

# Ecocriticism and Lee Chang-Dong's Poetry

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UNIVERSITY OF SPLIT



Sveučilište u Splitu  
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# **Ecocriticism and Lee Chang-Dong's *Poetry***

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University of Split  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
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BA Thesis

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Split, 2024

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## **Introduction**

With analysis of Lee Chang-Dong's movie *Poetry* through an ecocritical lens, this thesis aims to suggest how its storyline serves as an allegory for the divergence between humanity and the natural world under a capitalist society, as well as how it uses the protagonist's exploration of poetry to challenge the capitalism-induced alienation, and call for unity between humans and nature. Through the main character Mija, who discovers a passion for writing poetry amid personal life issues, the film presents poetry as a connecting point between the internal human experience and the natural world. Considering the cause and effect of alienation, in this paper I suggest that connecting with nature, through processes such as creative writing, taking the time to carefully observe the world around us, and being brave enough to condemn any unethical practices of a capitalist society are some of the ways of overcoming it depicted in the film.

I will begin the paper, after providing the movie's synopsis, with a brief introduction to film theory, in order to back up later analysis of the visual medium. It will serve to better understand the discourse on film techniques Lee Chang-Dong uses; how he utilises frames, camera movements, sounds, and visual motifs to convey the narrative of a poet's, Mija's, relation to nature and capitalist society. I will observe how these techniques can add onto the movie's storyline and help transmit its message better to the viewer. For this topic, my preferred term later on will be 'cinema poetics'.

Considering that the point of view for this movie analysis is ecocriticism, a foundational introduction to its main ideas will be given. I will present its origin in the context of literary theory, as well as the scope of its interest, and I will lean onto the theories of ecocriticism regarding the human-nature relationship to support my thesis. Throughout the entire paper, I aim to explain how the movie depicts the influence of human culture and nature on one another; how there is humanity in nature, and nature in humanity.

Following that, I will dive deeper into the discourse on the relationship between humans and nature in capitalist society; its rift and the subsequent feelings of alienation and melancholy. I will introduce ideas presented by philosophers such as Karl Marx and Theodor W. Adorno who argue that the cause of the growing division between humans and nature is precisely the

capitalist society we are a part of. I will define alienation and provide more context as to why it is a prevalent issue in the ecocritical discussions, as well as highlight their reasoning behind nature being part of the solution.

In the context of the movie, I will focus exactly on this issue – how the effects of capitalism in human culture lead Mija closer to nature. The driving force behind that argument will be a moment in the movie’s plot when money is used to buy the silence of a mother grieving the death of her daughter, amidst which Mija finds herself noticing natural elements more often, focusing on the look of trees and the sound of birds. I will analyse in which ways alienation presents itself in the movie’s plot; whether it be alienation from oneself or from other people. With that in mind, I will focus on Mija’s attitude towards her illness, as well as her relationship with the other characters.

Finally, I will take the discourse in the direction of poetry by analysing Mija’s approach to writing, as well as trying to explain what it means to be a poet; and this may appear along with the term ‘literary poetics’ in the paper. With the backdrop of ecocriticism, the role of the poet will be discussed in relation to nature, as I observe what several other ecocritics have pointed out in this relationship; for example, whether or not language puts humans above other parts of the ecosystem, and where the poet’s responsibility lies within this context. I suggest that poetry-writing can prompt a person to, by careful observation of the surrounding environment and deep self-reflection, better appreciate nature and nourish the connection with it. This ultimately backs up one of the main points of my thesis – that poetry can be seen as a bridge between human culture and nature, and a tool for handling the ever-growing feeling of alienation.

### **1. *Poetry* - synopsis**

Thirteen years after his directing debut Lee Chang-Dong released the movie *Poetry* (2010). The story revolves around an elderly woman named Mija who, on a whim, decides to enrol in a poetry class. This interest shows up shortly after she gets diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, and up until the end of the film, her main goal is to finish writing one poem. This leads her to partake in poetry recital nights and meetings with fellow writers, with a wish to understand what it takes to be a poet.

In the sphere of her personal life, Mija is depicted as a well-dressed character. She likes observing nature and making small talk, and she earns a bit of money taking care of an old man, Mr. Kang. She lives with her passive, ill-mannered grandson Jong-Wook who, she later learns, took part in the raping of his classmate Agnes that led her to suicide. The fathers of the other boys involved come up with a scheme to raise hush money for the girl's family. This causes an inner turmoil in Mija; Jong-Wook's inability to own up to his actions leaves her frustrated and alienated from her only present family member. *Poetry* guides the viewer through Mija's life; coming to terms with disease and loneliness, understanding poetry-writing, and reaching a resolution regarding her grandson's criminal action.

This tragic event, her grandson's silence, and the human greed all serve as a catalyst to Mija's alienation, not just from Wook, but from everyone around her. With Mija not able to agree with their views on ethical issues, the gap between them widens. In turn, she retreats to nature whose presence is ever-present throughout the film – as the background of a shot, Mija's point of view or a subject of her writing. This growing attention towards the natural world helps Mija, to an extent, understand and bear with the complexity of interpersonal relationships. In addition, it can be said that it aids in recognising ways in which we get alienated from ourselves. The cause of this for Mija may be her disease, which could make her feel like a stranger in her own body. Connecting with nature through poetry then helps Mija reflect on her living situation and come to her own resolution.

## **2. Theoretical foundations**

### **2.1. Film theory**

In order to justly analyse the art of cinema, it is important to cover the basics of film theory. In "Poetics of Cinema", David Bordwell writes of three dimensions. First, the story world - the characters and their circumstances. In *Poetry*, an elderly woman Mija deals with her recent diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease and the acknowledgment of her grandson's involvement in a school rape case, all while enrolling in a poetry class. Second, the plot structure; the movie opens with a seemingly unrelated suicide case, followed by Mija's introduction, her disease diagnosis and class application, and up until the end deals with the effects of her grandson's actions on her life and poetry. The line between being oblivious to

learning about her grandson's actions is the only one that could be drawn when dividing the plot sections - everything else is happening simultaneously, not at any particular moment in the movie but rather everywhere, all the time. That connects to the third dimension, the narration, or the flow of information. Much is said, but much more is shown, requiring careful observation and in-depth analysis of the movie's silent emotive cues.

The ability to understand these cues becomes important when dealing with a somewhat passive, even aloof character, Mija. Bordwell understands the creative decision of putting such people to the forefront, writing how those cases require the viewer to "construct a less casually driven story world, one ruled by passivity, chance encounters, and emblematic episodes that evoke psychological and social themes" (Bordwell, 2007: 35). That is precisely the guiding idea behind Mija's character analysis throughout this thesis.

Moreover, given the nature of cinema, and the absence of a narrative voice, the assignment of meaning begins at an emotional level. If doubts arise on whether something has a deeper purpose behind it - be it an image of a flower or bathtub frame, the question should be posed - did it evoke emotion? Bordwell believes that a wide array of options is presented to the filmmaker, and whatever is deemed possible of evoking certain emotions and guiding the story in the desired direction, can be used rightfully so.

It must be noted that, unlike literature where the written words are the obvious narrative guide, most movies heavily rely on their imagery to tell a story. That is why it is important to deliberately position the frame and the elements inside it. Bordwell notes the cinematic amalgam of dynamic spaces and enclosed ones, vast landscapes to shoebox room interiors, "narration burrows all the way down into the material, shaping it for our uptake" (Bordwell, 2007: 12). Every little thing contributes to the overall story; from the camera's position, movement in front of the screen, editing of shots to dialogue. Another notable distinction from literature is the concept of background and foreground action. In a movie, the two could very well be represented in a single frame. Examples of that in *Poetry* often include a dining table, where one or more characters are seated, while the other stands in the distance. In writing, argues Bordwell, these positions and their importance cannot be revealed in a simultaneous moment.



It can be said that film and literature differ in as many instances as they are alike. However, film analysis requires following its unique mould, as Bordwell puts it “there are no narrative techniques possessed by cinema that cannot be found in literature, though cinema can actualise those techniques in strikingly different ways” (Bordwell, 2007: 47). Most of the time, our understanding of a movie, its plot structure and narrative comes from relying on visual cues and our own knowledge of the world. Even when dealing with passive characters, the viewer, or according to Bordwell, ‘the spectator’, must actively try and understand what the movie is putting forth by categorising, hypothesising and concluding.

While the poet uses language to convey ideas, thoughts and feelings, the movie director uses shooting images as a medium to convey ideas and evoke feelings in the viewer. Their underlying role remains the same - the director, like the poet, presents his/her perception of the world. The complexity of such a process requires certain theoretical knowledge, in order to provide a proper analysis.

## **2.2. Ecocriticism**

To understand the context in which the contents of the movie will be analysed, and why the concept of human-nature relationship is prevalent in the paper, the idea of ecocritical literary theory should be discussed. Ecocriticism, also known as green studies, ecopoetics or environmental literary criticism, is a term coined by William Rueckert in 1978.

In the sphere of literature, ecocritics wonder what the relation between humans and the natural world is. In his book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*, Joseph Meeker speaks of “literary ecology”, referring to “the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works”, which is also “an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of the human species” (Meeker, 1997: 7). Sessions describes the “attempt to arrive at an objective understanding of man and his place in the scheme of things” as a crucial theme between different areas of human existence ever since the time of the Greeks (Sessions, 1974: 71). Adding onto this perception of self in the natural world, one of the key discussions amongst critics is the relationship between human culture and nature: if the two are completely separate and if not, to what extent they come together.

Therefore, ecocriticism does not merely study the aesthetic aspects of nature portrayal in writing – the writer’s recognition of the beauty of waterfalls and landscapes. Rather, it speaks up against the negative effects of separating humans from nature, as well as putting them above the latter. Armbruster and Wallace speak of the necessity of ecocriticism challenging “dualistic thinking by exploring the role of nature in texts more concerned with human cultures, by looking at the role of culture in nature, and by attending to the nature-focused text as also a cultural-literary text” (Armbruster, Wallace 2001: 4). This opposition of certain ecocritics towards a separation between humanity and the natural world becomes especially relevant when reflecting on today’s capitalist society.

### **2.3. Capitalism and alienation**

Karl Marx, regarded as the father of communism, is a prominent figure of 19th century European philosophy. One of his main concepts stresses the importance of unity between nature and humans, and the unfortunate growing gap between them as a consequence of living in a capitalist society. The way in which people relate to their work under such circumstances leads to feeling disconnected, unhappy, and - alienated. In his analysis of Karl Marx’s ‘ecosocialism’, Kohei Saito points out different types of alienation according to Marx: from labour, from the product, and from other people. In such a system, humans are forced to work merely to sustain their existence, and better yet, to ‘fight’ others trying to survive just the same. This fight for physical existence leaves negative effects on our social relationships and communication; “Instead of free mutual intercourse and collaboration, there emerges antagonistic and atomistic competition for survival” (Saito, 2017: 31). For Marx, the cure to the disconnect, poverty and isolation that came along with capitalism is, among other things, returning to nature.

The concept of alienation is a recurring theme of Marx’s philosophy. Saito stresses the importance of understanding the main cause of alienation, thus understanding how Marx’s goal is encouraging “a conscious rehabilitation of the unity between humans and nature” (Saito, 2017: 44). In his opinion, humans are a part of nature, thus reconnecting and working with it aids in nourishing the unity between the two. Subsequently, it could minimise the feeling of alienation brought upon by modern capitalist production. Backing up Marx’s thesis on the negative influence of capitalism on nature, John Bellamy Foster also critiques the idea

of making a profit being the only connection among humans, as well as between them and nature. In *The Vulnerable Planet*, he writes: “Marx believed that it would be possible, not all at once but through a process of historical struggle, to create a society aimed at the transcendence of human self-alienation and of the alienation of human beings from nature” (Foster, 1994: 145).

The exploitation and destruction of humans and nature is something Jason W. Moore also addresses in *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. He describes capitalism as something that “drew wealth from Nature” and “disrupted, degraded, or defiled Nature” (Moore, 2015: 16). He proposes the idea of humanity-in-nature and nature-in-humanity, which will be used in the analysis of *Poetry* as well, saying “everything that humans do is already joined with extra-human nature and the web of life” (Moore, 2015: 17). Moore sees the distinction between nature and society as Cartesian, with negative effects of humans seeing themselves as separate from the nature ‘out there’. In the context of the film, we can see Mija’s poetry as an attempt to close that artificial gap between humanity and nature.

Theodor W. Adorno sees capitalism as the root of the issue as well, with nature being a source of inspiration on one hand, and an object of exploitation on the other. Like Marx, he sees the negative consequences of trying to dominate nature, which is intertwined with humans. He writes of melancholy, in his work *Minima Moralia*, as a natural human response to capitalism and mass culture, as well as alienation which, Adorno believes, comes from the constant push and pull in capitalist society. “Alienation manifests itself in human beings precisely in the fact that distances fall away. For only so long as they are not overwhelmed with giving and taking, discussion and conclusion, access and function, would enough space remain between them for that fine mesh of threads, which connects them to each other” (Adorno, 1951) – according to his theory, individuals are overwhelmed to the point of seeing past the true connections with other people. Amidst this alienation, Adorno argues that art and music can provide moments of connection with the natural world, which is precisely what we see in the film with Mija’s relation to poetry-writing. In *Aesthetic Theory* he points out how despite the progress society has made humans are still vulnerable, and the norms of a modern world leading to powerlessness and alienation urge the human to return to nature; “the subject’s powerlessness in a society petrified into a second nature becomes the motor of the flight into a purportedly first nature” (Adorno, 2002: 65). His views on nature and art will be picked up again later in the essay when discussing Mija’s writing specifically.

### 3. Film techniques

#### 3.1. Framing and camera movement

When speaking of “cinema poetics” the focus is on the visual communication, and all the elements that film comprises; acting, imagery, silent cues, music, as well as scene framing and camera movement. This section explores how specific shots are organised, and how the camera is used to portray the dynamic between nature and humans in *Poetry*.

The very first frames of the movie depict a body floating on the river's surface. The scene remains unbroken for some time, as the camera pans across the scenery. The long takes, as Michael Rabiger would point out, let “you stand back and consider the meaning of the characters’ lives rather than pressing you to identify with their emotions” (Rabiger, 2008: 207). The viewer is given some time to observe the circumstances and come to certain conclusions. The title ‘*Poetry*’ appears next to the lifeless corpse before the screen turns pitch black. In a simple way the tone is set for the entirety of contents that will unfold further on; showcasing the human connection to the natural world.

The frames in which nature is the main subject stand in striking contrast to those where the main subject is the urban environment. The former seem simpler and less stimulating, almost having the power to ground the viewer in the present moment. The latter may seem suffocatingly overcrowded at times, whether that be positioning Mija in the middle of loud traffic, or in the middle of a packed hospital waiting room. Despite such a distinction, one thing is certain; nature and humans are never depicted as fully separate in the movie. Even if the focus of a frame is nature, there will be something ‘human’ attached to it – perhaps the presence of Mija, or a man-made bridge. Likewise, when it seems that humans are the focus of a scene, there will be elements of the natural world peeking through the background. Examples of this include greenery that can be seen through car or bus windows, flowers that grow beside a restaurant building, or birds that fly above a concrete school playground.

This idea of depth and layers in a movie scene can be connected to ‘deep focus’ frames, based on Bazin’s idea of position. Much like the framing of depth on the movie screen impels the viewer to consider multiple layers of action, the film’s storyline holds a similar intention. For

example, Mija is in the centre of the frame when driving on a bus, and the nature seen through the window seems like a minor detail in the distance. And yet, our attention is drawn to it because we can feel it also plays a role. Gerald Mast describes such frames as “shots that create their meaning by arranging their components in multiple planes of the frame’s depth” (Mast, 1984: 86). Despite one object standing closer to the camera, attention can be drawn to what is standing further behind. Similarly, despite the partial focus of the story being on poetry-writing, attention is drawn to underlying complexity of the human-nature relationship. Under such circumstances, Mast explains how “the viewer enjoys the same freedom that he does with reality itself, the freedom to decipher and infer meaning for oneself” (Mast, 1984: 86). The director of the movie provides these layers, but it is the viewer’s role to work out the message behind the imagery.

Apart from the frame composition when the camera is more or less static, Lee Chang-Dong makes use of the camera’s movement to evoke an emotional reaction. This can be seen moments after Mija gets her diagnosis. The camera movement that was still until Mija finds herself in a hospital parking lot, suddenly turns a bit shaky, as if human-like character is added to it. It is at this parking lot that the viewer is introduced to the grieving mother of Agnes, the girl who committed suicide. The camera acts as if triggered by Mija’s steps, as if the viewer is walking into the situation along with her. The composition of the frame conveys the tone of the scene - a mother depicted in denial over her child’s death, and passers-by that get interested in the commotion but quickly go on about their lives. In a way, the camera acts as a stander-by too, putting the audience in such a position that they feel one with the viewing crowd.

Whether it be a still frame with multiple layers, or messy camera work that follows a character’s movement, Lee Chang-Dong does not shy away from cinematographic imperfection. In fact, it seems intentional, precisely because it blurs the line between fiction and reality. It makes the viewers consider how the content of the movie translates into their own lives - how they perceive their environment, how they understand their relation to nature, how they deal with personal issues, or how society affects their existence.

## **3.2. Sounds**

### **3.2.1. Electronic**

When used deliberately in a movie, sounds can evoke a certain emotional response. The following two sections focus on the concept of electronic and natural sounds, suggesting the different intentions each might have, and how it may relate to the storyline.

In the middle of the waiting room frame, a ringtone breaks through the air, representing the first sound of music appearing in the film. Lee Chang-Dong boldly omits the soundtrack, relying solely on diegetic sounds; in other words, sounds that are heard by both the audience and the characters. The only sources of music thus become cell phones, computers, or a karaoke room.

A decision to disregard non-diegetic sounds may seem risky but in retrospect, it allows the viewer to truly focus on the sounds in the movie; to wisely utilise both the visual and auditory perceptions in order to step into the scenes. In a way, the movie becomes much more real and convincing. It makes space for the viewer to exist among the characters - breaking down a big barrier.

The element of electronic sounds becomes especially important in the analysis of characters. Mija's grandson Wook is often depicted listening to loud music or watching funny content on the television. When Mija comes home from the grocery store one day, a faint sound of an instrumental flows into a loud sound of the music playing in Wook's room as he lays slumped inside himself. Wook is depicted as a flat character all throughout; never saying too much. If there are thoughts running behind his eyes, the viewer would hope it is that of guilt which he attempts to overpower with other noises. That is how sound and music are used in the film. Not as something additional for the purpose of entertaining the audience, but as parts of the characters' lives that help the viewer get inside their heads a bit better.

Music and television are sources of escapism for Wook. Oftentimes when serious topics are brought up by Mija, Wook acts indifferent, not willing to discuss the issue, but rather interested in the contents of the television playing in the background. The content he indulges

in does not seem to require much brain activity. In contrast, whenever Mija is paying attention to the TV, it seems to depict a grave situation.

The difference in their perception is shown in the moment Mija decides to go inside Wook's room, claiming access to that environment. As the grandson clearly will not let her inside his mind, she chooses to go through the very space that mirrors it in the real world - his bedroom. With faint sound of his music still playing, she goes through the mess of his notes, his drawers, and even accidentally triggers his computer. As the music plays louder, Mija's frustration grows from not knowing how to turn it off. What serves as escapism for Wook, becomes a source of frustration for his grandmother. Mija's ability to slow down, take in both the silence and the sounds of nature, is just one quality separating her greatly from her grandson.

Above all else, Mija is not trying to brush things off, or accept reality as it comes. She tries to see beyond the surface level, and that characteristic is visible in the way she approaches poetry writing as well. A poem is not simply a product of a wave of inspiration that suddenly hits a person, but a string of efforts, observing one's surroundings and understanding the depths of different elements that it consists of.

It could be argued that much like music is for Wook, Mija's source of escapism is poetry, and maybe that is true in the very beginning. However, unlike Wook who lets the music meaninglessly drown out his thoughts, Mija's poetry serves a bigger purpose in her life. Her poetic growth is made possible precisely because of the many different factors at play - both at conscious and subconscious levels, which make her poetry more meaningful than a simple pastime activity.

### **3.2.2. Natural**

Parallel to the electronic sounds, there are also sounds from nature. The sound of the river rushing by, the sound of the rain gradually falling harder, and the sound of the wind blowing through tree branches.

There are a few instances where Mija is quietly sitting under a tall tree. She sits in its shade, observing it from ground level. At the curiosity of a passing-by lady she says she is looking at

the tree in order “to see it well, to feel it, to understand its thought and listen to what it says” (*Poetry*, 2010: 25:38). After she moves from her spot, the camera takes on her original position, letting the viewers observe the tree for a moment as well.

Looking at it from Mija’s perspective, the audience gets a chance to see the tree well too, to feel and understand it. The tree branches cover the entirety of the screen as Mija’s point of view is shown. Jean-Pierre Geuens describes such instances where “the camera ‘attaches’ itself to a character’s spatial position” as frames that “endeavor to subjectivise a character’s finite, limited viewpoint” (Geuens, 2000: 119). A similar frame reappears later as Mija visits the school playground. As she looks at the tree, the sound of the wind blowing through its branches becomes more prominent. It solidifies the idea that the reality of the film is projected through the filter of Mija’s mind.

Through her quiet observations, she pulls nature out from the background, thus allowing a constant interaction. Or rather, the director draws attention to these elements through framing, and Mija puts them in the spotlight in her writing. Even as she simply pays close attention to the song of birds in the air, she writes: “The song of birds singing, what are they singing?” (*Poetry*, 2010: 57:18). Although perhaps only on a subconscious level, Mija is aware that she has the power to achieve connection between herself and nature through poetry.

If electronic sounds represent alienation and escapism, natural sounds represent connection and consciousness. The string of events leading up to the scene of Mija sitting quietly in the rain surrounded by greenery could lead the viewer to assume the horrors of inner turmoil and pain accumulating behind her dreary eyes. And yet she remains quiet. The sound that overpowers the scene is that of a heavy rainfall. This could be a key example of a scene in which nature speaks for the poet, rather than the other way around. Mija’s pain is translated into a heavy outpour, growing larger and larger, and no words need to be said. Be it connection between Mija and her environment, or the viewer and the storyline, the sounds of nature depicted in the movie seem to aid in such achievements.



### **3.3. Visual motifs**

#### **3.3.1. Water**

Just as it is with literature, films can be analysed through repeating visual motifs. Rabiger describes motifs as “devices placed by the storyteller to signify thematic aspects” (Rabiger, 2008: 205). One of the main motifs to point out is water - the river flowing under a bridge, the water resting in a filled bathtub, or the droplets of rain falling onto an open notebook. Rabiger suggests that the image of flowing water as a motif could represent the continuation of life, no matter the circumstances.

Right from the beginning, Lee Chang-Dong gives us a supporting image for this paper’s argument - the connection between humans and nature. By showing deceased Agnes floating in the river, he could be implying that humans are a part of and equal to everything else in ecology. He may also be suggesting that the effects of living in a society where profit is put above human lives, and where human alienation from themselves and one another numbs them from guilt, could literally push people over the edge and in the direction of the natural world. The body in the beginning of the movie flows by like an interruption to the flow of life, a disturbing reminder of the end. Much like the water flows and carries her body, the little girl ‘flows’ silently through the entire movie, seeping into every crevice and filling it with her being; the one that once was.

Water is almost deceiving, however. The transparency of water makes it seem like everything is clear, visible, and understood. Yet, the many forms it could take represent the different modes of communication - the message being sent and the intention behind it. It could stand still in a bathtub; it could fall softly from a tap or heavily from the sky. It could even be fast and unpredictable as a river current making way into the unknown. All those instances are connected through the element of water, and on many occasions, this idea mirrors the storyline of the movie. It could seem as if at times everything is still, and nothing is happening, then all of a sudden, as if caught in a strong current, the viewer gets taken to different places and new conclusions.

Another characteristic of water is its visible surface and the hidden depths. At times, the characters in the movie show their inability to see past the surface level, and by noticing this, the viewer begins to question all the areas in which this idea is applicable. Is there depth in the

poetry that Mija writes that could be overlooked by its beautiful surface? Does one simply stop at the aesthetic value of lines such as: “Before crossing the black river, with my soul’s last breath, I am beginning to dream, a bright sunny morning” (*Poetry*, 2010: 2:15:30), without caring to explore the deeper meaning behind it; the life experience that inspired its conception? Is there depth in the storyline of the movie that could go unnoticed through casual viewing?

The water itself does not speak of such ideas, or pose philosophical questions – but the poet, who listens and observes carefully, translates that phenomenon in poetry, as a director does in a movie, thus making the reader / viewer, the receiver of the message, decode the meaning.

### **3.3.2. Doors**

The motif of doors and the camera’s position in relation to them may be easier to go under the radar for the average viewer on the first watch, unless one makes the effort to stop for a moment and think about what the frame is trying to imply.

Doors shown as shut all the way usually divide the viewer from the reality of the scene. Such as when the group of boys is discussing their secret behind a locked door. In that moment, not only the viewer, but also Mija, is stuck behind a closed door; literally portrayed as standing in the oblivion. The doors are also closed when privacy is needed, when Mija goes to change her clothes, or cries silently under the water stream in Mr. Kang’s shower. At times it seems the doors are a visual representation of human beings becoming alienated from one another and losing their connection.

The doors are left slightly ajar or fully giving a peek inside a room when there is either nothing to hide, or the viewer is given a false sense of awareness of the present situation. For example, the task of washing Mr. Kang is seen through the open-door frame repeatedly in the movie. Near the 1:27:35 mark of the movie, the frame reappears just the same, but as Mija begins to close the door, we learn that she is giving into the old man’s advances. By character observation, the viewer might have predicted a different course of events - Mija standing her ground and putting the man in his place. However, another outcome occurs. Through the simple repetition of a familiar open-door scene, to slowly closing the door, the viewer learns that not everything will unfold as it seems.

It is not just about being allowed inside the actual space, but inside the reality, ready to become aware of certain truths. The depiction of the door determines how much or how little is hidden from the viewer. When Mija is driving in the passenger seat of a car with one of the fathers from school, the camera remains inside during their small talk. It allows a view from the side windows, alternating based on who is speaking, but nevertheless giving the impression that the camera is right inside the vehicle alongside Mija and the father of Kibum, the grandson's classmate. In that moment, Mija is speaking of her poetry class, her love for flowers, and expressing her tendency to say weird things. It all relates to the content the viewer is previously made aware of. As soon as the conversation cuts to the purpose of the upcoming meeting, which neither the viewer nor Mija is yet sure about, the camera leaves the confined space, allowing only a view through the front windshield.

The idea of being left in the dark is conveyed through being left behind a closed door, a window, or a wall in Lee Chang-Dong's narrative. Unlike water, where distinct variants are possible, and the idea of depth vs. surface is prevalent, the doors pose only the two extremes; either awareness; openness and what is allowed to be known, or complete disconnect; being closed off, that which is hidden.

Water is also greatly connected with human beings in the movie - carrying their bodies or being soaked up by their skin. It almost indicates human involvement and the role they play in everything that happens in their lives. Doors, on the other hand, are solid and isolated. In a sense, they might represent all the impacting life elements, free of human influence - like a disease that one does not choose but is still greatly affected by. Then again, through their connection, all the visual motifs support the idea of human-nature interconnectedness; behind the bathroom door stands bathtub water, and behind a bus window stands a flowing river.

### **3.3.3. Glass**

When it comes to the motif of glass, a car windshield represents only one side of the spectrum. A similar imagery appears after Mija finds out the truth about her grandson and his friends at the gathering with the group of fathers. She decides to leave the room of the restaurant, as the camera stays inside with the men, and the viewer is allowed to look at Mija through the big glass window.

It is almost an indication of her wanting to escape the horrible truth she learned prior, by going back behind the door, behind the wall or window; back into the oblivion. She could also be removing herself from the group in order to step into a different environment, closer to nature and closer to flowers, which she seems to understand, feel and see better than the humans in the room. This particular scene arrives when the group of men suggest they should buy their way out of a lawsuit from the girl's family, and witnessing this immoral behaviour, which eerily seems socially acceptable, leads Mija away and towards the natural world.

Another portrayal of Mija stuck behind a barrier comes later in the film as she observes the inside of a science lab where the group of boys used to abuse their now deceased classmate. Standing behind a window, her eyes scan the room. She knows to a certain extent what horrors occurred there, but she is not fully aware of the entirety of it, hence the choice of framing.

The glass seems to represent the bridge between water and doors as motifs. Like water's transparency, the glass allows a view to something deeper, and like the stillness of doors, the windows represent an immovable force, similar to uncontrollable life circumstances. Glass, like water, makes space for human involvement in the form of eyes that glance through them - and much like the water's deceit, the human behind the glass is not yet sure if they are left in the dark, despite the clear view of action on the other side.

By that conclusion, it could be argued that the movie screen is the glass that allows a view of the action, but the viewers must figure out to which extent they are still left in the dark to the entirety of the message attempting to be transmitted. In addition, if water represents nature on one side, and doors are connected to humans on the other, the glass movie screen is the connecting point between, much like the poet is. The former uses cinema poetics, and the latter literary poetics, to transmit their message of the two elements being intertwined - through the glass movie screen we see where doors and water come together, and through Mija's poetry we see how humans are one with nature.

## 4. Human culture and nature

### 4.1. Humanity in nature

Previously mentioned visual cues represent implicit connecting points of nature and humanity, but such an idea is often explicitly stated in the movie; the idea of the human life experiences intertwined with natural imagery.

The motif of red flowers is one of the first things Mija writes in her little notebook - “A flower as red as blood” (*Poetry*, 2010: 36:49). She stands outside a restaurant, observing a cockscomb bush. This association of flowers and blood comes moments after learning about the rape and suicide of the schoolgirl. She compares the flowers to a shield as Kibum’s dad squats down next to her, trying to see from her point of view. He, however, misses the point entirely because he takes it at face value, agreeing that the flowers are indeed very red.

Connections between the natural world and human qualities are often made throughout the film, as nature is seen through the lens of humanity. Mr. Kang, the old man Mija cares for, takes note of how quiet she is one particular day, bringing in contrast her usual “chirping away like a skylark”. Mija later tells her grandson off for not picking up his own mess, explaining how “even animals clean up after themselves”. At the poetry recital night, a man called Dongkyu expresses his wish to live “as passionately as the cicada”, and when asked about her experience of writing poetry, one woman shares how she wrote as if she were “a flying butterfly”. It seems that, through directing choices, the movie constantly tries to showcase the ways in which humanity and nature overlap, as Lukinbeal says “films can position place in the foreground as a supporting actor, rather than mere background scenery” (Lukinbeal, 2005: 7). Just by filming technique observation it can already be seen how nature in *Poetry* is more than just objective aesthetical addition, but rather one of the pushing forces behind the entire narrative.

At the doctor’s office, Mija associates red flowers with pain. In the moment when she is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, the camera stays on the flowers for a bit as the doctor points out they are fake, as if to give the audience some time to see them for what they are. At one point, Mija explains her love for flowers by saying how simply looking at them makes her feel full to the point of not needing food. It is no wonder the motif of flowers is so prevalent. In a sense, the viewers are experiencing the movie through Mija’s eyes - not only observing what

is happening to and around her, but also having their own perception be influenced by that of Mija's.

Whether it be water, doors, bridges or flowers, it seems like a human need to attach meanings and metaphors to these natural elements, and find human reasoning behind their presence, but most importantly their silence. However, I think this urge is amplified by the idea that the humans in the film are just as silent. They do not own up to their actions, they do not acknowledge their circumstances, and they push things under the rug. This leaves viewers scrambling for answers themselves, and in that confusion, attaching meaning to just about anything. In this sense, the viewer's experience is parallel to that of Mija, who is also met by silence from the rest of the world. Thus, she turns to nature, trying to decipher the sound of birds and the metaphors of squashed apricots, and letting it have a voice in her poetry.

#### **4.2. Alienation from oneself**

The strains capitalist society has put on the human-nature relationship becomes evident in one's attitude towards individual biology; how Mija handles her illness, or her age, is veiled with alienation. As if those things are detached from her – a stranger, or an intruder – which she does not wish to acknowledge.

Mija's diagnosis of the Alzheimer's disease is something weaved into the entire story but remains largely as an unspoken part of her background. Inevitably, it is a thing that would significantly alter an individual's day-to-day life, yet Mija rarely, if ever, speaks of it. To her absent daughter whom she claims to have a precious bond with, to her grandson with whom she shares a living space, even to her classmates and fellow poetry enthusiasts who she sees so often - no one is deemed emotionally close enough to share the news with. Or, rather, Mija's silence is her way of coping with such unprecedented times of her life. Most likely, it is the ever-growing gap between human beings that prevents Mija from turning towards her community.

Moreover, the movie presents additional factors to be considered. Besides the moral question of covering up for her grandson's crimes, Mija is also defined by her old age; despite her youthful appearance, she is undoubtedly a short distance away from the end of her life. There

is also the ambiguity of her relationship with other figures in the movie; such as her daughter, living in a far-away city, or her own husband, who remains unmentioned.

As many things as there are happening in and around Mija, there is still so much she bottles up, refusing to share or even acknowledge. Bolton goes on to say how writing poetry can "effectively be used to examine issues the writer knows are problematic but does not want to talk about." It is also "particularly appropriate for people at the ends of their lives when the need to express, clarify, and understand is very strong" (Bolton, 1999: 124). Koch further explains how the special thing about talking one's emotions through poetry is the fact that "they may be feelings one didn't know one had" (Koch, 1978: 116). Mija's pain might be the catalyst for her poetry writing, but her finished poetry could also serve to soothe the pain; to liberate her from certain emotions weighing her down, or to clear her mind on certain issues.

Perhaps her writing could serve to bear with the emotional pain of dealing with an illness, even though her poetry never directly addresses it. As Bolton says: "The writing of poetry profoundly alters the writer because the process faces one with oneself," as "poetry is an exploration of the deepest and most intimate experiences, thoughts, feelings, ideas" (Bolton, 1999: 118). Poetry, especially when focused on the natural world, urges the person to attentively observe both the processes inside and outside themselves. Thus, the accumulation of such reflections leads towards better understanding of the world and each other; towards healing and solutions.

This is one of the reasons why *Agnes' song* at the end of the movie holds so much importance; primarily due to showcasing Mija's emotional development; a step in the right direction of tapping into her inner self and pulling out certain emotions she may have been reluctant to confront previously, in order to minimise their significance. The ability to see a person – truly see, and acknowledge them, and the things they went through – shows an intent to move away from alienation, as well as the seemingly normalised division of human beings.

#### **4.3. Alienation from others**

Expanding on this idea of Mija finding herself isolated, both from herself and other people, it is worth analysing certain examples of her experiences in social circles. Additionally, it can

serve as a basis to later understand how her presence in the world, and the world's response to her influence her as a person and a poet.

Whether it is in the classroom, during poetry recital nights, or meetings with a group of fathers; Mija somehow always stands out. For the most part, it is her way of dressing that causes the disconnect, but that is merely looking at the visual cues the director presents. The disconnect may also come from age, income differences, and different emotional responses to a young person's suicide.

An important example of this comes from the restaurant meeting scene, which opens with the fathers ordering food with quite relaxed expressions on their face, considering the situation. Like catching up during a regular Sunday get-together, they inform Mija that her grandson, along with a few other boys, participated in the rape of their classmate which drove her to suicide. The grandmother stands out in the environment, perplexed by the news; her processing thoughts painted across her face. As the boys' names get called out, the fathers raise their fist up as a sign of attendance, weirdly almost as a prideful act. "Although I feel sorry for the dead girl, now's the time for us to worry about our own boys" (*Poetry*, 2010: 34:06). The topic of their conversation very quickly goes in the direction of shushing the affected family with money to protect their sons. It shows complete disconnect from others, and a disregard for their well-being; a primary example of the alienation induced by capitalist society in which money is put above human lives.

Another depiction of such a disconnect, where people are more concerned with profit, comes from a scene in the grocery store when Mija mentions the dead girl for the first time, and no one pays attention - neither the shop assistant nor the other customers. They are simply there to either earn, or spend their profit, meanwhile living on autopilot. It is like her words float in the air, unheard and forgotten like the girl herself. Mast explains how regardless of proximity in physical space between characters, there can be a huge gap in psychological space. He says: "The psychological barrier between them is absolutely invisible; it is, in fact, the purely mental abstraction of their own unconscious wills", also adding how "two people, so closely related in body and in space, can be so unrelated in mind and consciousness" (Mast, 1984: 108).



The psychological barrier between two characters is also well depicted in the kitchen scenes when Mija shares the space with her grandson. His previously mentioned tendency to escape reality through different media devices, leaves no room for Mija to even try and penetrate his mind. Mija is often seen standing in the background trying to observe Wook as he gets absorbed in the television time and time again, silently trying to understand how he could ever do horrible things to someone. It is as if Mija is slowly becoming the only active observer, the only one who sees the effects of alienation, the only one who sees the strains it puts on the human connection, and the only one who is repulsed by it.

Feeling alone in holding such worldviews could very easily lead to frustration. The mental struggle to get through to her grandson is represented through the physical struggle of tugging at his sheets, while repeating: “Why did you do it?”. Passively waiting for the grandson to open up turns into actively demanding the answers. It seems to add onto a moment in the poetry class when the teacher noted how inspiration doesn’t come to a person, but they must go and beg for it. Similarly, clarity won’t come to Mija unless she acts; and what starts as a small step, tugging at sheets, turns into a bigger step, turning Wook in to the authorities. Mija’s attentive observation of her grandson with a wish to serve justice seem to mirror her attentive observation of nature with a wish to write poetry.

## **5. Poetry as a bridge**

### **5.1. Writing and observation**

While “cinema poetics” focuses on what is shown, “literary poetics” draws attention to what is said, or rather what is poetically written. Here begins the gradual unpacking of Mija’s poetry; writing in which nature is both the muse and the subject. Capitalist society has made certain individuals not only numb to guilt, but also prone to overlook their surroundings; the examples of which have been mentioned a couple of times already. Mija, through her poetry exploration, shows the importance of active, intentional perception, and the necessity of seeing things in order to understand and write about them.

*“To write poetry, you must see well.” (Poetry, 2010: 19:41); “Writing poetry is all about finding beauty.” (Poetry, 2010: 27:20) - “To write poetry” or “writing poetry” is one of the repeated sentence starters in the movie. It is used to open the poetry class, and to start a poem*

at a recital night. It serves to set the tone; not only for the rest of the scene in which it is uttered, but for the entirety of the movie.

Enrolled in an afternoon poetry class, Mija spends her days writing down notes as they come to mind. She is slowly enthralled by the ambiguous ideas on the creation process of poetry, put forth by her teacher and fellow writers. She seeks to understand what it takes to write poetry and how one could even begin. The teacher's usage of an apple to describe the disengagement of his students with simple everyday objects, remains imprinted in Mija's mind until the very end. She takes the comment quite seriously, finding in her the urge to hold the fruit in her hands for a prolonged moment - trying to truly see it. She does so with trees, flowers, and empty rooms. She tries to see the natural world beyond the very first image that crosses her mind. And these moments of observation are put down on paper.

Mija carries a small notebook wherever she goes, jotting down one-liners as life passes her by; such as the redness of a flower that reminds Mija of blood, or the chirping of birds that leaves her wondering what they might be saying. Moments after getting diagnosed with Alzheimer's, she notes down: "Time passes and flowers fade" (*Poetry*, 2010: 1:14:33), indicating that both the human and nature are temporal, and all will meet its end one day. The flowers that she loves so much will not be bright and colourful forever. Based on her diagnosis, the words occupying her mind will wither with time just like the flowers. The sentence is declarative, with no significant emotion attached to it. In addition, the camera simply shows her writing, without a narrator reading the notes aloud. The audience cannot tell where Mija's thoughts are; if such observations worry her, or if she is simply stating facts in a neutral manner. Regardless of what her emotions are, it is clear that her notes are not simply the product of mindlessly observing the nature around her, but rather a reflection of everything she is experiencing in her day-to-day life.

Therefore, one has to observe and process before being able to write. Cooper mentions the importance of observing to produce writing, since "one does not even begin to have ideas about a topic, even a relatively simple one, until a considerable body of already structured observations and experiences has been mastered" (Cooper, 1986: 369). It is not a matter of choice; Mija has to hold an apple, has to walk across a bridge, has to let the rain wash over her - because all of it serves to feed into her poetry. Parini compares the poet to a plant in a sense that the poet "gathers material from the atmosphere around him and puts out branches

and leaves”, the poem therefore comes to existence by soaking up all the “materials from the atmosphere” (Parini, 2008: 14). Without the experience, she has nothing to write about. She must reflect on the images she sees, the sounds she hears, and the emotions she feels before she is able to relay their significance in her poetry.

This active pursuit of utilising her perspective to connect with the natural world and preserve her humanity is best seen in her relationship with Agnes. No one gives information on who Agnes was as a person, outside of being the ‘girl who jumped in the river and died’, but Mija wants to truly get to know her. She does so by following a trail of the girl’s usual movement; her neighbourhood, her school, the bus she used to take, all up to her final destination. Something within her urges Mija to find a connecting point between her and the girl, and to not lose sight of what is human in the both of them. As following Agnes’ trail leads her to the suicide bridge, the viewer gets a sense of Mija trying to put herself in the girl’s shoes – trying to see what the girl saw or get an insight into what she may have thought, felt, or understood. This quest ultimately leads to her being able to write a poem in Agnes’ name in the end.

## **5.2. Poetry and ethics**

As has been suggested numerous times in the paper, Mija’s poetry writing is used in the movie to reflect social issues and the effects of capitalism on human beings, as well as their relationship with nature. Inevitably then, what influences Mija’s writing development is not only her general understanding of poetry, but also her ethical stance on social issues.

In the beginning, there is an inner turmoil in Mija, caused by the need to write poetry battling her need to help serve justice for a death case involving her grandson. Hwang Hyer-Yung reflects on Mija for the first portion of the movie as someone who thinks “beauty could not be associated with human affairs”, and therefore “clings to the aesthetic objects of the non-human, the glowing splendor of nature, and the red glamour of flowers”. Hwang drives this point of Mija’s inner conflict home by explaining how “Mija’s inability to write a poem derives from her very ignorance of the relation between the true beauty that she longs for and her wretched life, the gruesomeness of her reality” (Hwang, 2017: 46-47). Mija initially believes that poetry should be seen as something elevated; a pursuit of beauty that requires a different way of seeing the world for it to come into fruition. Therefore, serving justice by

raising her grandson well and putting him on the right path seems to have no correlation with the first point.

Because how exactly could she allow herself to write poems when a child has lost her life and the majority are not batting an eye? Reflecting on the movie in comparison to Bong Joon-Ho's *Mother*, Eunah Lee brings up the very topic Lee Chang-Dong spoke of in one of his interviews: "whether it is still possible to write poetry in this cruel era where humanity is lost" (Lee E, 2020: 17). The director expands on this thought by explaining how "art is a pursuit for beauty and there is a question of how it is related to the filth and vice of the world" (Lee CD, 2011). He points out how his own preoccupations with this idea are channelled through the character of Mija. Lee Chang-Dong's own views on art is that it is simply irony as itself, because "beauty co-exists with pain, filth and ugliness" (Lee CD, 2011). The irony of it all could also be symbolised in the character's very name - Mija; describing a 'person of beauty' in Chinese characters. The battle between art and life is therefore presented first and foremost through Mija's very own identity.

And this inability to see a connection between the pure beauty of poetry and a grim reality of her life may stem from the innate human tendency to live by extreme dualism where only one or the other is possible. Good and bad, rich and poor, male and female - the society often pushes these dualistic views. It seems a fitting by-product of capitalism which strives to separate and isolate humans; from other humans, from nature, from their work or themselves. Elaine Riley-Taylor critiques the "mechanistic world that has taught us to think in terms of separation: inner self from outer self; self from others; self from nature and the planet". She goes on to say how "often thought is directed and limited into predetermined binaries dividing outer from inner" (Riley-Taylor, 2002: 20). This ideology of separation is condemned by many writers, including previously mentioned Jason W. Moore, who urge for a collective understanding of the interrelatedness of humanity and the natural world.

This capitalism induced separation and turn against nature is something that Adorno sees as destructive for humans. In *Aesthetic Theory*, he writes: "To feel nature, and most of all its silence, has become a rare privilege and has in turn become commercially exploitable" (Adorno, 2002: 69). He sees the disappearance of a genuine connection between humans and nature under capitalism, which has taken away from an unmediated experience of natural beauty and turned it into an ideology. Our experience of natural beauty, lacking genuine

appreciation, has therefore become characterized by suffering and melancholy: “Over long periods the feeling of natural beauty intensified with the suffering of the subject thrown back in a mangled and administered world; the experience bears the mark of Weltschmerz” (Adorno, 2002: 63).

Following this idea in the context of poetry, Adorno believes that although art can provide a connection with the natural world, it cannot represent nor imitate natural beauty. What it does is express desire to free nature from instrumental usage, meaning it refuses capitalist uses of nature, and draws a line between the two - much like Mija initially draws a line between social struggle and poetry writing. She seems to believe that poetry cannot co-exist with grim reality, but it could express a desire to free herself from these social issues. Her finished poem itself gets put in the second plan, and the important part becomes the change in Mija’s outlook. By turning towards her life circumstances, she is able to write. Similarly, with Adorno’s argument, the ultimate goal is not simply creating art that tries to imitate nature, but rather encouraging humanity to critically look at the system we live in, along with its flaws.

Another example of such mirroring imagery comes from the idea of keeping poetry alive, thus keeping one’s identity alive. The death of poetry is a concern briefly mentioned in the movie, and on a symbolic level, perhaps the character of Wook represents a glimpse of the future; the further modernisation of the world, the mindless diving in the depths of media induced escapism, and ultimately the disappearance of poetry. In *Why Poetry Matters*, Parini addresses this idea by describing our culture as “clamorous, with a television blaring in most living rooms, magazines proliferating, and earphones downloading a great deal of garbage”, adding how “there is little time for concentration, or a space where the still, small voice of poetry can be heard” (Parini, 2008: preface ix). The strains of capitalism take a toll then, both on poetry and humanity.

As the movie plays out, Mija’s circumstances become a source of creativity and her writing process influences her emotional response to the outside events. The gradual mixture of the two sides of her seems to resolve the conflict, and that is visible by the fact she manages to produce the poem in the end. Her doubt is resolved; it is possible to write beautiful poetry while living a dark life. She realises that whatever is going on in her life is ultimately pushing her to write poetry, and her exploration of poetry in turn makes her reflect on her life. Ralph Waldo Emerson explains it best by saying: “The production of a work of Art throws a light

upon the mystery of humanity"; therefore, Art is "nature passed through the alembic of man" (Emerson, 1836). Mija once stood for a long moment over a sink full of unwashed dishes, recalling the words of her teacher about poetry being "found even in the dishwashing basin". Over time, she learns that poetry has always been right there beside her, in the bleak reality of her everyday life. No matter how cruel, or gruesome, it is nevertheless the environment that allows for her inner poetry to fly out to freedom.

### **5.3. Agnes' poem**

Having provided a slight background for it, now we begin to focus on Mija's biggest writing project. Titled "*Agnes' poem*", it is dedicated to her grandson's classmate who was driven to suicide. Like Mija's one-liners, the theme of this poem is also nature, with the predominant motifs being the sun, birds, forest, wind, river and flowers.

Her teacher points out that having the heart to write a poem is the most challenging part, as he starts to read Mija's first and final poem. The frame suddenly switches to that of Mija's kitchen, as the camera stays fixed in one position; letting the viewer observe the empty room, the cleaned table and the turned off TV. Time is given to see the space well and to understand what might have happened. The outer world seems to represent the inner world, and the environment seems to represent the thoughts. There is no mess on the table, there is no source of escapism, and there is no Wook - a definite change in their everyday lives is visible from a single frame. That is when the poem starts, and it is also the first time her writings are read aloud in the film.

Lines such as "the grass kissing my weary ankles" and "before crossing the black river" sound like Mija is coming to terms with growing old and soon passing on. Moreover, it showcases the connection between humanity and nature. The mention of "tiny footsteps" behind her and questioning "how is it over there?" address the little girl directly, relating to Mija's inner turmoil and perhaps second-hand guilt. The idea of meeting her in the afterlife comes from the closing lines: "again I awake blinded by the light / and meet you / standing by me".

In the middle of the reading, Mija's voice blends into Agnes' before completely turning into that of the young girl. The camera takes the audience to places Mija inhabited. It lets the

viewers follow her trail and observe the environment to understand Mija, like how she attempted to do for Agnes previously. Another woman is seen sitting under the tree, looking at it and trying to see what Mija might have seen. The bus she used to take drives away from the bus stop without Mija in sight. A little girl walks over a playground she stood by once. The imagery flows into the environment that both Mija and Agnes came to be a part of at one point in their lives and that is the moment in which their voices mix. Through different film techniques, such as framing, sound, and visual motifs, Lee Chang-Dong sends the message of human connection – both to each other and to nature. Everything is connected, and humans must not let themselves be isolated from one another, or to normalise such behaviour.

The camera appears in the middle of the bridge, a passing vehicle blowing its horn; as if the viewer is in the way, making him/her an active participant in the narrative and not just a passive observer behind a screen. A young girl emerges from the background, stands in the middle of the shot, and breaks the fourth wall without saying a word. The audience can only assume that it is in fact Agnes. Her sudden appearance may strike the viewer as unconventional, but as Mast points out, the magical fun of the cinema frame is achieved because “it has edges and borders that are not so much physical boundaries as psychological limits and barriers to visual perception” (Mast, 1984: 109).

The important thing to note is that Lee Chang-Dong gives a visual background for the poem. He could have made the teacher read the poem on his own, leaving the camera stuck between the four walls of a tiny classroom. Instead, he chose a different approach. Lawrence Buell talks about the importance of performance and the impact it has on art. He notes how Andrew Marvell’s *The Garden* is not read the same in the privacy of one’s backyard and a formal seminar session; “reading contexts matter” (Buell, 2005: 48). Not just the poem itself, but the directing choices of its reading and background visuals all influence how it may be interpreted.

In regard to Mija, the poem is significant because it leads her to a resolution. Bolton explains how “writing poetry is a way of grasping life, nurturing every bit of good,” and “even when it concerns death, pain disfigurement, despair, is vibrant, alive, a way of life” (Bolton, 1999: 130). The possibility of spiritual healing brought about with creative writing is something Wakeman ponders over too, saying “the reflection involved in writing can help make sense of experience, deepen understanding of what happened, and give space for examining ideas, or

issues", further explaining how writing helps the individual come to terms with troubling times. Wakeman also presents the idea that "the poem can freeze experience and make it available for later thought" (Wakeman, 2015: 57).

Much like the beginning of the movie, the end also gives a prolonged shot of the river, giving the viewer time to observe it, see it well, think about how cold it might be to swim in it, and what it would feel like against one's skin. Lukinbeal explains how repetitive use of an image can "create a bond between narrative and place" (Lukinbeal, 2005: 9) and the river is undoubtedly one of the main elements tied into the whole story. As the sound of the final poem overlaps with the sound of the river, Lee Chang-Dong's choice to let the water sound seep into the ending credits adds even more importance to it; by making the moment last just a tad bit longer, attempting to freeze it inside the viewer's mind, as much as it is possible within the restricting spatial and temporal movie frames.

Bridging two separate frames together through sound is a way of "creating a sense of nostalgia for 'the lost' scene" (Neumeyer, Buhler, Deemer, 2010: 94). The sound goes on and on and on; a lingering effect - quietly saying "it is not totally over now", reminding everyone not to forget Agnes or Mija so easily.

#### **5.4. The poet**

Having looked at Mija's attitude towards poetry and her written work, a few questions still remain - what makes someone a poet, particularly a nature poet, and how ecocriticism regards the responsibility of poets towards nature.

Inevitably, a writer whose environment is nature will end up transmitting such imagery through his/her writing - with focus on landscapes and natural beauty. Mija is not surrounded heavily by pure nature; the visible natural shots are mixed with urban elements, tall buildings, roads, and buses - yet, on the surface, her poetry reflects the natural world. What gets noted down are flowers, birds, and fruit. That is not what makes it the subject of ecocritical analysis however, as ecocriticism is not simply concerned with the aesthetic of natural imagery in poetry. Laura-Gray Street points out: "ecopoetry isn't just any poetry garnished with birds or trees; it is a kind of paradigm shift" (Fisher-Wirth; Street, 2013: xxxviii). Mija's writing,



along with the movie's overall storyline, is an attempt to transmit the message of nature and humanity never being separate nor fully isolated from one another.

Considering that, it is certain that nature as a subject of human art cannot be analysed in isolation, as if it exists in a vacuum. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes: "For in every particular aesthetic experience of nature the social whole is lodged. Society not only provides the schemata of perception but peremptorily determines what nature means through contrast and similarity" (Adorno, 1997: 68). The way humans perceive nature is heavily influenced by social factors, historical events, and personal ideologies. What Adorno suggests is that humans are unable to view nature in its purest form, without the effects of human condition adding onto the image. Similarly, Christa Grewe-Volpp says: "Human beings define nature culturally, but they themselves are also biological beings and as such dependent on the ecosystem" and therefore "nature and human culture cannot be neatly separated; instead they influence each other in multiple ways" (Grewe-Volpp, 2006: 124).

By that consideration, it is almost impossible to write nature poetry completely devoid of such influences. Support of such arguments in *Poetry* include scenes that indicate visual connection between a part of nature and a part of humanity, which inevitably provides a new connotation for the thus far objective natural elements; a river and suicide; apples and perception; bathtub water and caretaking. Similarly, in Mija's writing, the imagery of flowers, birds and fruit must have their counterpart in her personal life story; be it her disease, her growing interest for poetry, her family's association with a rape and suicide case, her sociocultural status, or a sum of all parts. Therefore, analysing Mija's writing, and the supporting visuals of the movie, makes it clearer than ever how the entirety of *Poetry* stresses the unity of humanity and nature.

This idea raises a question of the poet's role in the world. For instance, in his essay *The Poet*, Emerson praises the true poets; those that look past the perfection in skill but rather care to nourish their connection with the universe, and those with a fine ear for poetry waiting to be written into existence. For Emerson, a true poet speaks, names things, and represents beauty. In a way, he/she has the power to interpret the silent mysteries of the world. But what does this 'naming' of things entail?

The anthropocentric worldview puts the human above everything else in the ecosystem, and such ideology is distortedly justified by the man's literary skills. Some would advocate that since humans are the only literary beings in the world, they are deemed as superior to nature. This idea comes as a consequence of giving into a culture in which, according to Christopher Manes, "being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative" (Manes, 1996: 15). Deeming language and reason therefore as something purely cultural, argues Grewe-Volpp, "confirms a hierarchical dualism in which nature is not only deemed totally opposite from culture, but also inferior and at the service of culture" (Grewe-Volpp, 2006: 125).

Understanding the symbiosis of nature and humans, particularly the poets, the anthropocentric stance should be challenged by moving the narrative of superiority in a different direction. If we are to look at the human as the only literary being, that entails a certain dose of responsibility to the system one is a part of. Grewe-Volpp acknowledges the concern of ecocritically minded authors giving a voice to nature. The river cannot describe what it felt like to carry a dead body on its surface, the wind cannot explain how it felt to blow through a grieving mother's hair, the tree cannot describe what it is like to hold an elderly woman in the embrace of its shade. So, the poets speak for them. The poets speak of the unspoken, and in the name of those who cannot speak.

The idea that humans are above nature because of their ability to convey thoughts through language is refutable, considering that language itself is also natural, not only cultural. Thus, language is the particular point of recognising our connection with nature. Street sees language as "an integral part of our biological selves", adding how humans "are language-making creatures in the same way that spiders are webmaking creatures" (Fisher-Wirth; Street, 2013: xxxvii). Gary Snyder also points out: "Language and culture emerge from our biological-social natural existence, animals that we were/are" (Snyder, 1990; 17). Obviously, nature has its own language, and to think conscious communication is exclusive to homo sapiens would be narrow-minded. However, the intention behind giving nature 'a platform' or 'a voice' actually lies in transmitting the message to humans in a way understandable - to humans. It should not rest on the basis of putting ourselves above anything else in the ecosystem, but rather acknowledging our connection and interdependence with the natural world.

The poets' role in giving nature a voice, therefore, is not to impose themselves as superior to nature, but to strike a reconnection with it amidst the forces that strive to alienate us from it. Parini describes the poets as those who "hold a mirror of sorts up to the mind if not to the world, and their poems reflect our deepest imaginings, our hopes for ourselves and our society" (Parini, 2008: 9). Poets are called to stand in the middle, to bridge the gap of alienation, and encourage reconnection; "It is their namings that provide the bridge, the uniting of sentimental and naive, of poet and nature" (Bate, 1991: 17). Thus, human language is not to be understood as a means to achieve superiority, but as a tool to make sense of the world around us and our place in it. As Patrick D. Murphy claims, "words, among other functions, serve to name, identify, depict, and define the material world in which they circulate and from which they arise", adding how "words shape the reality that human beings perceive" (Murphy, 2009: 3).

The solution for the ecopoet lies in "humble acknowledgment of human prejudices and cognitive inadequacies and of the existence of a presence 'out there' which we know very little about", believes Grewe-Volpp, explaining how once one stops seeing nature as a passive object "but as a living, sophisticated, complex being, an ecocritical writer (...) can begin to (...) imagine what the world is like for an animal" (Grewe-Volpp, 2006: 131; 135). Additionally, the ultimate goal is tearing down the anthropocentric ideology which, along with capitalist society, encourages further division between humanity and the natural world.

With a finished project, Mija stands as a proof to the message written on the building of her poetry class: "You too can become a poet". Despite Emerson's distinction between a poet and an ordinary man, as "the poet conforms things to his thoughts (...) and impresses his being thereon" (Emerson, 1836); here in the movie, quite an ordinary woman creates poetry. She does so, as previously mentioned, through an accumulation of deep observation and self-reflection. A poet is not a being one is simply born into by the grace of the universe, but rather a position one steps into when deeming oneself strong enough to bear all its responsibilities.

### **5.5. Aesthetics of nature poetry**

"Wherever snow falls, or water flows, or birds fly, wherever day and night meet in twilight, wherever the blue heaven is hung by clouds, or sown with stars, wherever are forms with

transparent boundaries, wherever are outlets into celestial space, wherever is danger, and awe, and love, there is Beauty” (Emerson, 1844).

As previously mentioned, ecocritics are not concerned with nature poetry on an aesthetic level - for example, how eloquent the syntax is or how well the landscape is described. We have established so far that ecocriticism goes beyond the surface level, and is rather concerned with the complex relation of humanity and nature defined by a literary medium. Therefore, judging Mija’s poetic journey merely on a surface level, without taking into consideration the context, is nearly impossible. Her individual purpose might be to simply finish a task for her class, but the deeper purpose expands over various areas of her life - to shine light on a girl’s tragic death, to make people around her reflect on their life, to cope with the pressure of falling under a growing disease.

“The apricot throws itself to the ground (..) crushed and trampled for its new life” (*Poetry*, 2010: 1:38:53); a thought comes to Mija’s mind as she eats an apricot from the ground, the shadows of tree branches dancing over her colourful outfit. Beauty in itself does not save anyone, not the poet, not the women, not apricots. Apricots remain crushed on the ground and Mija still marvels over them, dedicating a page of her notebook to their bleak situation. In an interview, Lee Chang-Dong uses apricots to express this great irony between beauty and ugliness in art: “Apricots need to fall down to earth to create a new life” (Lee CD, 2011). The real world is cruel and unrewarding at times, but such trials often lead to ‘the most beautiful moments’ in one’s life.

The course of life, be it for the poet or the fruit, is defined by fluctuation of the highest and lowest points. From withering on the ground, to being the food on someone’s table. From being unable to write, to producing a poem. From getting metaphorically crushed under the feet of society and their cruelty, to rising above it, even if it is only on a cognitive level. The variation of highs and lows help differentiate each stage and draw more appreciation towards both ends of the spectrum. Complete erasure and avoidance of pain is not the solution, and so it is not the beauty’s inherent purpose to save anyone or anything. It is there to send the message of: “This apricot is crushed and trampled but look, there is still beauty in it, isn’t there?”

Beauty does not save, but it exists in salvation and solutions, in the light that illuminates the hospital room, in the songs sung at a funeral, in the crickets that chirp as a boy gets put in the back of a police vehicle. Beauty will continue to exist in such spaces, and if necessary, the job of salvation will be left to something other than it. Beauty is there to be noticed, to enhance the wounds and make the observer acknowledge them.

The film shows instances where it is almost too late for saving; some fruits are already on the ground, one person is already dead, and the concrete already overpowers the green scenery. But to recognize there is beauty to be found in all of it, is to acknowledge the suffering and keep one's humanity intact. Even the step of acknowledging is something that most characters in the movie overlook, and the way the story is delivered makes the viewers question if they do so too.

Writing poetry in itself does not entirely erase the poet's pain, but it demonstrates the ability to understand life even when the fog of troubling times comes around. What enables the poet to do so is careful examination of his/her environment - the nature, the humans, and the man-made spaces. The viewers are then encouraged to, like the poet, carefully observe the world one is a part of, and evaluate how outside forces influence them on a personal and social level.

## **6. Conclusion**

Through this paper we have relied on both film theory and rules of literary interpretation to analyse the 2010 Korean movie *Poetry*; a story of an elderly woman Mija discovering her love for poetry amid an Alzheimer's diagnosis and family involvement in a sexual assault case. Nature being the predominant motif in the movie's cinema and literary poetics, it was observed in this thesis through an ecocritical lens. With that in mind, we have observed what the director's intention is behind portraying the human-nature dynamic, both in his movie, and in the main character's poetry.

The ecocritical foundational theory is supported with philosophical theories that regard capitalism as the main cause of the growing gap between humanity and the natural world. The paper highlights the ideologies of Karl Marx and Theodor W. Adorno in order to explain the exact cause of such a process, as well as the potential solution; reconnecting with nature. The

rest of the paper is then dedicated to showcasing how Lee Chang-Dong's *Poetry* aligns with this belief.

The section on film techniques breaks down the specific elements of cinema poetics that help better portray the director's intended message; framing, camera movements, sounds, and visual motifs. Following that, an in-depth character analysis of the protagonist is given; most notably her life circumstances, and relationships with other people, with intention of highlighting various forms of alienation presented in the movie.

The section dealing with Mija's poetic journey focuses on ethics, characteristics of nature writing, and responsibilities of a nature poet. With all of this in mind, we come to learn that nature in literature and cinema can hardly be analysed exclusively as an aesthetical addition, but rather as a mirror to deep human emotions and experiences.

The section on cinema poetics observed how visual motifs, camera angles and sounds can convey a certain mood. On the other hand, literary poetics focused on the poetry inside the movie; the writing of the main character. Through both of them, *Poetry* urges the viewer to become aware of the importance of unity between human culture and the natural world, as well as the negative effects of their division.

Mija's development as a poet is one of the main ideas of the film, and her outlook on poetry is depicted in a sort of romanticised, almost childlike manner. She sees poetry as something higher than her, something grand and almost painfully unreachable by the ordinary human. Beautiful poetry and ugly reality seem two separate and distinct concepts at first, until she realises that writing about her 'ugly' life can be a form of beautiful poetry. Learning to incorporate the sad reality of human existence into poetry, enables the poet to finally write, which is only achieved through great observation of one's surroundings and deep self-reflection. The importance of Mija's poetic exploration therefore lies in the fact it becomes a metaphoric image of a bridge that is able to unite two seemingly distinct elements; sad reality of life and artistic expression, or allegorically, human culture and nature.

## 7. Summary

Combining ecocritical, political and film theory, this paper aims to analyse how the alienation of humans from nature under capitalism is depicted in Lee Chang-Dong's 2010 movie *Poetry*. In a movie where humans lean towards passivity and biting their tongue, the nonhuman world seems to carry a deeper meaning. Therefore, analysing film frames, camera movement, visual motifs and sounds helps to better understand the director's message – that of humans growing apart from themselves and each other as a result of living in a capitalist society. *Poetry*'s main character Mija and her exploration of creative writing serves to exemplify how poetry stands as a bridge between humanity and nature, trying to bring the two estranged sides together again; and a cure for alienation, by making the individual notice and reflect on their surroundings.

Key words: ecocriticism, poetry, humanity, nature, film, capitalism, alienation

## 8. Sažetak

Kombinirajući teorije ekokritike, politike i filma, cilj ovog rada je analizirati kako je otuđenje ljudi i prirode pod kapitalizmom prikazano u filmu *Poezija* Lee Chang-Donga iz 2010. U filmu u kojem ljudi naginju pasivnosti i prešućivanju, čini se da neljudski svijet nosi dublje značenje. Stoga analiza filmskih kadrova, kretanja kamere, vizualnih motiva i zvukova pomaže boljem razumijevanju redateljve poruke – da se ljudi odvajaju sami od sebe i jedni od drugih kao rezultat života u kapitalističkom društvu. Glavni lik *Poezije* Mija i njezino istraživanje kreativnog pisanja služi kao primjer kako poezija stoji kao most između čovječanstva i prirode, pokušavajući ponovno spojiti dvije otuđene strane. Također služi kao lijek za otuđenje, tjerajući pojedinca da primijeti i razmišlja o svojoj okolini.

Ključne riječi: ekokritika, poezija, čovječanstvo, priroda, film, kapitalizam, otuđenje

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