## **Looking Beyond Capitalist Realism in Hye-young Pyun’s *The Law of Lines***

“People don’t end up poor because they’re stupid. They end up poor because the system is fucked” (Pyun, 2020), this quote, taken from Hye-young Pyun’s novel *The Law of Lines* (2020[TLOL])*,* encapsulates Mark Fisher’s concept of capitalist realism. Fisher considers capitalist realism as the belief in capitalism as “the only viable political and economic system” (2009, p. 8), categorising capitalism as an inexorable force that must be accepted/adapted to. However, by considering capitalist realism through an eastern literature perspective I will utilise an anti-mimetic approach, which Michael W. Clune argues is the key to combating the “realism” in capitalist realism: “the anti-mimetic is our great ally…a willingness to imagine alternatives to what exists (2014, p. 195). Clune’s approach is relevant to analysing *TLOL* because Pyun has stated that, like Clune, she wants readers to feel an unnerving sense of imagination surrounding a new world: “What I wanted was for readers to look up from my work and feel uneasy…feel goosebumps when they looked around at the world anew” (2018, p. 77). Therefore, this essay will analyse *TLOL* in conjunction with Fisher’s work on capitalist realism in order to determine what is beyond current capitalist realist modes of thinking, or whether there are potential alternative modes at all. This analysis of capitalist realism will be considered alongside other variants of capitalism, like confucian and crony capitalism and Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism,* in order to contextualise the socio-economic state of South-Korea and the ways the characters depicted throughout *TLOL* suffer under capitalism.

An application of capitalist realism to *TLOL* proves most useful with a consideration of Berlant’s concept of *Cruel Optimism.* Berlant argues that “all attachments are optimistic” (2011, p. 24), with said attachments resulting in an “sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy” where “nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way.” (2011, p. 2). The notion that attachments lead to a cycle of returning to a fantasy state mirrors the manipulative tactics utilised by MLM schemes like the one protagonist Se-oh joins in *TLOL*. Se-oh recalls her experience inside the pyramid scheme where each recruit had an aforementioned sense of optimistic attachment: “It was only by clinging tenaciously to survival that you would accomplish whatever you set out to do. Giving up meant certain failure, but holding out for a year raised your chances for success.” (Pyun, 2020, N.P.). Mary Wrenn and William Waller describe MLM as a world of “predatory optimism” (2021, p. 429), providing false opportunities for income by becoming “independent” salespeople who “emphasize and epitomize the optimism, meritocracy, and work ethic particular to our current stage of capitalism” (2021, p. 423). This concept of false independence is seen directly in *TLOL* through Pyun’s use of the repetition of a third-person pronoun in order to establish the loss of individuality when joining a pyramid scheme. During chapter 20, Se-oh recalls the manual she was given as a recruit: “They may have all been individuals, but once they were in the manual, they became typical, collective beings.” (2020, N.P). The effect of the repetition of the pronoun “they” and the description of people as “collective” here is how it empahsises how MLM considers individualism as sacrificial: it is taken away from new recruits, transforming them into financial deposits. The schemes’ method of commodifying people parallels capitalist realism’s power, as Todd Hoffman suggests, to “convert all cultural objects…into a "system of equivalence, namely, money” (2017, N.P), with Pyun elevating Hoffman’s analysis to considering people as a monetary equivalence. Thus, capitalist realism, clearly enforces a sense of expansive assimilation, whether that be assimilating into MLM or assimilating into the passive acceptance of neo-liberalism. Therefore, it appears that hope of finding an alternative demands a search/analysis into the opposite of these two structures: individualism.

As a character, Bu-wi (friend Se-oh recruits to the scheme) is representative of individualism, especially as a symbol of independence despite the “transpersonal psychic infrastructure” (Fisher, 2014, p. 27) of capitalist realism. Fisher reiterates that capitalist realism emerges as a “pragmatic adjustment…sense of resignation, of fatalism” (2013, p. 90), however, Bu-wi’s character rejects this notion of necessary adjustment, actively questioning the rules of these structures. For example, during chapter 26, Bu-wi, reprimands the MLM as “unfair, as it had played to everyone’s get-rich-quick fantasies” (2020, N.P), and provides alternatives to the current systems the scheme has in place: “He said there were better solutions to housing and feeding everyone” (2020, N.P). These suggestions are considered frustrating to the others because they had “put up with the hardships without complaining” (2020, N.P), emphasising how MLM mirrors the ideology of capitalist realism that promotes a pervasive feeling of the unchanging inevitable. Thus, Bu-wi represents the potential for change inside a system that would deny such freedom, mirroring the analysis of Luke Goode and Michael Godhe who seek to explore *Beyond Capitalist Realism*. In their article they argue that capitalist realism’s pillars of “sober realism” and “cynicism or fatalism” (2017, p. 119) only work to prevent any form of “participation and public engagement” (2017, p. 119) that would allow for discussion of alternatives to capitalist realism. Instead, they argue that the “futural public sphere” (2017, p. 119) is vital for allowing feelings of hope and excitement that drive aforementioned participation and engagement. It is evident, then, that Bu-wi is representative of the form of hope for the future that Goode & Godhe suggest. Bu-wi is the pioneering individual within the MLM to suggest changes/alternatives, and, therefore, if Se-oh’s experience within MLM establishes the scheme’s ability to assimilate recruits into its hegemonic structure that strips identity away, then Bu-wi’s character establishes the untapped potential for change that can make way for alternative modes of thinking.

Although Se-oh achieves a sense of individuality after leaving the scheme, capitalist realism continues to manage her life as she adopts an unhealthy attachment to murdering the debt collector (Su-ho) she believes responsible for her father’s suicide. Leaving one extreme for another, Se-oh develops a fixation on malice and revenge which the text describes in a personified manner where malice itself becomes a paternal replacement. During chapter 12, Se-oh’s malice is described as giving her “something to do. It swept away her grief…It gave her energy and got her moving. It fed her…It enabled her to live” (2020, N.P.). The repetitive anaphora of “it” emphasises that only through malice can Se-oh currently survive. Analysed under a capitalist realism perspective then, Se-oh’s malice parallels the pervasive presence of capitalist realism as “Work you take home with you…working from home, homing from work” (Fisher, 2009, p. 22), with Se-oh’s work being her obsessive desire for revenge. During chapter 26, the evolution of Se-oh’s malice is evident through her belief that she has no real future. In this chapter Se-oh contemplates her future: “Once her work was complete, the will to live that had been held in place only by imagining the plan and its execution would flee from her completely.” (2020, N.P). The notion that murder is her sole purpose in life replicates the “hermetic and solipsistic” (Bird & Green, 2020, p. 284) behaviours, which stem from the “unpalatable uncertainties of CR” (2020, p. 284). For Se-oh, murder is her only reliable certainty and, thus, this obsession drives her: despite her loneliness and sole thoughts of malice, these feelings keep her alive. Moreover, it is through Se-oh’s malice that capitalist realism and cruel optimism become inseparable because her attachment to malice prevents her from imagining any other way of life. As Berlant suggests, under capitalism, cruel optimism emphasises the idea that “being in circulation denotes being in life” (2011, p. 42) and hoarding an attachment provides a fantasy against a “threatening real” (2011, p. 42). Therefore, to Se-oh, her fantasy of murder is a better option than a reality with an uncertain future without her father, but certain debt.

During the final chapter Se-oh has the opportunity to succumb to the inevitability of capitalist realism, achieving her fantasy of murder: she has the chance to burn down Su-ho’s house, killing his mother and him when he gets home. However, instead she gives Su-ho’s sleeping mother a blanket, leaving without doing anything:

“Surprised at the kindness of her own gesture, she stared down at her hands. Hands that had taken their time to try and pull out the old hose…Hands that had packed the old lady and Su-ho’s belonging into a cardboard box. Hands that had placed a blanket over the old lady.” (2020, N.P.).

Interestingly, Pyun’s use of anaphora changes from previous chapters, instead of anaphora that reinforces the omnipotence of Se-oh’s malice, it is now Se-oh’s hands that are repeated, symbolising her physical control over herself. *TLOL* ends Se-oh’s story stating that she turns her back on the light of Su-ho’s house, walking “Toward the place that the darkness made look like an empty void” (2020, N.P.). This ending is undoubtedly vague, although Se-oh relents her desire for revenge, she walks toward the dark void of the unknown. However, this portrayal of a newfound, uncertain future for Se-oh creates hope for a new future: hope for alternatives beyond capitalist realism. This ending resonates with Annika Gonnermann’s analysis of post-pessimism as a “as a feeling meandering between resignation and stoic acceptance” which is also considered a “result and precondition for capitalist realism” (2019, p. 37). Gonnermann goes further, discussing the potential of dystopian novels that provide a “world void of alternatives besides neoliberal capitalism” (2019, p. 27) that “offer a negative blueprint from which a more cognitive journey can begin…look for a more optimistic future despite and because of capitalist realism” (2019, p. 38). Although *TLOL* is not wholly dystopian it does provide a world void of alternatives to capitalism like Gonnermann suggests. Therefore, Se-oh’s post-pessimistic ending, where she finds the ability to choose *not* to murder,represents the blueprint for the more optimistic future that Gonnermann discusses.

 If the climax to Se-oh’s narrative can be considered a post-pessimistic conclusion of hope for the future, then it is interesting that Se-oh’s team leader is written in a similar post-pessimistic manor yet remains symbolic of persevering capitalism. John Bird & David Green discuss Fisher’s critique of identitarianism: “the usually narcissistic idea that we can be who we want to be…a culture where pointless busyness is normalised” (2020, p. 288). This concept of individual transformation promoting needless preoccupations is wholly embodied through Se-oh’s team leader. This idea of narcissistic individualism is most prominent during chapter 19 where the team leader recounts her attempted escape as a recruit, but does so in an illeist manor, separating herself from her past. The team leader states that she realised staying at the scheme was the only choice: “She realized the only way to succeed was to make her own opportunities…working really hard to succeed here” (2020, N.P.). Illeism can be used to “distance oneself from traumatic occurrences” and “give self-motivation” (Alek et al, 2020, p. 447) and it would seem that Pyun utilises illeism in the team leaders recounting of her past to do both. Not only does the team leader’s illeism emphasise her post-pessimistic acceptance of capitalism, through her separation of her desperate past-self and current day identities, but also symbolises the team leader’s toxic identitarianism because she truly believes she has improved herself as an individual. Thus, the illeism acts as a form of motivation that recruits can ‘change’ like the leader has. However, this motivation fails to influence Se-oh who considers the leader’s experience as threatening: “It was also a warning to Se-oh that there was no point in trying to run.” (2020, N.P). Therefore, if the team leader is representative of the inability to escape capitalism, Se-oh’s post-pessimistic ability to leave the scheme, despite the “negative blueprint” (Gonnermann, 2019, p. 38) that the leader provides, solidifies her place as a symbol of hopeful alternatives beyond capitalist realism.

 Se-oh’s team leader is not the only character to have that title, Su-ho also has a team leader at his debt collector company who shares this name. Moreover, both leaders also serve as embodiments of capitalist ideology. Se-oh’s team leader represents inescapable capitalist realism while Su-ho’s leader serves as the exploitation of capitalist systems for monetary gain, specifically through confucian and crony capitalism. Ji-Whan Yun discusses the *Myth of Confucian Capitalism*, specifically, confucian capitalism’s focus on “strong family ties, the greater importance of community over individuals and social cohesiveness” (2010, p. 237). However, Pyun rejects confucian capitalism’s focus on family values and community through her depiction of the cutthroat nature of Su-ho’s team leader. Confucian values are manipulated by Su-ho’s team leader in order to ensure financial superiority against his debtors, and this is evident through the use of metaphor during chapter 11. During this chapter, Su-ho’s team leader states that family is a knife that grabs the spoils of money from debtors: “money is what they spill after we knife them…When you reach the point…it’s time to slip the blade between their ribs, you oh so casually mention their family” (2020, N.P.). The metaphor of family as a knife emphasises Pyun’s warping of confucian values in contemporary South Korea because the leader promotes the endangerment and exploitation of family for financial gain. Ironically, the leader absolves himself of accountability for his actions by blaming the government instead: “The government always bails out banks before families…They line each other’s pockets and don’t give a shit about the little people.” (2020, N.P.) The leader’s method of blame correlates with Fisher’s discussion of the “specter of big government” (2009, p. 46) known as the “‘realism’ of capitalist realism” (2009, p. 35). By utilising the government as a “deferral of responsibility” (Fisher, 2009, p. 38) the leader is depicted as incredibly ironic because it is those issues within the government that he directly profits off and something he shows no sympathy for later on: “They got greedy and borrowed money and fucked themselves” (2020, N.P.). Furthermore, this acknowledgement yet subsequent exploitation of the state of South-Korean economy also parallels crony capitalism. As Peter Enderwick suggests, cronyism “implies that a small majority will be positively favoured economically” where “The poorest will be disadvantaged” (2005, p. 128). Thus, the team leader is synonymous with cronyism and confucianism because he ensures his debtors stay disadvantaged through unethical means of endangering debtor’s families. Therefore, if Pyun depicts the two team leaders as embodiments of variants of capitalism, yet all equally hopeless, Pyun’s narrative invites her readership into “political activism” (Gonnermann, 2019, p. 38) through her setting of a despotic, yet unfortunately realistic, post-pessimistic contemporary South-Korea: if we exist in a hegemonic state of inexorable capitalism then Pyun’s narrative demands readers break out of capitalism’s pervasive grasp on society.

It is not just Su-ho’s team leader that embodies capitalist ideology, but Su-ho himself, whose characterisation and eventual death become synonymous with the “lack of imaginative ambition” (Goode & Godhe, 2017, p. 110) that immersion into capitalist realism requires. During chapter 27, Su-ho fantasises about the alternatives to debt collecting but immediately dismisses these thoughts: “He could quit anytime. He could start over anytime. And so he kept going. If nothing else, he felt okay as long as he was working.”(2020, N.P). His dismissed fantasies of quitting parallel capitalist realism’s method of “ironic distance” which aims to “immunize us against the seductions of fanaticism” (Fisher, 2009, p. 10). However, for Su-ho, his immunisation of his fantasies is actually destructive: his inability to see past capitalism leaves him chained to the job that kills him (murdered by an angry debtor). Although Su-ho’s job depicts him as a man with authority, his ending emphasises that he is equally as much a victim inside the cycle of capitalism. Before his death, it is revealed that Su-ho is in debt for borrowing money and is frightened: “If he couldn’t pay back the money…then someone else from this same office would come to kick at his front door.” (2020, N.P). Su-ho, then, is a corrupt man who’s financial stability remains on thin ice, melting rapidly, and, thus, Su-ho’s death wholly encapsulates what it means to be immersed in capitalist realism ideology. Su-ho dies alone in an alleyway, bleeding out from a knife wound, the same one he metaphorically pierced into others, yet he cries not “because he was afraid of dying…because of his great and powerless rage” (2020, N.P). The juxtaposition of Su-ho’s great, yet impotent, fury embodies the core sense of capitalist realism, specifically, the notion that “There’s no point fighting the inevitable” (Fisher, 2013, p. 90): all Su-ho has are his tears and a futile anger. Therefore, Pyun creates a contrast with Se-oh’s ending of potential hope for the future against Su-ho’s ending of certain death, emphasising the significance of the ability to fantasise and consider alternatives to capitalist realism.

In analysing *TLOL* alongside a capitalist realist perspective, the question of whether or not Pyun provides a concrete answer to Fisher’s inquiry of alternatives to capitalism is now asked. The answer then, is both yes and no. Pyun does not provide a solid alternative that wholly trumps capitalism, yet she does sprinkle the seeds for future alternatives. Se-oh’s ending that is left with undetermined possibilities is one such seed: no answer to capitalism can be found until we give ourselves the cognitive freedom to conceive it. Due to the fact Pyun herself is drawn to stories where people see the world through a “future unseen and its conclusion unknowable” (Kim-Russel, 2018, p. 73), it is no wonder that she constructs an ending that is so synonymous with looking past the seemingly concrete inevitability of capitalist realism. If “capitalism is massively naturalised” (Fisher, 2013, p. 90) in our world then Pyun’s narrative demands we allow ourselves the “willingness to imagine alternatives to what exists” (Clune, 2014, p. 195). Pyun’s character’s, then, become glimpses into alternative ways of living: we can follow Se-oh, finding the courage to escape our attachments to capitalism or choose Su-ho, staying in the capitalist cog until it eventually kills us.

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