inner spirits and the hidden dangers. Later, they agreed to clean together, and the scene of them wiping the glass while standing inside and outside the balcony door to the rhythm of music is a classic moment. On the surface, they are doing housework, but in reality, they are like a pair of lovers in perfect harmony dancing gracefully. However, they are always separated by a layer of glass—visible but unable to truly touch each other. These visual details not only create an atmosphere but also hint at the essence and trajectory of the characters' relationships.

The most exciting part is undoubtedly the scene where the male and female protagonists have a direct conflict in the last episode. The scene of a married couple arguing is a plot point that almost every work on marriage themes will show. Compared to American films on similar themes such as *Revolutionary Road* (2008) or *Marriage Story* (2019), this scene in *LTNS* can be said to be even better. Its dialogue reflects the characteristics of East Asian families, while incorporating elements of black comedy, blending seriousness with humor, and using parallel montage to create surreal scenes of intersecting time and space. The scene rewinds to two years ago when the female protagonist had a one-night stand with her ex-boyfriend and walked out of the hotel. It was raining heavily outside, and the two people who are confronting each other in the living room are suddenly transported to that rainy night at the hotel entrance. When the heroine begins to confess, the scene turns back to the living room, but the rain is still falling indoors. This scene is both realistic and magical, suggesting that infidelity is like a heavy rain that washes away the trust between them. During the process of their argument and struggle, the rain even flooded the room, like a deluge at the end of the world, suggesting the end of their marriage.

Conclusion

The art historian E. H. Gombrich said: "There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists." (Gombrich, 1995, p.15). The writer Vladimir Nabokov declared: There is no literature, only individual genius. All art exists only in masterpieces.

From the spread of Korean dramas in China, it can be seen that the power of the scriptwriters is the foundation for forming strong dissemination. Cinema is the art of the director, theater is the art of the actors, and television dramas are the art of the scriptwriters. In all television drama productions, the role of the scriptwriter is crucial. (Shin, 2007, p. 188)

Taking *LTNS* as an example, it can be seen that film and television works in the streaming media era need to adapt to changes, but the underlying literary aesthetic principles of achieving a good work has not changed. The localization of themes and stories, as well as the integration of excellent artistic techniques from both Eastern and Western cultures, is an inevitable trend in current film and television production.

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