

Social Realism and The Symbolism of Chalk in “Not One Less”: A Cultural-Historical Film Analysis

Our realities and privileges in life are revealed in the most trivial of things. “Not One Less” is a social commentary on scarcity, bureaucracies, and the struggles of the working class brought by government inefficiency and the growing class divide. This neorealist film by director Zhang Yimou unfolds the socio-political conditions of 20th century China. Thus, this paper argues that the film’s use of social realism and symbolism conveyed the social realities in China in relation to its historical and cultural context.

Chalk, in the beginning, represents the inadequacy of necessities for the poor. Teacher Gao tells Wei, there are a total of 26 chalks for 26 school days, and there is exactly one to be spent on each day. This scene lays out the sociocultural background of the characters as well as the story’s premise. Social realism is present in the chalk’s representation of the juxtaposed realities between the higher and the lower classes. Trivial things like chalk may seem of little importance because of its abundance for the higher classes, but this scene elaborates how the simplest necessities are valued to fit the rural village’s needs.

The lack of chalk, the absence of a clock, the worn-out classrooms, the lack of teachers, and the outdated ways of teaching somehow distorts the film’s setting away from its milieu. The first sequences may make one easily believe that it’s a movie set before advanced globalizations and digital revolution, but it’s surprising that it was set in the 1990s. These elements are an elaborative representation of the evident economic gap between urban and rural communities in the midst of global economic transformation. In addition to this, the absence of set design and aesthetic elements in film colors and the use of ordinary and non-professional actors made the film too authentic; it’s almost impossible to distinguish it from reality.

Half through the film, chalks represent a deeper understanding of the poor children’s perception of their lives. When these chalks get trampled on, one of the students expresses her sadness that it was wasted like that because, according to her, her former teacher, Teacher Gao used to value it so much because of its scarcity. One time, he even had to write the last few words on the blackboard using the chalk’s dust on his finger. This is a heart-wrenching representation of the children’s realities and ways of thinking in underprivileged communities. It made the film more resonating and heart-wrenching.

When the chalks get crushed and dusted, it foreshadows the crashing of hopes and the tedious struggles that Wei soon had to face. Wei and her students met the challenge of losing Zhang Huike. To get him back, they constantly haggled for money, and at some point, Wei was “stepped on” like the chalks, when she was faced with rejections, and when she had to take extraordinary measures to get Zhang Huike back in her class.

Money is the primary motive of the character’s actions and the central driver of the plot. These recurring themes of haggling for money represent the cash nexus in China and the overreliance of its society on wealth. Soon, when Wei goes to the city, her will and

determination amid hopelessness are almost unrealistic. But we understand her character through the Marxist literary theory, which states that the ideological functions of literature are related to the background and ideology of its author. In this film's case, Wei's resilience symbolizes the director, Zhang Yimou's peasant roots when he worked as a rural laborer in the Chinese revolution.

Soon, Wei finds Zhang Huike through the help of TV bureaucrats. When they got back to the village, the chalks made their reappearance through a powerful symbolism. The rural school got monetary donations from people all over the city, and the children and the locals were overwhelmed with joy.

In the end, the children celebrate the boxes of colorful chalks that were donated to them. They use these to write down words on the blackboard. What they once lacked, they now had plenty of. The crushed and dirtied ones were replaced with colorful ones, much like how their impoverished life was painted in colors with these little things. The chalks that were donated from the city were the very chalks they used to write down words they thought, and aspirations they hoped. This represents hope, social justice, and faith in humanity, and educational reform.

In conclusion, the use of social realism in *Not One Less* is a bold criticism of the prevalence of bureaucracy, government inefficiency, educational problems, and class divide in late 20th century China. It portrays the sociocultural reality of a country amid economic transformation. Everything is driven by money, and the capitalist regime and class divide continue to turn a blind eye to those left behind on the social ladder. The ending is not a solution nor a guarantee of improved social condition; instead, a call for reform, a representation of hope for social justice and inclusive education.