Violent Auteur: A Study of Park chan-Wook's Vengeance Trilogy

by Darren Fisher

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First published in the United Kingdom, 2009.
2nd edition, published in the United Kingdom, 2012.
This edition, published in the United Kingdom 2023.

Typeset in Libre Baskerville.

Printed and bound in Great Britain.

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"The prolonged history of military occupation, oppression, war, and subsequent liberation of the South Korean state have all affected the themes, content and style of the nation's cinematic New Wave. In this piece I shall discuss this, with reference to auteur theory and the films of Park chan-Wook, chiefly his Vengeance Trilogy."

- Darren Fisher, 2008

CHAPTERS

CHAPTER I
Introduction: A Cinema Lost and Found

"A new generation of Korean filmmakers, unconstrained by the government censorship that faced their predecessors, is being increasingly exposed to a receptive and growing audience, shattering box office records and expectations, both at home and abroad."

- Anthony Leong, 2002, p.16

Since the birth of cinema in 1895, upheaval and reinvention have been crucial in keeping it alive; not only for audiences, but

for film makers too. These disturbances to the conventional model of film making are commonly referred to by theorists as cinematic new waves. A new wave frequently consists of a group of youthful film makers with comparable ideals along with a fanatical aversion to convention. Independently these film makers will rebel against the mainstream, producing a collection of works that reinvent the cinema. Almost every film making nation will generate new waves (even if they are not formally recognized as being so) which will impact on cinema around the world. The most successful new waves gave birth to some of our most treasured cinematic classics of today.

The 'Nuberu Bagu' of Japan, for example, offered some of the earlier works of Nagisa Oshima such as Shonen (Boy, 1969) and Koshikei (Death by Hanging, 1968). 'New Hollywood' was the rise of the 'brat pack' who

collectively gave birth to films such as Bonnie and Clyde (1967, Arthur Penn), The Godfather (1972, Francis Ford Coppola), Taxi Driver (1976, Martin Scorsese) and Badlands (1973 Terrence Malick). The 'British New Wave' started the gritty documentary style social criticism that has become a tradition of British cinema that continues to this day. Notable films from this era include Kes (1969, Kenneth Loach), Billy Liar (1963, John Schlesinger) and If (1968, Lindsay Anderson). The tail end of the 'Hong Kong New Wave' brought legendary director Wong Kar-wai to prominence with Wong gok ka moon (As Tears Go By, 1988), who would later go on to revolutionise Hong Kong cinema with film classics such as Chung Hing sam lam (Chungking Express, 1994) and Fa yeung nin wa (In The Mood For Love, 2000). 'La Nouvelle Vague' of France, is perhaps the most renowned of all the new waves, popularising guerrilla film making, the inspiration of which

can be seen in films as diverse as 28 Days Later (2002, Danny Boyle) or even Lost in Translation (2003, Sofia Coppola). This new wave offered Les Quatre Cents Coups (The 400 Blows, 1959, Francois Truffaut), A Bout de Souffle (Breathless, 1960, Jean-Luc Godard) and Les Godelureaux (Wise Guys, 1961, Claude Chabrol).

New waves are generally born out of an amalgamation of social and artistic disappointments, frustrations or detestations. If ever there were a perfect example of a nation let down, forgotten and oppressed then South Korea would be it. And despite the common misconception that Korean cinema is in its infancy, there has been a continuous production of films ever since Uirijok Gutu (Royal Revenge) – the first film ever produced in South Korea back in 1919. Korean authors of Korean Film: History, Resistance, and

Democratic Imagination write that 'In the West, Korea has been briefly visible, but mostly lost from sight... (And) despite its rise in the global market and its recent political progress, Korea is still an understudied country. From misinformed stereotypes to outdated information, Korea has been treated as an addendum to China or Japan' (Min, Joo, and Han, 2003, p. 1). However, five years have passed since this book was first published and in that short period the interest in Korean film has multiplied, and not only in the West but across the world, people are beginning pay notice to the brilliance of contemporary Korean film making.

Taegukgi hwinalrimyeo (Brotherhood, 2004, Je-gyu Kang), Gwoemul (The Host, 2007, Joon-ho Bong), Oldû boi (Old Boy, 2003, Park chan-Wook), Swiri (Shiri, 1999, Jacky Kang Je-gyu) and Bichunmoo (2000, Kim Yeong-

jun) have all achieved critical and box office success around the world, particularly in the United States, Great Britain and in Europe. And although books such as 'New Korean Cinema' (2005) and 'Korean Cinema: The New Hong Kong – A Guidebook for the Latest Korean New Wave' (2002) are in publication as intellectual analysis and acknowledgment of a Korean new wave, it remains clear that 'Western studies of Korean culture are... in comparison to those on China or Japan, very much in their infancy" (Min, Joo, and Han, 2003, p. 1). When one considers the extent to which 'La Nouvelle Vague' was and remains to be studied by everyone from film makers to theorists to audiences, it appears as though Korea has drawn a short straw, but the weight of this dilemma is attributable to both the lacking importation of the most recent Korean films and the poor exposure of this wonderful new wave by Western theorists.

In the face of this, a devoted following of Korean cinema has forced this new wave in to the consciousness of the Western world, awaking us to the potential of Korea's pioneering film makers as well as the astonishing originality of storytelling that is emerging from South Korean film. Hollywood, in a traditional fashion, have jumped on the band wagon, claiming remake rights on everything from Yeopgijeogin geunyeo (My Sassy Girl, 2001, Kwak Jae-yong) to Old Boy. Although it is perhaps a brazen form of promotion to have Hollywood remake the works of other artists, it is also without a doubt one of the most successful. The Ring (2002, Gore Verbinski) and The Grudge (2004, Takashi Shimizu) were both extremely successful re-imaginings of Japanese horror hits Ringu (1998, Nakata Hideo) and Ju-on (2003, Takashi Shimizu). Regardless of the criticisms of the films themselves, it is

incontestable that the popularity of Japanese cinema in the Western world rocketed to an all time high after the release of these two remakes. Since, innumerable Japanese horror hits have been remade in Hollywood, and although the end result appears to be damaging to the original film, it in fact only serves as testimony to the brilliance of the original. Most importantly, Hollywood remakes offer exposure of world cinema to home audiences and with Western film goers it is often the case that a relationship will develop with world cinema because of this.

Korean cinema is due some attention, and whether it gains this through the success of a new wave, the recognition of its 'auteurs' or through shameless Hollywood remakes is irrelevant. The most important thing is that a nation who the world forgot is starting to thrive and flourish, creating artistic

freedom and a consequent admiration for its cinema. And following decades of oppression, occupation, war, political divide and subsequent liberation, comes a profusion of film makers who have a lot to say.

CHAPTER II
Korean Film: A Brief History

"To a country that suffered a century of war and occupation, violence is a fact of life."
- Jonathan Ross, 2004, 00.15.55

Before the journey began for Korean Cinema in 1919 with Royal Revenge, Korea had suffered its first nine years of Japanese occupation after having "been ruled by a single monarchy, the Choson Dynasty, a social and political order that had remained stable for over half a millennia." (Leong, 2002, p. 5). Since, Korea has suffered a prolonged

history of war, oppression and occupation that only seems to have recoiled in recent years. From 1910 to 1945 Korea was ruled under the occupation of the Japanese army, and whilst there was oppression, there was also a degree of stability. In 1945 the liberation of Korea and the withdrawal of the Japanese rule created a divide among the people. Communism and Capitalism separated the North and South of Korea, and as tensions mounted for five years, its film industry as a whole suffered from budget reductions. The lack of 35mm film stock resulted in the majority of films being produced on 16mm. This step backward in technology and the growing anxiety across the nation caused its cinema industry to all but crumble.

In 1950, the inevitable happened and civil war broke out in Korea. As North Korea's communist army invaded the unprepared

south, every last bit of money and man power from both sides went toward the war effort. After three years the war finally came to an end, but the country was in pieces. Despite the devastation, the nation's film industry flourished post 1953. "Films were produced freely without government regulation (until 1961). After that year, the military government gained control of the Korean film industry through legal restrictions and strong censorship. In retrospect, Korean film production has had little room to take a free breath." (Min, Joo, and Han, 2003, p. 25).

Throughout the 1960s Korean cinema struggled to communicate the frustration and sadness of its nation under the strong military censorship. "Films involving politics, or containing pro communist messages, strong realistic portrayals of society, and overt sexual expressions had to undergo harsh

censorship." (Min, Joo, and Han, 2003, p. 52). Korean cinema was once again plunging in to recession, the outcome of which looked bleak and inescapable. During the 1970s, Korean cinema suffered its harshest decade, this era commonly referred to by Korean film theorists as the depression in Korean film; one theorist even calling it "the winter of prostitution in the years of history of Korean Film" (Chang, 1983, P. 14).

During the 1980's, things took a turn in the right direction for the Korean film industry as the government relaxed censorship restraints, allowing its film makers more freedom to express the emotions of the nation. After a decade of tasting liberty, Korea elected its first president and became a democracy after decades of military dictatorship. As a result of this "Korea has witnessed an enormous renewed cultural production since the early

1990s. The films have been receiving special attention (and) have resurrected themselves with the freedom to depict social problems, sex, and violence in greater detail with humour, imagination, fantasy, and new narrative strategies." (Min, Joo, and Han, 2003, p. 149-150). This freedom has paved way to a variety of film makers and their films which are as quirky in their style, as they are exhilarating in their content.

In 1999, history was made with the release of Ring: Virus (1999, Dong-bin Kim) – not only a remake of the Japanese horror classic Ringu by Korean film maker Dong-bin Kim, but also the very first Japanese/Korean co-production. And in 2004 Park chan-Wook won the attention of the West, upon winning the prestigious Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival for his cinematic masterpiece Oldboy; a film based on a Japanese manga series.

Considering the history of the two nations, it is fascinating that so shortly after the Japanese withdrawal; they might collaborate and work in partnership. During the height of the occupation, "the Japanese government even went as far as trying to completely eradicate the Korean culture... through the banning of the Korean language and the use of Korean family names." (Leong, 2002, p. 6).

Since the release of Oldboy in 2003, South Korea has arguably had the most scrutinized cinema in the Asian continent. No longer is it being treated as an addendum to China or Japan as Min, Joo, and Han suggested, but instead has become the leading competition for these two great film making nations. South Korea is now even being referred to as 'the new Hong Kong' by Anthony C. Y. Leong, who argues that "the lustre on Hong Kong's home grown film industry has faded quite a bit over

the past decade (1992 – 2002). (But) Over the last few years, particularly since 1998, South Korea's local film industry has undergone a remarkable transformation... (and has) given way to a 'new wave' of filmmakers." (Leong, 2002, p.1).

This 'new wave' clearly started in the late nineties, but was somewhat overshadowed by the dominance of Japan and the wave of horror hits that followed in the wake of Hideo's Ringu. It is only since the horrors of Oldboy assaulted the senses of the jury at Cannes 2004 that the world has truly paid notice to the brilliance of the new South Korean film makers. Western audiences have since made gigantic successes of already popular Korean box office hits such as Brotherhood (2004), The Host (2007), and Park's very own Chinjeolhan geumjassi (Lady Vengeance, 2005, Park chan-Wook).

As previously mentioned, a new wave arrives at a time of cinematic crisis and usually resurrects a nation's cinema. For South Korea and its nation of people who suffered decades of oppression and restriction, cinema was an obvious outlet. The ingenuity and sheer artistry that emerged from Korea's film makers and their memories of a past filled with chaos and despair, was on such a level that it did far more than simply resurrect the nation's cinema. It did more than raise Korea's cinematic status amongst its fellow Asian nations. It quite simply launched Korea on to the world stage, and made mockery of its competitors. Producing everything from drama to comedy, action to romance, horror to simple rites of passage Korea has arguably outshone every other film making nation in the world at the present time.

CHAPTER III
Park chan-Wook: A Korean Auteur

"To me, when I use violence in my movies, it's to describe pain that is true to nature. I seek to show how violence leaves a painful scar, not only physically, but also psychologically on both the assailant and the victim."

- Park chan-Wook, 2004, 00.16.10

In the West, Park chan-Wook is best known for his violent Vengeance Trilogy which consists of Boksuneun naui geot (Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, 2002), Oldboy and Lady Vengeance, but throughout both divides of

Korea he is known more predominantly as the director of Gongdong gyeongbi guyeok JSA (JSA: Joint Security Area, 2000). Park chan-Wook was virtually unknown until he directed JSA – which was, at the time, the biggest cinematic hit in the history of Korean film.

In a documentary on Park chan-Wook, Jonathan Ross claims "[Park's] instant success came from being one of the first filmmakers to boldly confront Korea's tragic post war division." (Ross, 2004, 00.00.17). This is indisputably true, and it is this exploration of a sensitive contemporary tension between the North and South of Korea that made it so appealing to the Western world as well as domestic audiences. Park chan-Wook says; "when I depicted North Korean soldiers as being passive and human it came as a shock. I think it broke a taboo." (Park, 2004, 00.02.08).

The other film Park is famous for is Saibogujiman kwenchana (I'm a Cyborg, But That's OK, 2006) – a magnificent romance, set in a mental institution in which a poorly girl who believes she is a Cyborg falls in love with a boy who believes he is fading away. The film won the Alfred Bauer at the 2007 Berlin Film Festival for a work of particular innovation, and marked a definite progression for Park, who up to this point was most renowned for his aggressive revenge films.

This aptitude to drift between genres, and hold a signature style has had Park compared to Alfred Hitchcock, but a great many of the directors at the forefront of this 'Korean new wave' seem to possess this ability to avoid genre constriction. Just as famously, Kim Ki-duk moved from emphasising the disturbing and intense in Seom (The Isle, 2000), and Nabbeun namja (Bad Guy, 2001) to portraying

peace, love and beauty in Bom yeoreum gaeul gyeoul geurigo bom (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... and Spring, 2003) and Bin-jip (3 Iron, 2004).

These emerging filmmakers would almost certainly qualify as 'auteurs' under the template laid out by Andre Bazin during the time of 'La Nouvelle Vague'. The repetition of subtle thematic constructs, character traits and narrative strategy run throughout the works of a majority of the directors working in the prime of this new wave.

Park chan-Wook's inclusion of violence and vengeance run throughout a vast selection of his films but it is his more subtle thematic structures that leave his artistic stamp on his films. Often tackling the social class system, the destructive nature of love, relationships and family and a sense that humanity is

doomed to tragic outcomes, are almost certainly metaphorical representation of the dark and divided past of the nation of Korea.

Stylistically, Park "depicts a familiar world in fresh and always interesting ways" (Ross, 2004, 00.16.00), often by creating hyper-realities through using bleached or high contrast imagery depending on the emotional intensity of a scene. Park rejects passivity of the audience, and often uses techniques to involve the viewer and keep them engaged.

"Modern Hollywood movies tend to subscribe to a policy of 'tell the audience what's going to happen, show it happening, and then tell them what just happened'! The challenging, elliptical Park, however, happily skips one or even two of these steps forcing us to fill in the blanks." (Ross, 2004, 00.12.04).

Park will often include a quirk in his films; an offering of cinematic originality within the narrative or characters.

In Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance the protagonist Ryu is a deaf mute. His dialogue is conveyed exclusively through sign language, and as the camera shifts between passivity and point of view shots the sounds cuts in and out to further intensify the relationship between him and the audience.

In Oldboy, Oh Dae-Su is imprisoned for fifteen years without knowing the reason for his capture. During this time, his lack of contact with human or animal life causes him to grow insane and suffer hallucinations of ants that run through his veins, under his skin and through his hair.

In Lady Vengeance the film begins in fully

saturated colour as wrongly imprisoned, kind hearted Miss. Geum-Ja is finally released. As the film progresses, it de-saturates and Geum-Ja's volatile nature begins to wane.

Park says that "this movie ends as Geum-Ja gives up all her thoughts about revenge and lets all of them go. The movie gradually turns black and white and eventually becomes purified and refined." (Park, 2005, 00.00.10)

JSA presented the idea of North and South Korean soldiers becoming friends, arguing about trivial nonsense such as which side of the border makes the best cakes, as an alternative to an expected ferocious political.

And I'm a Cyborg could only be described as quintessential in the world of quirky cinema, as it presents its love story between two mental patients.

Park's films are inspired, and inspiring. When comparing Park to other filmmakers one might side him with Martin Scorsese, Wong Kar-wai or Takashi Miike. The latter of these directors is world renowned for films such as Koroshia 1 (Ichi the Killer, 2001), Dead or Alive: Hanzaisha (Dead or Alive, 1999) and Ôdishon (Audition, 1999) and is often studied as an auteur.

Scorsese and Kar-wai on the other hand are both filmmakers who rose to prominence through their individual nation's cinematic new waves; America's Brat Pack New Wave and the Hong Kong New wave, respectively. Thus, it could be argued that a new wave is never really new, as filmmakers are influenced and inspired by previous new waves.

And, consequently auteur theory could be debunked, and all so-called auteurs may

simply be regurgitating themes and styles of the filmmakers before them. Even if it is simple reinvention of old ideas that has shaped the Korean New Wave, it remains true that South Korea's filmmakers have forced a cinematic revolution and surely the long, bloody and oppressive history of the nation has played a larger part in inspiring the content of South Korean film than any other source.

And if the effect of Korea's dark past can be seen within any filmmaker's work then Park chan-Wook is that filmmaker. He is an author of film, an artist and a pioneer riding high on a cinematic new wave.

Park chan-Wook is... an auteur.

CHAPTER IV
Case Study I:
Boksuneun naui geot *or*
Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance

"Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance undoubtedly illustrates Park's gift as a director—perhaps one of the best to come out of the latest 'Korean New Wave.'"

- Anthony Leong, 2002, p.160

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance is unarguably one of the most shocking films of all time. Though it stars JSA's Song Kang-ho and Shin Ha-kyun, it is a hefty step away from the

military drama that was JSA. Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance is a horrifying tale of turmoil, torture and tragedy and resolves in a manner which is most upsetting to the audience, and yet it is the only outcome imaginable for characters that seem fated to a path of self destruction.

Among the most upsetting scenes is the accidental drowning of a little girl and her consequential autopsy which her distraught father attends. Another scene sees a quintet of teenage boys, simultaneously masturbating in a flat, to the sounds of a woman's dying screams, mistaking them as orgasmic cries. But most disturbing of all is a scene in which a simple young man has sex with a corpse in front of his encouraging mother.

Leong recalls "unfortunately, many Korean moviegoers went into Sympathy for Mr.

Vengeance expecting something akin to Joint Security Area II. Not surprisingly, many went away disappointed." (Leong, 2002, p. 160). Fellow Korean filmmaker Kim Yông-hye even went as far as publically denouncing the film as irresponsible and excessively violent. (Kim, 2005, p. 111).

However, critically the film was a success and has gone on to attain the eminence it deserves. Though it is more extreme in its nature, Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance feels less exploitative than the films of his Japanese counterpart Takashi Miike, who made his name through sparking outrage.

The first film in Park's Vengeance Trilogy is fundamentally a horror film in which events spiral out of control and cascade in to catastrophe, but it is not horror for escapism or cheap entertainment. It is "horror as

critique" (Kim, 2005, p. 106); not only of the state of South Korean society at the time of the making of the film, but also of the self destructive nature of humankind, and the pointlessness of vengeance.

The film is intense and complex, and there are many narrative strands that the film follows. No particular character is offered as protagonist or antagonist. Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance reflects the truth of human nature. There are no good guys and bad guys. There are only people, and those people are flawed and make mistakes, and eventually pay the ultimate price for doing so. This makes the violent and tragic conclusion of the film exceptionally hard to swallow as a viewer, as you neither love nor hate the characters, but simply relate to them and feel a bizarre sense of attachment. This educated construction of realistic characters is something that would go

on to recur throughout Park's work, further certifying himself as an auteur, particularly with Oldboy and Lady Vengeance.

Though utterly dissimilar in content, Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance could easily be compared to Wong Kar-wai's Chungking Express, in its narrative duality. Chungking Express was revolutionary for its depiction of two separate protagonists, and their connection to one another despite never having met.

In the first half of Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, we are introduced to the loveable Ryu – a deaf mute with green hair whose sister is in need of a kidney transplant or she will die. Through a disastrous set of circumstances, Ryu loses his job, his life savings, and his kidney, and eventually, in a desperate bid to save his sister, kidnap's his

former boss' daughter for ransom.

Tragically, events go awry and the young girl falls in to a lake and drowns, leaving her father Park Don-jin devastated. The second half of the film follows the heartbroken Park Don-jin and his quest for vengeance. Unlike Chungking Express, this film's characters inevitably do cross paths, but it is the duality of narrative that causes the Kar-wai influence to resonate, throughout.

The climax of the film is typically Park, and yet seems inspired by the explosive violent outbursts seen in the films of Scorsese, such as Taxi Driver and Goodfellas (1990). Instantaneously after the death of his sister, Ryu wreaks revenge on the organ traffickers who stole his kidney and his life savings, whilst Don-jin tortures Ryu's girlfriend - Cha Yeong-mi, for her part in the kidnap and killing of

his daughter.

Following this, Don-jin then tracks down the clueless Ryu, bringing the violence to a head at the lake where his daughter died. Following the brutal assassination of Ryu, Don-jin returns home, his heart filled with guilt and sadness. Later, he is brutally stabbed to death by the radical political activists with whom Yeong-mi used to associate with, and as an audience we are left stunned, but not by the violence itself (which we have become quite accustomed to in cinema), more by the context in which the violence has unfolded.

Greed and selfishness are the two sins that lead to the loss of many innocent lives in Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, and while we relate to the yearning for revenge, we also witness the devastation that unfurls because of it. This has become one of Park's most intriguing qualities

as a director; the ability to criticise the nature of humanity without preaching or taking any sort of moral high ground.

In the film a majority of the significant acts of violence or vengeance occur in and around water, almost as though Park is suggesting a reflection of the audience in the characters, perhaps even signifying that the characters' sins are a reflection of our own in a world that is motivated by gluttony and self-centredness.

Park also places a heavy focus on the literal ascent and descent of his characters, almost as a Nolan-esque foreboding technique. When a character is seen descending, whether it be down stairs or in an elevator etc. it is almost certain that that character's narrative is about to descend in to darkness. And as characters visually ascend or rise, they take a position of control or power in their narrative. This is

another trademark that Park leaves imprinted across all three films in the Vengeance Trilogy, especially in Oldboy.

What makes all of Park chan-Wook's films in the Vengeance Trilogy uncomfortable for the audience, is the impending sense of doom for all of the characters involved, as well as the frighteningly imaginative methods of murder and torture our very ordinary heroes dream up to inflict upon their victims.

As the audience is lead to relate to three main characters in Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, it becomes even more nauseating to see each of them suffer and inflict suffering upon each other, essentially because the audience see themselves on the screen. Kim Yông-hye recalls her experience immediately following having seen Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance for the first time, as seeing the audience leave the

theatre, silent and pale as though they had undergone some form of painful medical treatments. (Kim, 2005, p. 110).

It is true that all of Park's films in the Vengeance Trilogy provoke this reaction in the audience, but it is imperative to keep in mind the violent history of Korea that Park has witnessed, when considering why he might want to evoke these emotions in people. Park justifies his depictions of violence as being descriptions of pain that are true to nature and that violence affects physically and psychologically, both assailant and victim. (Park, 2004, 00.16.10).

Another interesting attribute of Park's films is the theme of isolation, which is often explored as inner isolation as opposed to overt physical loneliness.

In Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, this theme is explored in Park's typically creative approach. Ryu is isolated by his inability to speak or hear.

Throughout the film, Ryu is presented as a loveable and innocent simpleton whose only sin is his boy-like naivety and his selfless love for his friends and family. In the climactic scene, Don-jin recognizes Ryu's innocence, his final words to Ryu being "I know you're a good guy. But you know why I have to kill you."

This exemplifies Don-jin as being a three-dimensional and likeable character, which is essential to keeping the narrative believable. From the outset Don-jin is presented as a loving father, so when his daughter is killed by Ryu and Cha Yeong-mi, we fully relate to his desire for revenge as he has been left totally alone in the world with nothing but his all

consuming thoughts of vengeance. Don-jin's isolation forms through his dedication to his business, without which he would not be able to support his daughter. This transforms from inner to physical isolation when his daughter tragically meets her demise.

Cha Yeong-mi is Ryu's girlfriend, and is at once adorable. She gains approval of the audience through her selfless love for Ryu, whom she communicates with solely through sign language. This altruism proves to be her un-doing. Seeing Ryu's distress, as his sister's life draws steadily closer to an end, she suggests a plan to kidnap Don-jin's daughter for ransom in order to pay for the kidney transplant that will save her life. Her isolation is born out of her inability to make educated decisions and her child-like belief in anarchy and extremism. Torn between her love for Ryu and her duties as a political activist, Yeong-

mi is likely the most subtle representation of inner turmoil and loneliness in the film.

This theme of isolation then carries through the screen, penetrating the audience as Park's subtle techniques isolate the viewer from a feeling of comfort. "While watching (Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance), viewers pity both the victim's father, who seeks vengeance, and the criminal. Without knowing whom to identify with, they're faced with a dilemma." (Chan-Wook, 2002, 00.00.44). Again, this idea is carried throughout Oldboy and Lady Vengeance.

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance was Park chan-Wook's 'difficult second album' after the huge success of JSA, and although at the time, audiences rejected his bold and heart-breaking commentary on humanity, the film would go on to achieve worldwide acclaim and form

a beautiful access point to Korean film for Western audiences who had seen Oldboy. It is also an early example of the personality that would run throughout the films of Park chan-Wook and make him notorious throughout Asia and the rest of the world.

CHAPTER V
Case Study II: Oldû boi *or* Old Boy

"One could easily compile a book analyzing shot by shot the techniques used in Old Boy, its multiple parallels, extravagant leaps and surgically precise abbreviations. There is something ingenious, interesting or at the very least eye-catching in practically every shot of the film."

- Kyu Hyun Kim, 2003 [online]

Oldboy is bizarre and astonishing, yet magnificently accomplished and executed.

It is a faultless illustration of a South Korean filmmaker innovating cinema, as opposed to merely re-creating the works of the Hong Kong new wave.

In Oldboy, Park chan-Wook's subtle presence effortlessly resonates throughout. The trademarks, which would go on to become recurrent in his style can be seen written all over Oldboy, permeating every scene and shot.

Based on the original Japanese manga by Tsuchiya Garon and Minegishi Nobuaki, Oldboy retains all of that wacky art house Japanese flair, but also "blows away the ijime-obsessed faux-existentialist machismo of the original and instead plunges into the themes far more universally resonant, as ancient as the scarred bones interred in our ancestral tombs: the unrequited (and unrequitable) love and the Biblical suffering that such a love

brings to the hapless, hypocritical animals that we are." (Kim, 2003, online).

Clearly, Park is capable of utilising source material from a third party; shaping it in to a dramatic and emotional story that satisfies all of his requirements as a narrative film maker. This only assists to validate any theory that suggests Park chan-Wook is an auteur.

Oldboy revolves around mild alcoholic businessman Oh Dae-su, who one night is kidnapped by gangsters and incarcerated in a private and secluded prison. His only connection to the outside world is his television, through which he learns that he is wanted for the murder of his wife. As the years pass, Oh Dae-su becomes consumed by rage, insanity and an overwhelming desire for vengeance against his captor.

One day, after fifteen years in captivity, he is released on to the rooftops. A few hours later he is accosted by a tramp who hands him a wallet and a phone. He is then contacted by his captor who tells him "who I am isn't important. Why is important. Think it over. Review your whole lifetime. Keep this in mind: whether a grain of sand or a rock, in water, they both sink." Oh Dae-su, collapses in the sushi restaurant and is taken home and cared for by the beautiful chef, Mido.

After his recovery and subsequent explanation of events Mido promises to aid Oh Dae-su in his quest for the truth. What unfolds is Park's trademark narrative laden with betrayal, obsession, chaos and tragedy featuring more twists and turns than a Hitchcock thriller.

Unarguably, a masterpiece of cinema, Oldboy remains a rarity. An extraordinary

combination of commercial appeal and art house class flow throughout the film with such remarkable consistency, one would swear they were watching the work of a filmmaker with decades of experience, as opposed to the work of Park chan-Wook; established just three years as a commercial filmmaker, with only two releases on his résumé.

Oldboy was received more favourably than its predecessor Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, and won the Grand Prix at the 57th Cannes Film Festival, narrowly missing out on the Palme D'or, much to the annoyance of Quentin Tarantino. Oldboy was also awarded five Grand Bell awards, two Asia Pacific Film Festival awards and a further four awards at other international film festivals as well as one additional nomination at the 2004 European film awards.

The enormous critical success launched Oldboy in to the theatres of the West, and as swiftly as it had become a home grown hit for South Korea, it became the most 'must see' foreign film throughout the world in years. Jonathan Ross reviewed Oldboy as the film that ignited his interest in Korean Cinema, claiming that if a better film had been made since 2000 it hadn't passed in front of his eyes. (Ross, 2004).

Park's glorious masterpiece is so heaving with his trademark style that it almost seems impossible to know where to begin analysing. When Oldboy was released on DVD in 2004, the special edition included an additional disc which featured a three and half hour long exhaustive shoot diary, which just reflects the extent to which this film can be analysed

However there are a few scenes that exemplify,

without complication, Park's traits and quirks. The first of these is the extensive sequence that highlights Oh Dae-su's experience whilst incarcerated. Park immediately touches upon themes of isolation and self destruction, as Oh Dae-su goes insane, battering the walls with his fists and self harming.

Oh Dae-su imagines he has a relationship with a beautiful Korean pop singer whom he sees on the television, and describes the television as his friend, his church and his lover. The extreme isolation which Oh Dae-su has undergone causes him to become severely introverted, and thus all his emotions become destructive upon himself.

Upon his release, we see Oh Dae-su's wrists which are harshly scarred where he has evidently attempted suicide. But Oh Dae-su's liberation only causes his sanity to become

more unstable, as he sets about his revenge.

There are two moments of absolute insanity, in which Park was able to present the psychosis of Oh Dae-su, immediately following his release. The first is the fight he engages in with a group of aggressive teens who attack him as he steals a cigarette from them. We hear Oh Dae-su's inner-narrative as he asks himself "can fifteen years of imaginary training actually be put to use?" He then proceeds to batter all five of the teens as they simultaneously attack him. "It can", he says in a voice that is so emotionless it sends shivers down the spine.

The second moment, for which Park has achieved notoriety, is the infamous live octopus eating sequence. This scene was labelled as gratuitous by some, and genius by others but it is the significance of the action

that really creates the drama in the scene, which consists of a desperate and frantic Oh Dae-su demanding something alive for which to eat. This scene did not exist in the original manga, and Park has not added this scene for the superficial purpose of creating a controversy. Oh Dae-su has suffered a decade and a half of solitude and dumplings, and has a craving to eat something that will make him feel alive. It is not unheard of to eat live octopus in parts of East Asia, but it is unheard of for it to be unprepared as in Oldboy. Choi Min-sik who plays Oh Dae-su had to say a prayer after eating each one of the four live octopuses as he is a vegan and a Buddhist, which caused further outrage.

The second most discussed scene of the film is the incredible single take fight scene which takes place in the corridor of the hotel. “The decision to shoot it as one long take was

chosen during filming. What is necessary here is not a combat scene, but an expression of Oh Dae-Su's isolation, solitude and fatigue." (Park chan-Wook, 2004). This scene perfectly represents all of these emotions as well as revealing the desperation of Oh Dae-su for the truth.

Eventually, Oh Dae-su becomes so torn between his quest for the truth and his quest for vengeance, that he further isolates himself – not even knowing his own desires anymore. In this scene, Oh Dae-su battles with the henchmen of the prison hotel, and after suffering repeated beatings to the hands, stomach, face and receiving a knife in the back Oh Dae-su collapses, among well over twenty men. As he clambers to his feet we see the anxiety in his face, and understand his thirst for revenge. His ability to fight and keep walking, despite his injuries are testament to

his rehabilitation from the old and selfish Oh Dae-su.

Ironically his internal monologue: "I have become a monster, now. When my vengeance is over and I've had my revenge can I ever return to being the old Dae-su?" reveals his lack of realisation that he has in fact become a stronger and improved person. It is only his unrelenting journey down the path of vengeance that is steering him towards tragedy, just as with Ryu and Don-jin in Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance and Geum-Ja in Park's follow up to Oldboy – Lady Vengeance.

Oldboy concludes in a comparatively more shocking way that Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, both subconsciously and overtly. The twist in the tale is that protagonist Oh Dae-su is not the innocent hero we have been lead to believe all along and has committed a

terrible crime against Lee Woo-jin – the films supposed antagonist and Oh Dae-su's captor.

Despite, his revealed flaws, there is still a clearer idea of antagonist and protagonist in the conclusion, unlike Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, yet when the truth is revealed there is an immediate detachment which takes place between Oh-Dae-su and the audience.

This, again, leaves the conclusion complicated with a narrative that is two sided, thus more realistic, yet difficult to digest as a viewer who will have aligned themselves wholly to the character, throughout the film.

CHAPTER VI
Case Study III:
Chinjeolhan geumjassi *or*
(Sympathy for) Lady Vengeance

"Lady Vengeance begins with the scene where the outraged and wrathful main character, Geum-Ja, gets out of prison to take revenge. But towards the end of the movie she disregards all that resentment and wants to redeem her own wrongdoing."

- Park chan-Wook

Always keen to offer his audiences a surprise, Park decided to make his final part of the Vengeance Trilogy about a woman. Falsely

imprisoned for kidnapping and child murder, Lady Geum-Ja spends the next thirteen and a half years plotting her vengeance against the real killer. Upon her release, Geum-Ja sets to work with the help of friends she made in prison, to reveal the real murderer to the parents of the children who have been mercilessly tortured and killed.

Lady Vengeance could possibly have been the most strongly anticipated film to have ever come from of South Korea, after the titanic success of Oldboy. Though Oldboy hadn't made box office history like JSA and Shiri had, it had raised the profile of Korean cinema and brought the attention of the West. By the end of 2004, every mainstream film produced in South Korea from the late nineties was being snapped up by Western audiences who were now just as eager as Korean moviegoers to see what came next.

The 2004 success of Brotherhood, which played on a record four hundred and fifty screens across Korea (Paquet, 2004, online) had only furthered the popularity of Korean cinema among Western audiences. And in 2005 Park chan-Wook, bravely unleashed his follow up to Oldboy.

With the success of JSA, Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance and Oldboy behind him, as well as a short film entitled Cut (2004) which was produced for the Tartan funded Three... Extremes (2004), Park chan-Wook was finally able to achieve some complex artistic endeavours which he had previously been constrained from exploring.

Park himself admitted that the decision to make three films about vengeance had come about accidentally, when in a press conference he announced he would make another

vengeance movie. Being a proud man, Park would not go back on his word, even though he regretted making the statement. (Imdb. com, online).

The decision to go ahead with Lady Vengeance would prove to be fruitful, however. Not only did Park get to delve deeper within his artistic capabilities, but he also silenced his critics with a film that pars with its two predecessors as far as violence is concerned, and yet wraps up on an uplifting and hopeful conclusion.

Park had originally wanted to make Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance in a 'fade to white' version, whereby as the narrative developed and became more wretched, the film would de-saturate and eventually become entirely monochromatic (black and white).However, due to budget constraints, this idea was overturned by the producers. (Park chan-

Wook, 2002). Park wanted to re-visit the idea of 'fade to white' with Lady Vengeance and being that this film concludes on a more beautiful and peaceful note than its two predecessors, it seems so much more fitting that it would be this film that would become more visually alluring through this 'fade to white' technique. "The movie gradually turns black and white and eventually becomes purified and refined." (Park chan-Wook, 2005). This purity and beauty is reflected wonderfully through the black and white image, whereas one can't help but suspect that the effect might have been slightly wasted on the bleak and harrowing Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance.

Park's signature narrative is once again the focal point of the film; a web of deceit and betrayal, murder and love weaved throughout. Kind hearted Ms. Geum-Ja's experience in

prison vastly differentiates from that of Oh Dae-su's incarceration in Oldboy. Oh Dae-Su becomes consumed with rage as the reasons for his imprisonment remain a mystery. Ms. Geum-Ja becomes consumed with thoughts of vengeance as she is not only innocent of the crime for which she has been charged, but also knows the identity of the real murderer. Like Oh Dae-su and the characters in Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, Geum-Ja is an ordinary person who has been wronged and commits terrible acts; a likeable killer with reasons so genuine, the audience find it impossible to disapprove of her actions.

With the first two films in the Vengeance Trilogy, Park sought to display the damage which consuming emotion causes to humans, with bitterly brutal finales, but with Lady Vengeance he offers an alternative outcome, in which Geum-Ja is re-united with her estranged

daughter, and freed from her consuming antagonism, despite having committed sins on a par with the characters of Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance and Oldboy. Here, we see further evidence of auteur-ship in Park's style, in that he can explore similar themes and consequences in a sequence of films and yet end each on a vastly different conclusion, despite each conclusion representing a similar moral.

Kyu Hyun Kim, a Korean film critic writes "at first glance, Park chan-Wook seems poised on the verge of international fame and joining the ranks of Hong Sang-soo and Kim Ki-duk as frontrunners of Korean cinema. However, as sharply divergent critical opinions on Old Boy in Korea, North America and elsewhere attest to, Park is more problematic as an auteur to be celebrated. His films retain their power to shock and disturb even the most seasoned

critics, but not always in the ways they expect." (Kim, 2005, online).

But despite criticisms against him, Park has gone on to reveal himself as a constantly innovative artist, often shifting the execution of his ideas to cater for those who are missing the message of his work. Kyu Hyun Kim went on to write about the heart-wrenching finale of Lady Vengeance, acknowledging Park's shift in temperament from his first two instalments of the Vengeance Trilogy, as follows: "Park lays out a deeply moving yet perplexing vista of Geum-Ja, perhaps standing in for all the main characters in the entire Revenge trilogy, reaching out for salvation, weighed down by her guilt. I confess the film overwhelmed my defences completely by this point: I was muttering to Miss Geum-Ja on-screen, "Receive the Host. Save yourself. Save your soul." But how can she? And how can we?

In ignoscendo ignoscimur. In forgiving, we are forgiven. Those who commit the sin of revenge have condemned their souls. And are we not they, as well?" (Kim, 2005, online).

Despite her acts of revenge Geum-Ja is saved by her acceptance of her wrong doing, and her desire to be forgiven by everyone, including herself. The film was received with great praise and recognition, though not as much as its predecessor, and went on to win the 'CinemAvvenire Award' for best film at the Venice Film Festival.

Though Lady Vengeance marks a development in Park's progression as a commercial filmmaker, it is essentially still very much akin to its two predecessors in the Vengeance Trilogy. Razor sharp dialogue, a volatile mix of black humour, violence and poignancy and brilliantly developed characters are all

provided in Park's final vengeance offering. Scenes of forced oral sex between women in prison and a woman being fed bleach for three years count among some of the most shocking scenes to emerge from Asian cinema.

Geum-Ja is an anti-hero, just like Ryu, Don-Jin and Oh Dae-su of the previous two Park offerings, and yet there isn't the narrative complexity that was evident in Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, nor the devastating twist of Oldboy to create conflict in the relationship between her and the audience. Geum-Ja is less morally ambiguous, and continually motivated by love, unlike Park's other protagonists who each became self obsessed and selfish in their quests for vengeance. It is the love for her daughter, which drives her to ensure that justice is carried out, and peculiarly, despite its vulgar construction, Geum-Ja's plan is indeed one for justice.

Even the camera work of Lady Vengeance feels familiar and yet seems miles apart from the intrusive and abstract photography in Oldboy. Though it is shot in a similar style to Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, Lady Vengeance seems that touch more observational and calm, despite the film's horrific nature, throughout. A sense of still resonates throughout the film, perhaps in respect of the appalling subject matter involving the murder of children.

Considering Park never intended to make a third film about vengeance, this is a marvellous achievement. Equally as exciting and original as any of Park's other films, Lady Vengeance bears the stamp of a director who is comfortable with confronting tough and upsetting issues in a creative and entertaining way, without being gratuitous or exploitative.

In light of Korea's bloody history, it would be fair to comment that the Koreans might know a thing or two about the desire for revenge and dealing with violence that we, in the West, could never even begin to comprehend. But with Lady Vengeance there is a sense of resignation in Park, communicated through Geum-Ja. A sense that there are hidden emotions that are being laid to rest in light of a new future, and with the critical success of Park's follow up film I'm a Cyborg it is perhaps the case that Park, like Geum-Ja has disregarded all of his resentments and wants to move onwards and upwards as a filmmaker.

CHAPTER VII
Conclusion: Rise of a Forgotten Nation

"For those Hong Kong cinema aficionados who passionately followed the rise of the 'Hong Kong New Wave' during the Eighties and early Nineties, only to become increasingly disenchanted since then, like myself, I offer you two words: South Korea."

- Leong, 2002, p.1

Throughout the twentieth century, as cinema markets boomed and flourished around the world, all seemed lost for the nation of South Korea, whose cinematic capabilities remained

overshadowed by a chain of misfortunes and conflicts. Despite all of this, the resilience of Korea's filmmakers allowed the cinematic industry to just about survive and in the nineteen nineties eventually undergo a revival that would draw the eyes of the world. The Korean 'new wave' not only offered salvation for increasingly dissatisfied fans of Asian cinema, but also provided an artistic outlet for the South Korean people, who had undergone an unforgivable cruel, near century long oppression.

Ranking high above the majority of other film-making Asian nations, in a good fraction of critical opinion, Korean film has become the greatest new obsession for cinephiles all over the world. The Korean 'new wave' has helped to provide the world with an understanding of this great nation and the forces that motivate its artists, whilst also

turning out a collection of magnificent, awe inspiring films. Directors such as Park chan-Wook, aligned with fellow Korean filmmakers such as Kim Ki-duk (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... and Spring) , Kim Jee-woon (The Quiet Family, 1998), Lee Jong-hyuk (H, 2002), Bong Joon-ho (The Host), Park Kwang-Hyun (Welcome to Dongmakgol, 2005) and many more, form an alliance of fascinating and sophisticated artists, who are pushing the boundaries of cinema.

Since the writing of this dissertation began, there have been major developments in Hollywood, in regard to the remaking of Korean film – especially the films of Park. Whilst Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance seems to remain 'too much' for Hollywood producers, Charlize Theron has been tipped to play Lady Geum-Ja in the remake of Lady Vengeance, whilst Steven Spielberg and Will Smith have

announced their collaboration on the remake of Oldboy.

Considering Theron's surprisingly brilliant turn as serial killer Aileen Wuornos in Monster (Patty Jenkins, 2003), one wonders if she could perhaps bring something fresh and exciting to the character of Geum-Ja. As for Spielberg and Smith, it is an irrefutable fact that the former is a master of narrative cinema direction, and the latter is an actor who, particularly in recent years, has flourished. These remakes are likely to occur more often as Korean cinema continues to prosper, but the quality of filmmakers and actors wanting to be involved should serve as testament to the tremendous impact that Korean film is having, even upon the most well established filmmakers in the world.

With Park chan-Wook's latest film Bakjwi

(Thirst), due for release in mid 2009 it will be impossible to comment fully on his progression as a director but with the tremendously successful and record breaking JSA in his repertoire alongside his Vengeance Trilogy, Park chan-Wook had established himself as a consistent and successful filmmaker.

With the short film Cut and his off-the-wall romance I'm a Cyborg alongside this already celebrated collection of films, Park chan-Wook did more than simply establish himself as a great filmmaker. Park established himself as an articulate and fastidious artist, whose progression continues despite his already achieved brilliance. He is a man who is not only in charge of his film's content and style, but also in control of them.

Park is able to discuss any aspect of any of his

works at great length, and seems comfortable in the knowledge that he can make the films that he wants to make. Park carries all of the labels of an auteur but until the release of Thirst, it remains to be seen whether Park can continue his spree of success.

In closing, it is accurate to suggest that a majority of Korean cinema to emerge from this 'new wave' is violent, unsettling, often sadistic and laced with turmoil, tragedy and treachery. But when taking in to consideration the history of Korea – the decades of occupation, war, oppression, invasion and crime, is it any wonder that unpleasant themes permeate these highly stylistic and metaphorical films that are made by the very filmmakers who have grown up in a society that restricted their freedom of expression

And even though a quantity of Korean

cinema might seem horrific and thoughtlessly cathartic, it is essentially a cinema that shows violence as destructive. Kim Ki-duk and Kim Jee-woon, like Park, are famed for their depiction of destructive violence and the consequences brutality can bring about.

The current state of Korean cinema is being referred to as a 'new wave' with an increasing regularity, but some more sceptical theorists see the Korean 'new wave' as nothing but a fleeting increase which will soon die off. But considering this Korean 'new wave' has now been ongoing for just over a decade, it is looking increasingly likely that Korean cinema is here to stay as a serious contender in the market of world cinema. "Whether the current status of Korean cinema is a momentary boom or a monumental renaissance, one thing is clear: Korean films of the last decade are, in a way, films of individual liberation and peace."

(Min, Joo, and Han, 2003, p. 183-184). And in view of the sheer ruthlessness against the Korean people for nearly a century, surely it is time for Western critics to just appreciate the cultural expression of repression, instead of judging it as wrong or hurtful. Because, when the majority of Korean cinema is boiled down to its basics, it explores peace, beauty, forgiveness and above all... freedom.

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"The prolonged history of military occupation, oppression, war, and subsequent liberation of the South Korean state have all affected the themes, content and style of the nation's cinematic New Wave."

With reference to auteur theory and the films of Park chan-Wook; chiefly his Vengeance Trilogy, this book delves deep in to the psychology behind the latest cinematic masterpieces of South Korean cinema.

This text was originally published in 2009 in the format of a bound dissertation, and consequently presented to the Digital Film and Screen Arts department of the University for the Creative Arts.