

## Table of contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
1.1 – Thesis.....	5
1.2 – Background.....	6
1.3 – Researching fans and fan behaviour.....	8
1.4 – The semiotic approach to film analysis.....	12
1.5 – Bibliography.....	15
1.6 – Reading guide.....	16
<b>Chapter 2: South Korean cinema and Park Chan-wook</b> .....	<b>19</b>
2.1 – Korean cinema under Japanese rule.....	19
2.2 – Post-war cinema in South Korea.....	21
2.3 – Contemporary South Korean cinema and the emergence of <i>Hallyu</i> .....	24
2.4 – On the director, Park Chan-wook.....	25
2.5 – Accessibility for Western Audiences.....	28
<b>Chapter 3: <i>Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance</i></b> .....	<b>31</b>
3.1 – Plot synopsis.....	31
3.2 – Reception.....	33
3.3 – Similarities to Hollywood features.....	36
3.4 – Where does the sympathy lie?.....	37
3.5 – Social and historical commentary.....	38
3.6 – The importance of colours.....	40
3.7 – Aesthetic symbolism.....	43

<b>Chapter 4: <i>Oldboy</i></b> .....	<b>47</b>
4.1 – Plot synopsis.....	47
4.2 – Reception.....	49
4.3 – Similarities to Hollywood features.....	52
4.4 – The importance of names.....	53
4.5 – Representation of class.....	54
4.6 – Social context.....	57
4.7 – Aesthetics.....	59
<b>Chapter 5: Spike Lee’s <i>Oldboy</i></b> .....	<b>65</b>
5.1 – Plot synopsis.....	65
5.2 – Reception.....	68
5.3 – Similarities and differences between Lee’s <i>Oldboy</i> and Park’s <i>Oldboy</i> .....	70
5.4 – The focus on technology.....	74
<b>Chapter 6: <i>Sympathy for Lady Vengeance</i></b> .....	<b>77</b>
6.1 – Plot synopsis.....	77
6.2 – Reception.....	80
6.3 – Historical and social context.....	83
6.4 – Meta cinema.....	86
6.5 – Colour symbolism and traditions.....	88
6.6 – Aesthetics.....	90
<b>Chapter 7: Conclusion</b> .....	<b>93</b>
7.1 – Fan participation.....	93
7.2 – Making meaning.....	95
7.3 – Further research.....	97

Bibliography.....	<b>99</b>
8.1 – Literature.....	99
8.2 – Online articles and film reviews.....	101
8.3 – User commentaries and statistics.....	107
8.4 – Analysis material.....	112



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

As technology has developed through the years, the world has become progressively smaller. Not only are people able to access news, films and music from across the globe, social networking sites have also proved themselves to be a useful platform for people to discover new forms of art they would previously not be able to access. Sites such as the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com) permit film lovers to discuss with other fans about their favourite films, actors and television series, as well as discover new films of interest. It serves as a platform for film audiences to discuss and share their opinions on different kind of works. In particular, the cinema of South Korea has gained popularity in Euro-American culture in recent years, directors such as for instance Kim Ki-duk and Bong Joon-ho gaining attention for their aesthetic styles and violent narratives. In addition, and possibly most notably, Park Chan-wook has been a successful figure in the popularisation of South Korean cinema. His work has been rewarded at film festivals around the globe and the director has gained status as an icon. The following thesis will investigate Park Chan-wook's Western success with the three films *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Oldboy* (2003) and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005), whom together form the *Vengeance Trilogy*.

#### 1.1 – Thesis

Though the subject of South Korean film has been increasingly studied over the past couple of decades, there is still little research on what draws Western audiences to the cinema of South East Asia. I, personally, was first introduced to South Korean cinema in 2010 through Kim Ki-duk's film *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter... And Spring* (2003). Prior to my first viewing of the film, I had acquired a fondness for contemporary Hong Kong and old Japanese cinema, in particular the works of Wong Kar-Wai and Akira Kurosawa. The beautiful

aesthetics and slow-paced narrative of Kim's film further intrigued my curiosity of the cinema of South Korea, thus I discovered the first film of Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy*, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. As my knowledge of South Korean history and culture was limited, I was interested in learning what symbolisms I had missed upon my first viewing of the film. Upon researching the complex history of South Korea, both as a nation and also in terms of their film history, I understood that Park's features were filled with symbolism and analogies that I could not comprehend upon my first viewing. Still, I was aware that the films had a large fan base in Western communities. My thesis intends to answer the question:

*How do Western fans make meaning of Park Chan-wook's Vengeance Trilogy?*

My intention is to discover if Western fans of the trilogy comment on the socio-historical elements presented in the film through metaphors and symbolisms. I intend on researching this through mainly reviewing comments found on the discussion forums on The Internet Movie Database. It is important to note, however, that this thesis will in addition pose several sub-questions. How are Euro-American audiences' reacting to the trilogy? How has the trilogy been received in South Korea? How are the fans of Park's trilogy reacting to Spike Lee's adaptation of *Oldboy*? I will also attempt to understand the intricate meanings behind the signs within the films through a semiotic analysis of the films, and discover if fans reference said signs in their comments.

## 1.2 – Background

As aforementioned, it is only in recent times that the subject of South Korean film has become a topic for scholarly research in the Euro-American world. This is mainly because South Korean films have not so readily been accepted until recently. As will be further discussed in chapter two of this thesis, South Korean film has mainly been projected on domestic screens, it was not until the 1990s that features from abovementioned country found success on international markets. I have chosen, for this thesis, to focus on the films of Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy*: *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Oldboy* (2003) and

*Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005). The reason for choosing said films is that these are the features, *Oldboy* in particular, that made the name Park Chan-wook known around the world. Interestingly, the films have not been particularly successful on the South Korean market, and Park's career, and visions, as a director has been under great critique domestically. In fact, one film producer was reported stating: "I'll eat my hat if a Park Chan-wook movie succeeds commercially," (Kim, 2007: Loc 99-107). Although it is important to recognize that the previous statement was exclaimed before the domestic success of Park's 2000 feature *Joint Security Area JSA*, there are still South Korean audiences and critics who remain unimpressed by the director's work. This will be further explored in chapters two, three, four and six. In contrast, Park has been recognized as "the Quentin Tarantino of South Korea. An unsung hero that has had massive influence over myriad American filmmakers," (Corrigan, 24.11.2015), and "The Master," (Bisley, 08.08.2013) in Western based magazine articles. For this reason, the films of Park Chan-wook become interesting subjects for this thesis.

In terms of research available on Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy*, there are several different approaches taken by different authors. Kate E. Taylor-Jones offers a semiotic analysis of *Oldboy*, which appears in her book *Rising Sun, Divided Land* (2013). The problem with her research, however, is that she mostly analyses from a Western perspective, her symbolisms mainly rooted in the Euro-American culture. Thus, her inclusion of signified concepts specific for the South Korean history and society is limited. Jung's analysis of *Oldboy* found in his book *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (2011) focuses on the patriarchal society still existent in South Korea as a backdrop within the films narrative. Kim's book *Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook* (2007) discusses Park as an auteur, in addition to providing a series of personal interviews with the director, where he discusses his entire body of work. The book has in addition been helpful in my understanding of Park's background and his venture into directing. While all three books have provided me with detailed insight on the Korean film industry, and partially the South Korean society, neither discuss what inherently makes Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy* a product of contemporary South Korean society.

### 1.3 – Researching fans and fan behaviour

The following thesis will explore the subjects of fan behaviours, in addition to providing socio-historic analysis' of the films. Thus, I will be using two central methodologies in order to complete my research. Firstly, in terms of fans and fan behaviours I intend on using Henry Jenkins and Janet Staiger's research on fan behaviour. The latter's book *Media Reception Studies* (2005) explores the matters of fans and their attitudes towards different genres of films, however, I will mostly be researching the matter of if, and how, Western fans participate actively in their respective fan community. Henry Jenkins explains in his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (2013) that fans have through the years been represented as "masculine, although frequently as de-gendered, asexual, or impotent, the eroticized fan is almost always female [...]; the feminine side of fandom is manifested in the images of screaming teenage girls who try to tear the clothes off The Beatles or faint at the touch of one of Elvis' s sweat-drenched scarfs, or the groupie servicing the stars backstage after the concert in rockumentaries and porn videos," (2013: 15). There are still negative connotations linked to the term 'fan' in present day, however, it is important to note the value of fans in terms of revenue and press. Through social networking sites such as for instance Facebook, Tumblr, Reddit and Rotten Tomatoes, fans are given the opportunity to express their satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with films, ultimately making them the modern version of the film critic. Jenkins argues that there are five levels of fan activity (2013: 277-280).

Firstly, he argues that fans have a specific mode of reception. In contrast to 'regular' viewers, fans are more selective in what they will watch, based on stars, directors and genre. He argues that fans of a certain feature will watch it repeatedly in order to acquire a thorough understanding of the director's vision and to make meaning of the text. He writes that, to a fan, "watching the series is the beginning, not the end, of the process of media consumption," (2013: 277). This suggests that fans will not only watch a feature numerous times, they will also search for meaning through research, for instance they will look to other sources to further make meaning. These sources can be in the form of articles, fan commentaries and documentaries, to name a few.



The second level of fan activity described by Jenkins is the particular set of interpretive practices set in fan communities. Upon entering a *fandom*, in other words the unofficial fan network, newcomers seek the aid of ‘fandom veterans’ in order to learn the preferred reading practice of the set text. Through setting up interpretive communities, fans are able to share their experiences with one another, in addition to gain further knowledge through learning of other fans points of view. In addition to being able to share their experiences with the selected text, fans often seek other fans with whom they share a mutual interest. For instance, the film *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) attracted a number of different types of fans. First, it attracted fans of the horror genre; second, fans of Stanley Kubrick’s earlier work with an interest in seeing the directors latest feature; and third, as the film was an adaptation of Stephen King’s novel of the same name, it attracted fans of the book.

Jenkin’s third category is consumer activism. He argues that fans actively participate in discussions with networks regarding their favourite shows, and mentions *Twin Peaks* as an example. He states that fandoms organized rallies against the cancellation of the popular 1990’s television series, in addition to fans expressing their desires for future plot developments. Janet Staiger also writes that this form of behaviour is “particularly in play when the fan text is unfinished because it is serially distributed,” (2005: 101). The reason behind this is that fans are virtually able to influence a show or a film’s plot progress. Several films and television series have indeed been influenced by the reactions of fans, for instance has the co-creator of the series *FRIENDS*, Marta Kauffman, reported that the characters Chandler Bing and Monica Geller were not originally intended to marry. Of the situation, she stated: "We thought it was going to be funny and we were going to get rid of it [...] Suddenly the audience told us they had been waiting for that and we had to rethink how we were going to keep going and change the relationship," (Gonzales, 05.06.2015). This category of fan behaviour also infers that audiences are able to express their opinions in terms of casting. Actress Scarlett Johansson is set to play the lead in the Hollywood adaptation of Japanese Anime *Ghost in The Shell*, planned to be released in 2017. The casting of a Caucasian actress in the role of a Japanese woman has sparked a vivid online debate, amongst fans, critics and other actors and actresses alike. On the internet site ThePetitionSite.com, there is currently a petition titled *DreamWorks: Stop Whitewashing Asian Characters!* aimed at the film. The petition’s description states: “Fans of the iconic 1995 animated Japanese sci-fi film *Ghost in the Shell* have been anticipating a live-action remake for years -- but now, instead of casting

an Asian actress, Dreamworks has selected Scarlett Johansson for the lead role! [...] The original film is set in Japan, and the major cast members are Japanese. So why would the American remake star a white actress? [...] Dreamworks could be using this film to help provide opportunities for Asian-American actors in a market with few opportunities for them to shine -- please sign the petition asking them to reconsider casting Scarlett Johansson in *Ghost in the Shell* and select actors who are truer to the cast of the original film!," (Rodriguez, 24.04.2016). The petition has, as of 24.04.2016, 99,633 signatures.

The fourth category of fan behaviour listed by Jenkins is the fans' production of art. Fans are not merely consumers of a product, they often use their creative skills to produce works of fiction, drawings, edited videos and so forth. Fanfiction is a genre of writing which permits amateur authors to write their own stories based on the characters from their favourite books, television series, films and the like. The site FanFiction.net writes that it is the "World's largest *fanfiction* archive and forum where fanfic writers and readers around the globe gather to share their passion," (2016), and offers a wide range of stories available for readers. Jenkins writes that while the fan-made art is not made with intentions of revenue for the artist, it still challenges the media industry's claims to copyright (2013: 279). Due to the strict terms of copyrights, several fan-artists have experienced having their work removed from the internet. In terms of Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy*, there are several fan-made film trailers available on the video site YouTube. It is likely that fans have created these videos, which are self-edited trailers using footage from the films, based on the lack of an available official trailer, yet it is simultaneously possible to assume that the trailers are being made in order for the creators to find an artistic outlet; in other words, the fan-made trailers can be seen as a testimony to the creator's passion for the films.

The final category Jenkins presents is fans ability to create an alternative social community. He stresses that this alternative community does not function as an escape from reality, rather it serves as a second community, one where fans can feel more free to express their passion. This type of social community can, for example, be fan clubs and internet forums. This social community can be seen as a coalition of the aforementioned four categories, as the social communities allows for fans to interact, share their works of art, and discuss all aspects of their respective fandoms. The problem with abovementioned society is the self-inflicted

exclusion from the 'normative' society. Staiger suggests that fans separate themselves from people who does not share their passion, using Jenkin's term 'mundanes' to describe non-fans. Paraphrasing Jenkins, Staiger writes that fans see themselves as "imaginative, childlike, doers, deeper thinkers; mundanes are shallow and shortsighted, adults, passive, and unaware," (2005: 108).

In addition to Jenkins five categories, Janet Staiger adds a sixth: "the extension of fan partialities into everyday living," (2005: 105-107). Staiger explains that this category refers to fans who incorporate matters from, for instance, films into their everyday lives. Examples of this form of fan behaviour can include fans quoting their favourite characters, changing their attire to appear like their favourite characters, or even naming their children and pets after their favourite characters. This type of fan behaviour can also include buying merchandise and special edition collector's items. In addition, in certain cases, fans are able to visit the homes and home towns of their favourite performers, such as for instance Elvis Presley's Graceland.

I would like add that fans often acquire a sense of ownership of the product they are supporting. I do not suggest that this constitutes a seventh category of fan behaviourism, rather that fans who conform to the abovementioned six are so tied to the product, be it a film, an actor, or an artist, that they feel it belongs to them. This is particularly evident when films are being remade by a different director than the original, and with a new cast. Fans can often feel as if the film they adore is being threatened, that the new version will be a lesser edition. Fans devote their time and their energy into supporting these products, thus they feel as if they are part owners of the product. Throughout this thesis I intend on discussing to what extent fans of Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy* conform to the above mentioned categories of fan behaviours. I will research if they produce art, and in which case what kind, in addition to the extent of their participation in discussions.

#### 1.4 – The semiotic approach to film analysis

In addition to the theories of fans and fan behaviour presented by Janet Staiger and Henry Jenkins, I will be using the semiotic approach in order to analyse the films mentioned directed by Park Chan-wook, in addition to Spike Lee's adaptation of *Oldboy* (2013). Whether intentionally or not, audiences will almost always attempt to make meaning of the films they have seen, scholars and non-academics alike. The language of cinema is one that does not merely constitute of the verbal or written, rather, cinema creates meaning through audible and visual signs. As Park's *Vengeance Trilogy* has gathered fans from around the globe, particularly in Euro-American communities, I wish to uncover if fans require an understanding of the social and historical meaning of the films, or if they are able to genuinely enjoy the films merely based on the aesthetics and narrative.

*A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from Greek semeion, 'sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance.*  
(Saussure, cited in Wollen, 2010: 171)

Considered the creator of what is now known as semiology, also referred to as semiotics, the Swiss scholar Ferdinand de Saussure did not, in fact, publish any of his own theories: his thoughts were published posthumously. In 1916, three years after Saussure's death, the book *Cours de linguistique générale (Course in General Linguistics)* was published. The book was mainly created from the collection of notes taken by Saussure's students at the University of Geneva, which, in turn, were gathered by Saussure's colleagues (Harris, 2013: xviii). Saussure expressed the necessity of the signs of language to be studied from a social viewpoint, as he believed there was no 'natural' language to be found in the study of the signs. Rather, Saussure believed that signs could only be interpreted based on the readers understanding of the connection between *signifier* and the *signified*. The signifier is the form of which a sign takes, while the signified represents the concept of the sign, in other words:

the meaning behind the sign. Daniel Chandler uses the term 'open' as an example to explain the relationship between signifier and signified. If the word is found written in the window of a store, the signified concept would be that the store is open for customers. However, the word 'open' is not limited to abovementioned signified, as it can, for instance, also be found next to a button inside an elevator, connoting that pushing said button will open the doors. He further explains: "Similarly, many signifiers could stand for the concept 'open' (for instance, on top of a packing carton, a small outline of a box with an open flap for 'open this end') - again, with each unique pairing constituting a different sign," (2002: 19). Thus, neither signifier nor signified can stand on their own, there is a crucial relationship between the two that need to be understood within each specific context. It is important to note that a sign, particularly non-verbal signs, will possess different signified concepts based on the social and historical relevance of the sign. Saussure thus concluded that signs are arbitrary, the code that connects the signifier to the signified must be learnt. For instance, for English speakers, the combination of the letters L-A-M-P will likely result in the mental image of a source of light, because the English language has determined that this is the correct signified concept. The problem with Saussure's research, however, lies mainly in the fact that his theories were not published by the thinker himself, rather they were, as mentioned, published based on lecture notes taken by students. For this reason, as Harris remarks, it cannot be said with certainty that Saussure's original views are accurately represented (2013: xviii).

Charles Sanders Peirce, an American contemporary of Saussure, developed what he would refer to as semiotics. Throughout his research on linguistic, Peirce concluded that signs could be divided into three classes, something which he referred to as "the second trichotomy of signs," (Wollen, 2010: 173-174). The three classes were the index, the icon and the symbol. Firstly, an index, or indexical, sign is one where the signifier is not arbitrary, rather it is directly connected to the signified, whether it is inferred or observed (Chandler, 2002: 37). In his article, Wollen lists examples given by Peirce:

*"[...] I see a bowlegged man in corduroys, gaiters and a jacket. These are probable indications that he is a jockey or something of the sort. A sundial or clock indicates the time of day,"*  
(cited in 2010: 174).

This suggests that index signs can be one that is natural, for instance smoke as a signifier for the signified fire; it can be one of sound, for instance a doorbell being a signifier for the signified concept of visitors arriving; and it can also be one presenting physical object, as the above mention clock indicates. It is important to note, however, that the signs mentioned here are in fact arbitrary. It is vital that the interpreter has learnt, and understands, the concept behind the sign, it is not something that every person is able to comprehend without having first been introduced to the concept. For instance, using Peirce's example, an interpreter must know the attire of a rider before he or she is able to indicate that corduroys and gaiters signify a jockey.

Iconic signs, too, are not arbitrary, rather the relationship between signifier and signified "is one of resemblance or likeness," (Wollen, 2010: 174). For instance, the iconic signifier can be a drawing of the signified person, like a caricature. Iconic signs are not limited to visual signifiers, they can also be presented through audio, smell, touch and so on. As such, iconic signs can often be found in music, radio plays and performance theatre. In order for a sign to be genuinely iconic, however, as with index signs, it is important that the sign itself is able to be understood without cultural intervention. Linguist Guy Cook uses the men's lavatory sign as an example of an icon, asking if it indeed resembles a man more than a woman. He states: "For a sign to be truly iconic, it would have to be transparent to someone who has never seen it before – and it seems unlikely that this is as much the case as is sometimes supposed. We see the resemblance when we already know the meaning," (cited in Chandler, 2002: 40). The iconic sign is therefore problematic, as the concept of the sign needs to be learnt, thus making it arbitrary.

The final class of Peirce's theory on signs is the symbol. The symbol does not differ much from Saussure's theories of the signifier and the signified, as the relationship between sign and meaning is arbitrary, it is "conventional and has the force of a law," (Wollen, 2010: 174). Despite the two modes of understanding are similar, Saussure avoided the term 'symbol' as he believed that a symbol, in its definition, could not be arbitrary as they were not "empty configurations," (cited in Chandler, 2002: 38), using the scale as an example for symbolising the law. Peirce's symbolic sign does not need to resemble the concept it represents, neither

visually nor audibly.

The three films which the following thesis will concentrate on will be analysed based on Saussure's notion of signs being arbitrary. It is vital that I do so, as I am suggesting that the signified concepts within the film are based in South Korean history and culture. As aforementioned, the *Vengeance Trilogy* has mainly been studied from a purely aesthetic standpoint, or the research have focused on the excessive violence portrayed. The reason for this is likely because of the films being mainly analysed by Western authors, however, precisely because of the large Euro-American fan base the films have gathered, I believe it is important to gain further knowledge about the socio-historic signs within the features.

### 1.5 – Bibliography

Most fan comments are extracted from the film site The Internet Movie Database (IMDb). I have used this site as my primary platform for user comments due to the diverse number of opinions found on the site, and also due to the diversity of commentators, both in terms of gender and nationality. As I have not been able to communicate directly with audiences, it has proved itself to be a forum of great value in my research. I do appreciate that the comments on the site do not represent the views of all people who have seen the films, however, they serve as a decent representation of the viewpoints. From this site, along with RottenTomatoes.com, I have extracted statistics and so-called 'scores' submitted by viewers. As the two sites are popular amongst film audiences, they have both been beneficial in my research on this topic. To truly understand the nature of fan communities and how their personal societies function, I have used Henry Jenkin's book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory* (2013) and Janet Staiger's book *Media Reception Studies* (2005) as my main sources of information. All interviews with the director of the films cited in this text have been translated from Korean to English by the persons referenced in the bibliography section of this thesis. It is here important to note that since all quotes and statements from the director have been translated as such, it is possible that they have been mistranslated. Similarly, it is also plausible that a few of the works cited which were originally written in languages other than English contain errors in their translations.

## 1.6 – Reading guide

Chapter two of this thesis will briefly summarize the complex history of South Korean cinema. In said chapter, I will also discuss Park Chan-wook's career and his general interest in the cinema. I intend to briefly discuss Park as an auteur, however, I do not intend on providing the readers of this thesis with a thorough discussion of auteur theory. As I am not researching what makes the *Vengeance Trilogy* a typical body of work for the abovementioned director, it does not appear relevant for this thesis. The chapter will also include a brief analysis of the general accessibility of the film for Western audiences, focusing on the distribution through the streaming network Netflix and through Tartan Asia Extreme. Chapter three will discuss the first film of the *Vengeance Trilogy*, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002). It will analyse the film's reception amongst Western audiences, as well as how it was received in South Korea, being the first film directed by Park after the immense success of *Joint Security Area JSA* (2001). The chapter will also offer an analysis of the film, particularly focusing on the representation of the South Korean class system and the Americanisation of South Korean society. Chapter four will examine the film *Oldboy* (2003), and similar to the previous chapter, it will provide an analysis of reception, both domestically and internationally. It will also include a formal analysis of South Korea's history and current society as presented within the film. Chapter five will explore Spike Lee's adaptation of *Oldboy* (2013) and discuss the similarities and differences between the South Korean original and the American remake. Chapter six will focus on the conclusion to Park's trilogy, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005). Throughout the chapter, I will explore the extreme focus on scholarly achievements within South Korea. Chapter seven will consist of a conclusion of my research. The chapter will also include commentary on what I believe should be further researched based on my current findings. In addition, I would like to add that throughout my thesis, I will be writing all Korean names with their family name preceding their given name, on the basis of the Confucian tradition. I will be using the terms viewer, audience, spectator and fan interchangeably, yet, within this thesis they all refer to the general film audience unless another meaning is specified. I also intend on using the terms Western and Euro-American interchangeably, both referring to audiences based in Europe and North America. In this thesis, I refer to the Tomato Meter and audience approval rates. The Tomato Meter displays the percentage of approved critics on the Rotten Tomatoes website



that have given a film a positive review. The audience approval rate, which is from the same site, illustrates the number of viewers who have given a film a score of 3.5 stars or higher.



## Chapter 2

# Korean cinema history and Park Chan-wook

That artists find their inspiration through the world that surrounds them is not a new phenomenon, neither is it in terms of cinema. The Italian Neorealist era for instance, which took place in the mid-1940s and early 1950s Italy, took advantage of the post-war destructions and created melancholic stories filmed on location, using non-professional actors, resulting in the new form of realistic cinema, and the surrealist cinematic movement of the early twentieth century, which included directors such as Luis Buñuel, was served as an alternative to the standard Western feature of the time. As the cinema of the Western parts of the world has been altered and inspired by the present and past, so has the cinema of South Korea. It is only in the recent years that the world has taken a notice to the cinema of the East Asian country, thus the knowledge of the country's cinematic history is not widely known. This chapter will offer an insight to the intricate history, in addition to a closer look at the director of the *Vengeance Trilogy*, Park Chan-wook.

### 2.1 – Korean cinema under Japanese rule

Taylor-Jones explains that “Although there had been a private screening of the new cinematic equipment for the court in 1897, cinema was introduced to the general Korean public in 1903,” (2013: 15). Despite this early screening of a film at the Korean cinema market, it was not before the year 1919 that South Korea produced its first ‘film’, a kinodrama performed by actors while a projected feature served as their backdrop, entitled in English *The Righteous Revenge*. The first silent feature premiered in 1923, and due to its success there was an abrupt boom in the Korean cinema market, several new production companies emerging. There is, however, little information to be found in regards to the early years of Korean cinema. This is a result of the Korean war, which caused early film footage to be “lost due to neglect or the

destruction [...] and not a single feature produced before 1934 survives in complete form today,” (Paquet, 01.03.2007). Despite the emergence of domestically produced cinema, the Japanese censorship laws limited its growth, partially due to the appearance of films with plots promoting the Korean independence from Japan. Paquet explains that the Japanese enforced censorship required all features, domestic and international alike, to be presented to a “government censorship board for approval before being screened,” (01.03.2007). In addition, local authorities were required to be present during screenings in order to ensure the films shown were not illegal copies. Still, there were a few young filmmakers who were eager to represent the Korean independence movement in their features, and together they formed The Korea Art Proletarian Federation (KAPF). The laws of censorship became stricter, and as a result, costume dramas and pro-Japanese films dominated the film market. “Any film that went against the Japanese discourse of obedience and unity went directly against the colonial rule and as a result by 1931 most members of KAPF were in jail and the burgeoning Korean film industry was being crushed to death by the might of the colonial machine,” (Taylor-Jones, 2013: 16). Though the first sound feature appeared in 1935, it was not until 1937, with the commercial success of *Drifter* directed by Lee Gyu-hwan, that sound films proved themselves worth producing. However, the same year saw Japan’s invasion of China, which was the beginning of the second Sino-Japanese war, and as a result, Korean filmmakers were expected to only create films which supported the Japanese war efforts and government. In addition, the economy went through a drastic downfall as most of the Korean finances were used in support of the Japanese military. Korean citizens were also drafted for the war, as “Koreans were to be totally assimilated as Japanese,” (Savada & Shaw, 1992: 21). A year after the Japanese invasion of China, in 1938, the Korean Language Prohibition Law came into force. The law stated that all Korean language films were to be banned, and in addition it enforced the “compulsory usage of Japanese in schools and official situations,” (Taylor-Jones, 2013: 16). The Japanese rule of Korea ended in 1945, after the country had been depleted by American forces, and the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima forced the Japanese government to surrender the Second World War. The warfare resulted in Korea’s split, and ultimately, it led to a new conflict on the peninsula; the Korean War. As aforementioned, the war destroyed virtually all South Korean filmmaking equipment, in addition to most of the films created before the war, meaning that the South Korean film industry had to rebuild itself.

## 2.2 – Post-war cinema in South Korea

The immediate period which followed the Korean war proved to be a new beginning for South Korean filmmakers. The first few years after the war showed a massive expansion of the film market and a rapid growth of domestically produced features, going from merely eight films in 1954 to 108 in 1959 (Paquet, 01.03.2007). The end of the Korean War resulted in an increased desire for audiences to return to the cinema, and thus the industry blossomed. Jo, Kwak and Min report that the films of this era can be split into two categories; the social atmosphere after the forthcoming of liberal politics in South Korea brought by the American public, and other features depicted a strong realism, offering a more critical view on the matter (2003: 44). This sudden return of interest in the cinematic arts led to the forthcoming of several of the country's most acclaimed directors, such as Kim Ki-young, Yu Hyon-mok and Shin Sang-ok (Bowyer, 2004: 2). In 1960, the second Republic of Korea was established by general election, but it was to last for less than a year, as in 1961 the government fell due to a military coup (Jo, Kwak & Min, 2003: 47). The new military led government wished for a stricter policy in regards to film censorship, and in January 1962, the Motion Picture Law was established. Of the law, Darcy Paquet writes: "Designed more than anything else to restrict and control the development of the film industry, the Motion Picture Law employed various tools to enact strict censorship, limit imports and to consolidate the industry into a handful of large companies which could then more easily be controlled by the government," (2005, 34). This law required from film companies that they registered with the Ministry of Culture and Information, and as the Motion Picture Law developed, it ultimately required for these registered studios to produce a minimum of 15 films per year in order to protect and foster South Korean films, which resulted in what audiences and critics would negatively refer to as "quota quickies" (Jo, Kwak & Min, 2003: 47). Not only did the Motion Picture Law demand that the local film studios produced a minimum of 15 films a year, it also limited the import of foreign films. For these reasons, from the years 1968 to 1971, more than 200 films were domestically produced a year, making South Korea the most active in film production in all of Asia (Taylor-Jones, 2013: 20). In addition, the law enforced a policy in 1963, entitled the Screen Quota System, whereby South Korean cinemas were obliged to screen any domestic film for 106-146 days out of the year (Paquet, 01.03.2007). The studios struggled on account of the new laws set by the government, and thus, the 71 registered film companies were reduced by about two thirds, 55 being eliminated due to poor business

revenue. Even the 16 remaining companies faced hardship due to the constant changes made to the law, thus in 1964 a new group, the Korean Motion Picture Association was formed in order to abolish the strict Motion Picture Law. The group was formed by members of the film community, such as actors, directors and film technicians, and they made the following declarations to the National Assembly:

*“(1) the expansion of film facilities was not reasonable for the film industry, considering the lack of capital; (2) the Motion Picture Law tended to protect the illegally registered film companies that produced films for major film companies to meet the requirements, and, thus fostered corruption in the industry; (3) the improvement of Korean film should not be in quantity but in quality; (4) it was necessary to raise new filmmakers; (5) the Motion Picture Law should be immediately abolished and a new Film Production Promotion Law [...] should be enacted,” (Jo, Kwak & Min, 2003: 48).*

The proposal did not go through, and the South Korean film industry was kept under the strict control of the Motion Picture Law until 1973, when the law was abolished by the Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corporation (hereinafter the KMPPC), which was the precursor to the Korean Film Council (Paquet, 01.03.2007). The KMPPC was formed in an effort to revive the film industry, as it had fallen into a depression on account of the strict laws and the film production companies' inability to conform to them. The sudden decrease of audiences is also quite possibly a result of the growing interest in television dramas. As a way of reviving the industry, the KMPPC wished for production companies to focus on creating fewer films of quality, rather than a large number of films of lesser quality, however, due to the remaining strict censorship laws enforced by the government, the industry still suffered. The leader of the third Republic of Korea, President Park Chung-Hee, was assassinated in 1979 by one of his own aids, after years of public uprising and revolt. As a result, the country saw a shift in politics, one of democracy, however, the shift in politics was not to last. The period ended “with the military suppression of the democratic movement of the City of Kwangju, where more than two thousand people were missing or dead by the military suppression, and a subsequent military coup,” (Jo, Kwak & Min, 2003: 57). A fifth Republic of Korea was established, and as a way of confirming their political power, censorship and government control once again became a strong part of the South Korean film industry, and as the United

States government showed their support for the fifth Republic, it became common for artists of all kinds to present anti-American themes in their works.

While the 1980s remained strict in terms of freedom of expression, the decade saw a slight change in terms of censorship. Sexual content was no longer strictly forbidden in cinemas, which led to the production of several soft-core pornography features, some of which found success at the box office. Despite this, filmmakers were still not contented and wished for more freedom in their art. In 1984, the Motion Picture Law further loosened its grip on the South Korean film industry and permitted *independent* filmmakers to produce films, something that up until said year had been seen as a criminal offence. This resulted in a new generation of filmmakers and producers being given the opportunity to enter the South Korean film industry, and their modern approach to cinema would affect the business. However, in 1988, the restriction of foreign imports was lifted, thus the South Korean filmmakers were forced to compete with films from other parts of the world, whose industries had been stable for a longer period of time. The South Korean cinema market share reached a low point in 1993, when domestic films made up a mere 16 percent of overall attendance figures (Paquet, 01.03.2007), however, the industry was somewhat protected by the continuous presence of the Screen Quota System. The early 1990's also witnessed the first film produced, financed and distributed by a single conglomerate; Samsung. The company became the country's first *chaebol* in 1992, with the film *Marriage Story*. A *chaebol* is a corporation which controls all aspects of a film, from pre-production to the video's release. In 1997, however, South Korea would enter a time of financial crisis, when they accepted the terms of an International Monetary Fund (hereinafter IMF, globally known as the Asian Financial Crisis), due to what Jaffe and Kim explain to be "one part recession, one part currency disaster, and one part general hysteria [...]," (2010: 46). The IMF crisis led to the extraction from the film industry for several conglomerates, Samsung included, yet a few remained and are still active as chaebols in South Korea. The crisis did not only affect the film industry; it meant unemployment, homelessness and distress for the South Korean people. As a response to the panic that spread throughout the nation, swift globalization was "advocated by the South Korean government, which proposed that business had to be stimulated to produce global commodities in order to overcome this economic depression," (Jung, 2011: 8).

### 2.3 – Contemporary South Korean cinema and the emergence of *Hallyu*

The late 1990s saw a drastic change of interest in South Korean popular culture across the world, in addition to a resurgence of domestic interest. The mid 1990s saw the emergence of new arthouse directors, amongst them Kim Ki-duk and Hong Sang-soo, as well as younger, more commercially adept filmmakers. A common feature for the filmmakers of this new generation was the desire to incorporate several aspects of film history in their features, from B-film aesthetics to classic Hollywood narration (Kim, 2007: Loc 30). Chang Yoon-hyun's film *The Contact* (1997) "marked a resurgence of box office popularity for domestic features," (Paquet, 01.03.2007), but it was the massive success of Kang Je-gyu's *Shiri* (1999) that would ultimately lead the way for other experimental filmmakers in South Korea. *Hallyu*, which translates to *Korean Wave*, is a term used to describe the global attention given to art and media produced in South Korea, such as music, television drama series, fashion and feature films. The term was first coined in China as they began airing South Korean drama series in 1996, and two years later saw the emerging popularity of South Korean music. The South Korean entertainment industry also found great success in Japan, particularly with the aforementioned film *Shiri*, which opened simultaneously in no less than 150 cinemas across Japan, and sold approximately 1.3 million tickets (Korean Culture and Information Service, 2012: 29). The film also experienced success on the domestic market, and within a few years the South Korean film industry boomed. Paquet reports that by 2001, "the 60-70 films Korean films made each year sold significantly more tickets than the 200-300 Hollywood and foreign titles that were released," (01.03.2007). While there was a rediscovered interest for South Korean film on the domestic market, there were a few directors who found more success abroad, most notably Kim Ki-duk. The experimental filmmaker has won several awards at international film festivals; his feature *The Isle* (2000) won a Golden Crow for Best Film at the Brussels International Festival of Fantasy Film, and *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter ... And Spring* (2003) earned the director the Audience Award at the San Sebastian International Film Festival. This is not to say that Kim has not found success on the domestic market, as the latter film was also presented as South Korea's official selection Best Foreign Language Film at the 2004 Academy Awards (Merajver-Kurlat, 2009: 87-88). As mentioned, South Korean films found great success on the Japanese market, their popularity peaking in 2005, and this for several reasons. Firstly, the American mass-produced commercial features did not appeal to Japanese audiences; secondly, the South Korean films offered stories more appealing to



Japanese viewers due to similarities in culture and history; and thirdly, Korean actors and actresses quickly rose to Japanese fame mostly due to the television miniseries, *Winter Sonata*. The series premiered in Japan in 2005 (2002 in South Korea) and instantly created a Japanese obsession with the cast, including Bae Young-jun, Lee Young-ae (whose star image will be further discussed in chapter six), and Lee Byung-hun (Korean Culture and Information Service, 2012: 30). However, the box office success of South Korean features in Japan drastically, and rapidly, fell, partially due to the Korean reliance on stars to draw audiences. In recent years, however, the interest in South Korean culture and art has spread throughout the world, creating fan bases all over the globe. The first Korean Convention (hereinafter K-Con) was held in Southern California, USA in 2012, showcasing South Korean films, music, fashion, cuisine and culture for American fans. This convention is similar to Comi-con, a convention for fans of comic books and science fiction. During these conventions, it is not uncommon for attendees to dress as their favourite characters, performers or other figures who are special within their own fan communities. Since 2012, K-Con has been hosted in New York and Japan, and in 2016, the convention is being held in Europe for the first time (Smith, 21.04.2016). The convention, which will take place in June 2016, will be hosted in Paris, France. K-con has attracted fans across Europe, thus the convention functions as a kind of ‘pilgrimage’ for fans, which is included in Staiger’s sixth mode of fan behaviour, where they are able to experience the culture of their favourite actors, actresses, and musical acts.

#### 2.4 – On the director, Park Chan-wook

Though most acclaimed directors from South Korea have been academically trained in the subject of film, this does not ring true in the case of Park Chan-wook. The now internationally recognised director was born in August 1963, meaning he was raised in a post-partitioned Korea, and he spent his years as a young boy in the country’s capitol, Seoul. Born into a family of higher social standing, with a university professor father and a mother who wrote poetry, Park Chan-wook was eager for intellectual stimulations. While attending Sogang University, where he was part of the Department of Philosophy studying aesthetics, he entered a photography group, wherein he learned briefly about film. Taking an interest in the subject, Park later joined a campus film group, and through that he learned about film history, and after a special screening of Alfred Hitchcock films for members of above mentioned society,

he found a desire for becoming a filmmaker. He particularly listed the film *Vertigo* as he claimed it had, through persistent viewings, made him understand what drove film directors to create their films (Kim, 2007: Loc 69-77). Park's directorial debut, the gangster film *Daleun... haega kkuneun kkum* (English title: *The Moon... Is the sun's dream*) was released in 1992, a film that was financially supported by the video company Dream Box, a company affiliated with one of the leading chaebol's of the time, Samsung. Despite Park's understanding and love of film, his debut proved unsuccessful at the domestic box office due to its unconventional filmic style and its tweaking of the conventions of genre. Of the film's reception, Park stated in an interview:

*"[...] Nobody wrote any reviews of the film. No, there was one review. It was the one I wrote [...] We had the famous singer Lee Seung-chul in the lead [...] On the day of the premiere, there was a swarm of Lee Seung-chul's teenage fans in front of the theatre, but that was because he was signing autographs. I didn't know about that, and I thought my debut was a hit. Once that weekend was over, you couldn't find anyone in the theatre. Basically, it bombed," (cited in Kim, 2007: Loc 1038-1055)*

As the film had been an unsuccessful beginning for Park Chan-wook's career as a director, it took an additional five years until he was able to release his next feature, *Saminjo* (Known in English as *Trio* and *Threesome*, 1997). Like Park's previous work, *Saminjo* was also criticized for its hyperbolic stylisations and violent plotline. Between the release of the two films, continuing after the second, Park worked as a film critic, however, he did not find particular interest in critiquing the current South Korean films. Rather, he focused his writing on lesser known works of foreign filmmakers, new and old alike, and in particular he had a fondness for Sam Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (Kim, 2007: Loc 93). Park's appreciation for films that had not proved successful with critics, nor in terms of revenue, gave him a reputation amongst other South Korean critics as a "cult film freak," (Kim, 2007: Loc 101). This was not because Park exclusively wrote about so-called B-films, however, those articles were the ones that garnered the most attention from the readers and other writers. Park's reputation as a fan of unconventional films also affected his standing as a director, as critics thought him incapable of creating anything with a commercial appeal, thus he was mostly met with rejection when presenting his scripts to producers.

The release of Park's 2000 film *Joint Security Area JSA* (hereinafter *JSA*), a film presenting the strained relationship between the two Koreas, proved to be a turning point in Park's career. Burdened by the label of being an advocate for cult films, Park wrote *JSA* in order "to show that I too could make a popular film, a well-made movie," (cited in Kim, 2007: Loc 1087). In contrast to his previously released features, *JSA* relied more on action sequences and a bright colour scheme, with a theme centred around a subject more relatable to the mainstream South Korean audiences. The film proved itself profitable on the commercial cinema market and broke the box office record set by Kang Je-gyu's film *Shiri* two years prior (Taylor-Jones, 2013: 126). The massive success of *JSA* permitted Park Chan-wook to practice his artistic licence more freely, and additionally, it meant an increase in funding, and in popularity, for the director. However, the success of Park's film also put pressure on the director to release another commercial success, as a director's fate relies completely on the box office revenue, or lack thereof, in South Korea (Kim, 2007: Loc 171). Park's next feature was *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), which will be further discussed and analysed in the next chapter. The film did not prove itself commercially successful, and thus Park's directorial capabilities was once again placed under doubt. His next release *Oldboy* (2003), however, would once again give South Korean audiences faith in Park as a director, not exclusively because of the film itself, but rather that the film received positive commentary abroad. The film won Park the Grand Prix Jury Award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004, where it was also nominated for the Palme d'Or. Nikki J.Y Lee notes that Park was featured in a commercial for an oil company in 2006, the commercial beginning with a man saying "I am an assistant director of Park Chan-wook, the director who won the award at Cannes! [...].", before cutting to a scene of the director in his chair singing the commercial song of the oil company. Lee further notes that within the commercial, there is no mention of any films directed by Park, rather, in South Korea, he is known as the director who won at the prestigious film festival (2008: 206).

After the 2005 release of *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, which will be further discussed in chapter six, Park directed the film *I'm a Cyborg, But That's Okay* (Original title: *Ssa-i-bo-geu-ji-man-gwen-chan-a*) in 2006, a film which Park referred to as his personal favourite feature (Kim, 2007: Loc 1786). The film centres around a young woman who believes she is a cyborg, and once admitted to a mental institution she encounters a man who believes he can steal people's soul. In addition to presenting mental health issues, the film, ultimately, is a

love story between the abovementioned characters. The romantic comedy did not do well with South Korean, nor Western, audiences. Park's next feature *Thirst* (2009), however, proved a success for the director, both internationally and domestically, earning over 13 million USD worldwide (Box Office Mojo, 2016f).

Park's career is not limited to his home country of South Korea. During his 2007 interview with Kim Young-jin, the director explained that he had received an offer to direct a Hollywood feature. The film was set to be a Western starring Samuel L. Jackson, but Park expressed that he did not wish to direct unless the screenplay was altered to fit his ideas (Loc 1805). It is possible to assume that the screenplay in question is *The Brigands of Rattleborge*, written by S. Craig Zahler, as it was added to the screenplay internet archive The Black List in 2006. In 2012, *Variety* reported that Park Chan-wook was in talks with Red Granite Pictures and Mythology Entertainment about directing the abovementioned feature (Sneider, 29.08.2012). In 2013, Park debuted his first English speaking film, the thriller *Stoker*, starring Nicole Kidman, Matthew Goode and Mia Wasikowska. The film did not do well on the American market, acquiring a total of 1,714,221 USD in domestic revenue, the total production budget being 12 million USD. Interestingly, in terms of revenue, the film was more successful in South Korea, earning 2,375,175 USD (Box Office Mojo, 2016e). This is possibly due to South Korean audiences being intrigued by the director's first Hollywood feature. Despite the lack of interest from cinema goers, the film has proven itself to be of inspiration for writers of fan fiction. The site FanFiction.net offers nine stories based on the characters India Stoker and Uncle Charlie (2016). Park's next feature, *The Handmaiden*, is set to be released in 2016.

## 2.5 – Accessibility for Western audiences

Tartan Film was founded in 1984, and in 2001 the company launched Tartan Asia Extreme, whose main focus was to bring Asian films to Western audiences. The brand provides Asian features, mainly South Korean, Japanese and Hong Kong cinema, to high street stores such as His Master's Voice, and online stores such as Amazon. The founder of Tartan Film, Hamish McAlpine, created the DVD release company due to his fascination with South East Asian

films and stated in an interview: “When I realised that these films were not one-offs and there was a constant flow of brilliant films coming out of Asia, I decided to brand it and make it Asia Extreme,” (cited in Shin, 2009: 86). The brand, originally founded in Britain, and for British audiences, expanded to the American DVD market in 2004, and Shin notes that in 2006, half of Tartan’s top 20 list in terms of revenue were Asia Extreme features, Park Chan-wook’s *Vengeance Trilogy* being the highest earner (2009: 92). Tartan Asia Extreme’s marketing scheme was mainly aimed at young males with an interest in the Oriental and who searched for a counterpart to mainstream Western cinema. Currently, however, Tartan Asia Extreme is commonly accepted by Euro-American audiences. It is important to note that the success of Asia Extreme features likely is a large factor behind the success of Park’s trilogy in Western countries, since it provided fans of Asian cinema with a simple way of discovering new features.

Netflix was founded by software engineers Reed Hastings and Marc Rudolph in 1997, their intention being to create a way for people to use the internet in order to effortlessly rent films. In 2007, Netflix transitioned into a streaming service, offering audiences the opportunity to subscribe to their services, and in return gain accessibility to a large selection of films and television series, and by 2010, the company had over 20 million subscribers (CNN, 21.07.2014). In 2013, the streaming site released their first original programme, *House of Cards*. The first season premiered in February, and as all 13 episodes were released simultaneously, it provided viewers the opportunity to “completely control where, when, and how much of the series they watched at any given time,” (Damico & Quay, 2016: 18). By producing and distributing original material, the interest in Netflix grew with the public, and by the end of 2015, the streaming service passed 75 million subscribers (Popper, 19.01.2016). Due to its numbers of subscribers, and the fact that the site offers suggestions of what audiences should watch based on their previous viewings, it is not unlikely that several of the Western audiences first discovered the *Vengeance Trilogy* through the streaming network. However, the initial release of the films created responses of anger and disappointment with viewers. On the internet site entitled High-Def Digest, one writer shared his experience, stating his frustration with the fact that *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* was only released without subtitles, *Oldboy* was released as a dubbed version, and of the three, only *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, the last of the series, was in its original language with English subtitles. “This kind of inconsistency makes it difficult to enjoy foreign films on Netflix, and it makes

me instantly shy away from adding them to my queue. Moreover, the lack of thought that went into putting these movies up is inexcusable [...] The optimal solution, in my mind, is to put up full rips of the DVD which include alternate audio and subtitle tracks. That way we could easily select our preferred setup,” (Ward, 17.11.2010). Three years later, in 2013, *Oldboy* was available to be viewed in its original language with subtitles, and as of April 2016 the trilogy is not available in its entirety in all countries that provide the service. By excluding the films from the possibly largest streaming service, it is harder for audiences to learn of the films if they have no prior knowledge of them, resulting in a more limited audience group. Despite this, the films have a consistent fan base in Western communities.

## Chapter 3

### *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*

After the immensely successful release of *Joint Security Area JSA*, the Korean public eagerly awaited the next Park Chan-wook feature. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (originally titled *Boksuneun Naui Geot*, which, in literal terms, translates into ‘Vengeance is mine’, a point that will be further discussed later in the chapter) had its domestic premiere in Spring 2002 and made its way around the festival circuit throughout the following year. The film was met with disappointment by South Korean audiences, while Western viewers have praised it for its aesthetic and narrative structure.

#### 3.1 – Plot synopsis

The film focuses on two protagonists, whose lives are tragically intertwined. Initially audiences are introduced to Ryu (Shin Ha-kyun), a deaf-mute factory worker who left Art School in order to support his sister (Lim Ji-eun) who is dying of kidney failure. After Ryu is fired from his job, he also learns that, while he has saved up the 10,000,000 Korean won needed for his sister’s kidney surgery, he will not be able to donate his own organs to his sister due to his blood-type not being a match. As a result, Ryu turns to black market organ dealers. He makes a deal with them to exchange one of his own kidneys for one that will be a match for his sister but post surgery he wakes up to find that he has been scammed, both his kidney *and* his money is gone. Shortly after, Ryu is told that the hospital has found a suitable donor, but as he has lost the 10,000,000 Korean won needed for the operation to the dealers, his activist girlfriend, Young-mi (Bae Doona), comes up with a scheme to kidnap the daughter of Ryu’s former employer. Young-mi manages to persuade Ryu by explaining to him that there are good kidnappings and bad kidnappings. She further suggests that the kidnapping they are about to perform is of the former kind, as it will ultimately bring the

family closer and Ryu's former boss is wealthy enough to spare 10,000,000 won. Pretending that he's a friend of the child's father, Ryu manages to abduct the girl, Yu-sun (Han Bo-bae), and brings her to his home. She is kept there for a period of time, in which she is treated kindly and adoringly by Ryu, his girlfriend, and his sister. The father of the girl, Dong-jin (Song Kang-ho) agrees to pay the ransom set by the kidnappers and arranges to meet Ryu with the requested amount. As Ryu returns to his home with the ransom money, he discovers that his sister has committed suicide after learning about the truth of Yu-sun's kidnapping. To honour a promise he made to her he brings her dead body to the Seomjin river, along with the young girl, Yu-sun. While Ryu is placing rocks over his dead sister, a man appears, attempting to enter the car in which Yu-sun is located. In distress, the girl exits the car and runs onto a bridge, shouting at Ryu for his help. Ryu is unable to hear her due to his disability, so he continues mourning over his sister's body unaware of what is occurring behind him. Yu-sun slips on the slick wooden floor of the bridge and falls below into the water, where she ultimately drowns. As Ryu is ready to leave, he discovers that the girl is missing and eventually he manages to locate her limp body lying in the water. This event fuels Ryu with anger, which leads to him to seek revenge upon the persons he believes are ultimately responsible for the death of the two females; the organ traffickers. With the help of his girlfriend, he manages to sneak back into their quarters and murders the trio.

The second central character is the factory owner, and father of the kidnapped girl, Dong-jin. Being a wealthy man, Dong-jin is openly envied and adored by a friend of his as the pair drive up to the former's house, along with their children. The car is stopped as a man is blocking their path, and with fury, Dong-jin confronts the man. The man on the streets explains that he is an employee at Dong-jin's factory, but as his wages are so low he is incapable of supporting his family. He threatens Dong-jin with a knife, asking for a higher salary before slicing his own stomach repeatedly. To this dilemma, Dong-jin responds by punching and kicking the man repeatedly. A little time passes before his daughter is kidnapped, and as he learns of his daughter's abduction he decides to do as the captors say and pays the ransom without informing the police. As time goes on and Dong-jin's daughter has still not returned to him, he concludes that he is in need of contacting the authorities for aid in locating the girl. This leads to them finding the body of the child by the Seomjin river. Dong-jin swears vengeance upon the kidnappers and after the funeral of his daughter he manages to discover their identities.



From this point, the stories are no longer separated. Dong-jin manages to locate Young-mi's apartment and begins torturing her by electrocution. Despite Young-mi's warnings to Dong-jin that she is involved with a terrorist group that will kill him for hurting her, Dong-jin does not stop, and ultimately the shocks prove too much for Young-mi. The woman dies, and Dong-jin's crime is overlooked by the police as he is considered a high-standing member of society in mourning over the loss of his child. As Ryu discovers the fate of his girlfriend, he turns his vengeful mind over to Dong-jin, which in turn leads to a circular chase between the pair. The two hunt each other, and ultimately Dong-jin manages to shock Ryu into unconsciousness by placing electric wires on a door handle. Dong-jin brings his former employee to the exact spot of his daughter's death and pulls the man into the water. As Ryu is tied he is unable to swim away, and Dong-jin dives into the water in order to cut Ryu at the back of his ankles. This ultimately leads to Ryu drowning in the river as Dong-jin slowly drags him to the shore, the next shot showing Dong-jin digging a grave, three blood-stained plastic bags behind him. This suggests that Dong-jin has cut up the other male. While he is digging the grave for Ryu, Dong-jin finds himself confronted by a group of men whom, without uttering a word, begin attacking him with knives. As Dong-jin is left kneeling on the ground gasping for air, one of the men sticks a knife in the dying man's chest, a note with the words 'Death Warrant' written on it.

### 3.2 - Reception

The film generally received positive appraisal from critics upon its release, however it proved itself unsuccessful amongst the mainstream audiences in South Korea. Kim Kyu-hyun argues that this negative response from viewers might be partly due to the fact that the film misguided its audiences in terms of genre, as it was not advertised as a horror film (2005: 106). Park himself claims that the film "from a broad perspective, [...] is a hard-boiled film noir," (cited in Kim, 2007: Loc 1359). Others argue that the film failed at the South Korean box office due to the fact that audiences expected something similar in both style and theme as they saw in Park's previous film, *JSA*. In contrast to *JSA*'s bright colours and nationalistic plotline, *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance* was told through dark filters and portrayed an intensely violent contemporary South Korea (Tyler-Jones, 2013: 130). Kim wrote on the matter:

“*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* was a disaster at the box office. Audiences were infuriated that the director who had given them the powerful emotions of a sleek mass-market film with *Joint Security Area* was once again showing the uncompromising sensibility of a B-movie director,” (2007: Loc 126). In an interview with Park Chan-wook done by Choi Aryong, Choi commented that, due to the film’s title, he “was afraid the film would be emotionally overwhelming.” He continued by stating “In Korea, the audience isn’t used to seeing direct bodily harm,” (Choi, 2008), an element that plays a crucial part of the film. Park explained: “Everybody liked *JSA*, but *Sympathy* was more bi-polar. Some people liked it, but some people really disliked it and after the film they’d even throw up. On the film website in the guest book some people wrote, ‘This is the best movie ever made in Korea’, but others wrote, ‘I’m so shocked by what I’ve seen, I want to kill the director’,” (cited in Sperling, 16.01.2004). When asked about which of his own films was his favourite in 2007, however, Park chose *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* as one of his top choices. He stated: “I’m most sympathetic towards *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*. I might say that out of all my children I put the greatest amount of affection into it and it hurt the most seeing it being treated unkindly. Compared to the welcome that *Oldboy* received, the audience reaction was also extremely meager,” (cited in Kim 2007: Loc 1787). While the film did not attract a large mainstream audience, it did win two awards at the Pusan Film Critics Association Awards: Best Picture 2002 and Best Director (Korean Film, 19.10.2005). However, the film was mainly well received in the western parts of the world, by critics, other directors and audiences alike. The American director Quentin Tarantino is reported to have stated: “I think right now, the most exciting cinema in the world is coming out of Korea. Park Chan-wook is amazing,” (cited in The Cinematheque, May 2013). Another critique, published in the New York Times, was far from positive: “In the end, the problem with “*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*” is not its violence, which isn’t really more outré than what you find in some Hollywood movies. The problem is that [...] yet another exploitation flick in which a man sets a course for bloody revenge, the violence carries no meaning beyond the creator’s ego,” (Dargis, 19.08.2005). The film has an approval rate of 7.7 on IMDb.com (2016d) and an 85 percent audience score on Rotten Tomatoes (2016d). However, the Tomato Meter is at a mere 54 percent, suggesting that the film is the least popular within the trilogy amongst critics.

The statistics of votes found on the Internet Movie Database assert that the majority of fans of the film are males between the ages 18 to 44. The male audiences between ages 18 to 29 cast

14.374 of the votes, and the group between ages 30 to 44 cast 18.978. This is a major contrast to the female voters of the same age groups, the over-all number of votes being 3565. In total, the film has been voted on by 44.424 people, total male votes being 34.496, and total female votes being 3997, the rest are undisclosed as of gender (2016g). The total number of voters with registered genders are 38.493, meaning 89.6 percent of the voters are male compared to the 10.4 percent of females. On the IMDb User Review section for the film, one user, Stage\_3\_Dan from Boston wrote “If you have weak stomachs, don't watch movies with any bit of gore in them. You're the wrong kind of people to be reviewing this kind of film. As a critic you should be able to put personal biases aside and give a fair and balanced review of the movie in question, but you've let a little bit of violence offend you [...] Chan-wook Park also tends to get very inventive with the camera in other ways as well, so much so that I think he's one of the most unique directors around today. I want to see more of his technique-- thus, I am looking forward to seeing *Oldboy* whenever I have the chance to,” (IMDb, 2016h). He has also listed the film as one of his favourites. Another user, Simon Booth from the United Kingdom, wrote “The story, characters, themes and aesthetics are all very unusual and creative. I can't think of any other film that's quite like it, though at times I likened the experience to that of watching certain Takashi Miike movies. Actually, Kim Ki-Duk's movies are probably the closest point of reference, though Park Chan-Wook's film is smarter,” (IMDb, 2016h). Using these two reviews as examples, one can assume that the general fan of the film is an educated male with an interest in Asia Extreme films, as evident by Simon Booth's referencing to other Asia Extreme directors and Stage\_3\_Dan's comment on Park's use of the camera. Also, the latter states that certain critics should not review the film and tries to separate himself from them, ultimately claiming himself as a person with the right to assess the film. This can refer to Jenkins fan behaviour category referring to fans creations of alternative communities. As he is educated in film aesthetics and on the director, he belongs to a separate community than the regular viewer, and ultimately he excludes others. Interestingly, most users compare the film to cult Hollywood cinemas rather than other South Korean or East Asian films, and mainly comment on the visual aspects, such as the lighting and art direction, and also the violent aspects of the film. It appears as though those are the factors that draw the Western audience to the film rather than the socio-historical symbolisms within the story, thus it is plausible that the fans of Park Chan-wook are not searching for a glance into South Korean culture by viewing his films, rather, they are wishing for an alternative to the Hollywood recipe.

### 3.3 – Similarities to Hollywood features

As discussed in the previous chapter, the generation of South Korean filmmakers who appeared in the 1990s were eager to incorporate elements from throughout film history. There are clear links to the Hollywood blockbuster in Park's *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, and there are obvious references to Western auteurs. While undoubtedly *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance* is a violent film, Park relies more on psychological suspense than visual horror. A scene in particular that stands out is the first time Ryu visits the organ traffickers. The scene is shot with a frame within the frame; the camera placed inside a building and viewing out a window, the walls are black and the outline of a set of stairs is visible on the outer perimeter, the entire sequence quite reminiscent of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. In addition, the scene also resembles the famous ascent of Nosferatu on the steps, the Dracula-esque character from the film with the same name, as the audience is only able to see the shadows climbing the steps. It is therefore possible to assume that educated cinema fans are able to draw the conclusion that there is danger waiting at the top of the steps. The removal of the organs is not projected on the screen; the audiences learn that the act has happened due to Ryu lying naked, and alone, on the concrete floor with stiches on his abdomen. A scene near the end of the film, as Ryu's and Dong-jin's search for each other comes to an end, the shadow of the latter is presented holding a knife. The scene also has a Hitchcockian quality over it. Park himself has stated in an interview with R. Kurt Osenlund that "'Hitchcock' is now a genre, so much so that even if you're a filmmaker who's never seen a Hitchcock film in your entire life, if you're making a thriller film, people might come up to you and say, 'I saw some Hitchcock references or Hitchcock elements in your film.'," (cited on 04.03.2013). Jung explains: "By narrating Korea's historical trauma through the Hollywood blockbuster genre, these culturally hybridized films become both familiar and unfamiliar to non-Korean audiences, and it is such cultural hybridity that is the crucial factor in helping these Korean blockbusters travel across national and cultural boundaries," (2011: 7).

### 3.4 – Where does the sympathy lie?

As aforementioned, there are two protagonists in the film, however, it is problematic to point out an antagonist within the diegetic framework. While it's clear that Dong-jin views Ryu and Young-mi as the villains, and Ryu's fight is against both the organ traffickers *and* Dong-jin, this is all within the narration of the film, it represents the characters' points of view. As a spectator, it is not so simple to differentiate between antagonist and protagonist, as, towards the end, they are both worthy of sympathy. It seems as though Park has made society, both within the narrative of the film and the actual current South Korean society, the antagonist, as it is pinning the two protagonists against each other. The English title of the film, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, ultimately presents a question for the viewers. Is Ryu Mr. Vengeance or is it Dong-jin? The narrative of the film, and the way it is presented through camera angles and scenic imagery, makes it seem as if Park wants the audience to conclude that they are both, in their own way and for their different reasons, Mr. Vengeance. Simultaneously, it is vital here to understand that the characters on screen are presented on their own, personal spectrums. Both Ryu and Dong-jin serve three functions; they are protagonists, anti-heroes, and antagonists. This back-and-forth character development might have been problematic for audiences, seeing as Park shies away from the classic divide between good (the hero) and evil (the villain). Park himself stated: "My films are stories of people who place the blame for their actions on others because they refuse to take on the blame themselves. Therefore, rather than movies purporting to be of revenge, it would be more accurate to see my films as ones stressing morality, with guilty consciences as the core subject matter. [...] Because they are always conscious of and obsessed with their wrongdoings, which are committed because they are inherently unavoidable in life, my characters are fundamentally good people." (cited in Macauley, 2009). The original title is, in literal terms, translated into 'Vengeance is mine' in English. This title suggests that vengeance is being claimed. Park's abovementioned quote is quite important when analysing the original title. Ryu and Dong-jin are both seeking vengeance, not only due to other people's actions but also because of their own wrongdoings. Ryu decided to turn to organ traffickers for aid, which resulted in him losing both an organ and his savings, yet he sets out to murder the trio based on what *they* did. Dong-jin is seeking revenge for the loss of his daughter, yet he did not inform the police until he was forced to do so. In the end, neither of the two can truly claim that vengeance is theirs due to the fact that, as Park put it, they refused to see that themselves were partly to blame for the situations that

occurred. In this sense, both titles, original and translated, function as hyperboles; albeit in different manners, both serve an equally vital role when analysing the films storyline.

### 3.5 – Social and historical commentary

Ryu's blood type, type B, is a fact that is frequently pointed out during the course of the film. In South Korea, it is not uncommon for a person to ask for another's blood-type as they greet each other for the first time. The reason for this is that the South Korean people believe that one can learn a lot about a person based on their blood type. While this form of personality assessment does not differ too much from the Western perception of star signs and their connections to personality, it is still more commonly accepted amongst the South Korean people that this, in fact, is part of what creates a character. This form of personality understanding dates back to 1920's Japan, and during the 1970's, it grew in South Korean culture. The personality of a person with blood type B is dependent on gender. While males with this particular blood type have a bad reputation, one of being irresponsible, unreliable and self-centred, this does not apply to females. However, males with this blood type are also considered to be creative, passionate and optimistic (korea4expats, 16.03.2015). It is clear that some of these traits do in fact apply to Ryu. He is represented as an irresponsible person due to him relying on the help of black market organ traffickers, something which his girlfriend is strictly against. His self-centred attitude is shown in his desire to seek revenge upon the people who have wronged him, even though it can be argued that his need for vengeance is not based upon selfish desires. He wishes to avenge the people who have wronged not only himself, but also his sister, and ultimately, his girlfriend, the two most important people in his life. It is also possible to argue that Ryu is unreliable, not necessarily from the perspectives of the other characters in the film, but from the perspective of the viewers. The audience rely on him to save his sister and to return Yu-sun safely to her father, both of which he fails to do. This is a turning point in the narrative, as it is not unrealistic to assume that audiences might lose their sympathy for Ryu and pass it over to Dong-jin instead. Ryu's unreliability is also presented through his disability. Early in the film, a scene shows Ryu eating ramyeon noodles in the foreground, while his sister writhes in agony in the background. Ryu is oblivious to the scene behind him. Also, Yu-sun's death could have been preventable if it were not for Ryu's disability. Yu-sun clearly calls out for her kidnapper's attention, but he is not able to hear it. It

is hard to believe that Park wished to depict that his disability made Ryu a morally ambiguous person, it is more likely that he meant to give his audience further reason to feel sympathetic towards the character, and show them, by for instance letting his blood type serve as a hindrance in his attempt to save his sister, that his blood type, and the personality traits associated with it, is working against him. Simultaneously, Ryu's creative side is proven by his former attendance at an Art School, his passion is portrayed via his desire to save his sister, and his optimism, albeit this might be a less prominent feature of his personality, is shown through his belief in his activist girlfriend and his somewhat distorted outlook on the kidnapping. These points give us reason to assume that Park used Ryu's blood type as a way for the Korean audiences to get an in depth understanding of his psyche.

Out of the three central female characters portrayed in the film, Young-mi is the only one who actively, and purposefully, drives the narrative forward. While the illness of Ryu's sister and the abduction and death of Yu-sun evoke distress in the two protagonists, it can be said that these events are circumstantial in terms of the narrative progression. Young-mi, on the other hand, pushes the narrative forward by being a vocal and active character. She is the one who suggests the kidnapping of the young girl, and she is likewise the one who persuades Ryu to go through with it as he is having second thoughts. She is also partially responsible for the deaths of both Ryu and Dong-jin; Dong-jin's through her involvement in an activist terrorist group, and Ryu's through her own death which awakens his desire to avenge her. This character serves as both a critique and a manifestation of the patriarchal Confucian society of South Korea. Confucius, which is the Latin form of 'Kong Fuzi', was a Chinese teacher, or master, who was born around 551 BCE (Rainey, 2010: 1-3). Confucius believed that peace and harmony could only be achieved if every member of society knew their respective place (Asia-Pacific-Connections, 2000-2008). The Confucian society dictates that the woman's place is within the house, undertaking house-related labours, and the man belongs outside of it, earning money for the family. As Ryu loses his job, it is Young-mi that ultimately acquires the money needed for the transplant, and by doing this, danger ensues. This is not to say that if women step out of their houses and become the earners things will be dire, rather, this hyperbolic violence becomes nearly parodic, possibly suggesting that the Confucian way of thinking is outdated and old-fashioned. It is also vital to here bring forth Young-mi's ties to politics. Her first appearance in the film is as she is printing out a 'death warrant'. The viewers later find out that she has ties with a North Korean terrorist organisation. Young-mi

claims this during the torture scene, her claims being dismissed by the police officer, who shakes his head in disbelief as he mentions to Dong-jin that she has claimed she will meet the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il. Young-mi's main cause of political activism is her desire to end the Westernisation of South Korea, and she is particularly vocal about banning American products. It is plausible that this is a comment on the IMF-crisis of 1997, where globalisation was advocated by the government as a means for South Korea to regain financial security.

### 3.6 – The importance of colours

There are two prominent colours being used throughout the film, both within the film's natural world and through the filters edited in, those colours being red and green. These colours add a stylistic element that does not differ all that much from other popular media platforms, such as the popular Japanese comic book stylings of Manga, Anime and videogames. Prior to the release of *JSA*, Park released two films who bombed at the box office, partially due to this particular visual style, however, in present day, he is celebrated for his artistic expression (Taylor-Jones, 2013: 135-136). The colour red in the modern western world is mostly associated with passionate feelings such as anger and love, which is why, as a western viewer of the film, it is easy to conclude that the red objects portrayed in the feature are meant to represent just that. For instance, it is possible to assume that the pale corpse of Yu-sun juxtaposed against the bright, red dress represents the vulnerability of the characters in a world filled with danger. Here, however, it is also important to consider the socio-historical relevance of the colour. The colour red has functioned as a world-wide symbol for the communist movement, especially through Chairman Mao's red book and the use of The Red Flag in the Soviet Union but even though the film can be seen as anti-communist, it is also possible to interpret some aspects of it as anti-capitalist, especially in the excessive use of blood, as it can be seen as an allegory for the loss of lives during the Vietnam War. South Korea, or the Republic of Korea as it was then known as, deployed circa 50,000 troops to Vietnam by 1968, and from the years 1964 to 1973, more than 310,000 South Koreans served in the war (Frentzos, 2013: 225). By aiding the American military, South Korea managed to build a stable economy and their exports to other nations began to flourish, however, the IMF crisis of 1997 left South Korea nearly bankrupt. Within the film, Young-mi is presented as a



self-professed anti-capitalist, and even though her views and actions are not presented in the most positive light, her ideological standpoints are not necessarily negatively presented either. Park explained that he used the scene with the organ traffickers as an example of this. He stated: “The Organ Dealers are depriving people of something necessary for life although the scenes are exaggerated in the film, this (organ stealing) does actually happen in Korea.” (cited in Sperling, 16.01.2004). The number of people arrested for this in South Korea has drastically decreased from 71 in 2007 to merely 3 in 2010 (Zgheib, 2015: 270). However, an article published by *The Korea Times* claimed that organ trafficking was increasing, stating that in 2010 there were 174 reports of human organ trafficking, and by June 2011 there were already 357 reports on the matter (16.09.2011). Park uses the side-plot with the organ dealers as a means of communicating not merely the issue of organ trafficking, but also the problem with capitalism within South Korea.

The other colour that is often used is green. It is the colour of Ryu’s hair, of the water in the Seomjin river and of the added filter used in Ryu’s apartment. This colour assists in creating a clear difference in the classes the two protagonists belong to. While Ryu is of the working blue-collar class, Dong-jin is upper middle class. This distinction is presented in a variety of ways. The first half of the film explores this difference in terms of who the audience should feel sympathetic towards. Ryu, being a deaf-mute working at a factory to provide for his ill sister is easier to sympathise with than Dong-jin, which is at first presented as a high-standing member of society, who cares very little for his workers. This is especially proven in an early scene of the film. The audience’s first glimpse of Dong-jin is when Ryu and Young-mi discuss the possible kidnapping of Yu-sun. Dong-jin is introduced as a man of wealth, proven by his expensive car and through his friend complaining that he cannot afford to buy his own daughter the same phone as Dong-jin has purchased for Yu-sun. As Dong-jin’s car pulls up towards his house, it is stopped by a man in the road. The two men step out of the car, followed by the two young girls in the backseat. Yu-sun is holding several red balloons with the T.G.I. Friday’s logo written on them, the logo of an American chain restaurant. It becomes clear that the man on the road is one of Dong-jin’s employees and he complains over the fact that he barely earns enough money to keep his family alive. He proceeds to pull out a knife and slices his stomach several times in protest. Dong-jin reacts by attacking the man further, possibly in an attempt to keep his daughter safe. While this action might be considered a heroic one, as he wishes to save his daughter from the man, it is also affecting the audience’s

way of looking at him. Instead of helping the man who is so desperate for aid, he further attacks him, making it difficult to feel sympathetic towards him at this point in the narration. This is also due to the conversation between Ryu and Young-mi which is happening simultaneously. They are discussing how much easier the wealthy have it and how they treat people of a lower class with less respect. In an interview with Seana Sperling, Park was cited, stating that, as opposed to *JSA*, in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* he “focused on the class struggles within South Korea. I wanted to show the animosity between the classes. Blue-collar workers always think that they are being taken advantage of, but owners aren’t always bad people. However, there is an impossible gap between being a good person and a good businessman in a Capitalist system. If a company isn’t doing well, the good person will try to lay-off only a few people instead of closing down and putting many out of work. In the film this action backfires. One of the men commits suicide because of the lay-offs and then his family kill themselves. This happens in Korean society and we need to be aware of it,” (cited on 16.01.2004). At a later point in the film, after the death of Yu-sun, Dong-jin mentions that the economy has in fact also affected him. He tells the police officer that questions him that after the economy crashed, his wife left him. This tells us much about the South Korean society and how social and economic status plays a vital part in their culture; now that Dong-jin is struggling financially, his wife will not stay with him and it has been required of him that he makes hard decisions which leaves people without work. However different the two are in class, it is juxtaposed by their mutual desire for vengeance. Park manages to show that despite their differences, they are ultimately the same. Their desire for revenge is fuelled by traumatic incidents; for Ryu, the need takes root with him being double crossed by the organ traffickers, and then his focus shifts towards Dong-jin after the death of Young-mi; for Dong-jin it begins with the kidnapping and death of his daughter. The divide between the two protagonists can also be found through Park’s usage of colours. Ryu’s hair and the hue of green which most his shots are filtered stands as a thorough contrast to the reds that surround Dong-jin. As stated, it is possible to connect the reds within the film to capitalism and the class divide. The first time the audience is introduced to Ryu he becomes instantly recognisable because of his green hair, but also, the factory he works in is covered in green light. This makes Ryu not merely stand out from the other workers, but it connotes that he belongs to the working class, he blends in with his surroundings. Director Park stated that Ryu’s hair colour stems from his “desire for self-expression, but because he can’t speak, he always has to suppress that [...] His strongly dyed hair helped give this film a bit of a fantastic and surreal atmosphere,” (Kim, 2007: Loc 1308).

It is important also to note that Yu-sun refers to Ryu as ‘Oppa’. This word translates to ‘older brother’, however, it is not merely used for older males of blood relation as it is in the west. The word Oppa is used as a term of respect and one that symbolises a close bond between two people. This term is only used by younger females towards males who are not too much older than themselves. Younger females refer to older females as ‘Unnie’, younger males refer to older males as ‘Hyung’, and older females as ‘Noona’. This is mainly due to the fact that South Korea still exists as a partly Confucian society. One of Confucius’ five moral disciplines was that “the younger should give precedence to the elder” (Asia-Pacific-Connections, 2000-2008). The usage of words such as Oppa clearly show that there are still traces of an age-related hierarchy within South Korea. However, this is not visible in the English translation of the film. When Yu-Sun yells ‘Oppa’ as she is drowning, the subtitles have translated it into ‘Ryu’. Thus, the English translation loses something vital. Yu-Sun does not view Ryu as a dangerous man, but rather he is one she trusts. She does not know the potential danger she is in because Ryu has made sure the kidnapping is a ‘good one’. Young-mi mentions this, that there are two types of kidnappings; good ones and bad ones. She explains that the ‘good kidnappings’ always end with positive results as it brings families closer and no one gets hurt. However, as the story progresses, it is clear that this does not happen and Yu-sun has put her faith in the wrong person.

### 3.7 – Aesthetic symbolism

An important natural element in the film is water, an element that has also been crucial in Park’s later work *Oldboy*, which will be discussed in the following chapter. Ryu’s sister takes her own life in the bath tub, and Yu-Sun drowns in the Seomjin River as Ryu buries his sister. The film’s finale also takes place by, and in, the river. The two contrast colours, red and green, are both present in all the water sequences. The water in the bath is bright red from Ryu’s sister’s blood, while the image itself is tainted by a green filter; Yu-sun is wearing a red dress and Park shoots a close-up of her, half of her body above water, the red dress showing, and the other half submerged under green algae water; and finally, the end sequence sees two examples of this mix of colours in the water. Firstly, Ryu’s bright green hair is in deep contrast with his bloodstained lip and red sports jacket, and secondly, Ryu’s blood leaves a trail behind him and Dong-Jin as the latter drags the former back to shore. In South Korea, the

colour green can symbolise spring, in other words a new beginning, yet it can also symbolise putrefaction. The above mentioned scenes all share the same plot point; death. It is possible that Park uses the two contrasting colours as a means of, once again, communicating the issues with capitalism. This is further suggested in that the red elements within the scenes, apart from in Yu-Sun's death, is mainly provided by spilled blood.

Park incorporates so-called B-films aesthetics in his shots to convey a sense of non-realism, adding a humoristic effect to the otherwise serious themes. For instance, when Ryu is seeking vengeance upon the organ traffic dealers, he walks in on the woman and one of her sons, the latter forcing himself upon one of their other, assumingly, victims. As the man walks up to Ryu to attack, Ryu runs towards him and stabs him in the neck with a screwdriver. Despite being warned by his mother not to remove the tool he pulls it out, resulting in a hard stream of blood spraying out of the man's neck. The shot is highly hyperbolic and gory, not unlike scenes typically found in 1970's and 1980's horror features. Park also creates a form of non-realism by using a cartoon character to foreshadow events within the film. Ryu and Yu-sun are watching a cartoon programme on the television when Ryu discovers that his sister has committed suicide. As he cries by her dead body, Park cuts to a shot from the cartoon showing an animated animal drowning, a rock tied to its tail. As the animal drowns it attempts to scream, but it is unable to make a sound, not unlike Ryu, who also is only able to shout in silent distress. Shortly after this event, Yu-sun drowns in the river as Ryu covers the body of his sister in rocks. As mentioned, Ryu is unable to hear Yu-sun's cries for help, which again draws a clear line between the animated scene and the filmic reality.

While the film has been supported by Western audiences, there has been little participation by fans on artistic levels. It is possible to find a small selection of fan art and edited pictures on the blogging website *Tumblr* (2016b), however the fans have mostly turned to internet forums to discuss the feature. With *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, director Park has created a story that ties the nation's violent and economically challenged past to the narration, yet South Korean audiences have been critical to the stylised aesthetics and the filmmaker's reliance on violent depictions. In contrast, Euro-American audiences have appreciated the film for those exact reasons, focusing on the visual elements rather than the signified concepts specific to South Korean history and society presented through the feature. It is important to note that

while the film has proven successful amongst Western fans of Asia Extreme films, it has not reached the same level of acceptance as the next film Park was to release, *Oldboy*.



## Chapter 4

### *OLDBOY*

In 2003, a year after *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* was originally released and was making its way around the festival circuit, *Oldboy* premiered in South Korea. Like its predecessor, this Park Chan-wook film was screened at several film festivals around the world, and it rapidly became a favourite for critics, both foreign and domestic. The film is based on a Japanese Manga series which was released in Japan between 1996 and 1998, and was remade for American audiences in 2014 by director Spike Lee. Despite the fact that the film is based on a Japanese Manga series, I have chosen to analyse the film as an individual work rather than an adaptation. This is partially due to the difference in the media of which the stories are presented, but mainly it is due to the creative changes made by Park. In an interview, the director stated there were several aspects of the original text he could not use due to them being rooted in Japanese culture (Choi, 08.06.2008). As I am searching for the signs particular to South Korean culture and history, the film will not be compared to the Manga.

#### 4.1 – Plot synopsis

The story follows a man named Oh Dae-su (Choi Min-sik), who mostly spends his time drinking and causing havoc. One day, after having been bailed out of a police holding station for a Drunk and Disorderly charge, Dae-su is kidnapped, and for 15 years he is kept prisoned in a room, without knowing who put him there, or why. During the course of his imprisonment, Dae-su's only connection to the outside world is the television set up in his room. Via this media outlet he learns that he has been falsely accused of murdering his wife. Dae-su's captor has been able to do this by using a sleeping gas on the man and extracting items with Dae-su's fingerprints on them, and leaving them at the crime scene. Slowly, Dae-su sinks into madness and he begins hallucinating insects around him, in particular ants. As time passes, Dae-su regains his focus and decides to seek vengeance upon his captor if he ever is to be released, thus he spends his days training for the day he will confront the mysterious

person. While in prison, however, Dae-su is regularly hypnotised by a woman, training him to react upon certain visual and audio clues. One day Dae-su is released, and he finds himself left on a roof top, wearing new, and seemingly expensive, attire. As Dae-su wanders through the city streets he is given a telephone and a wallet filled with money by a seemingly homeless person. The man informs Dae-su that it is pointless to ask any questions as he knows nothing, he was simply paid to make this delivery to Dae-su. Dae-su enters a restaurant where he encounters a young sushi chef, Mido (Kang Hye-jeong). The pair engage in a brief conversation before Dae-su receives a call from his captor. Not long after, he passes out and is brought to the home of Mido, who nurses him back to health, and later assists him in his search for the restaurant that provided him with Chinese dumplings during the course of his imprisonment. Once Dae-su locates the correct restaurant, he follows a delivery driver to the building in which he was held captive, and with the help of a hammer he extracts the prison leader's teeth and fights the numerous men guarding the cells in order to escape. As he leaves the building he passes out on the street from blood-loss and exhaustion, and is placed in a car by a man who audiences soon discover is Dae-su's captor, Lee Woo-jin (Yoo Ji-tae). Dae-su tracks Woo-jin down and attempts to murder him, but he is told that Woo-jin is in possession of a remote control that is able to switch off his pacemaker and kill him instantly, leaving Dae-su with a choice; does he want to murder his captor, or find out why he was imprisoned? Or as Woo-jin puts it; does he want revenge or the truth?

Dae-su decides he wants to discover the truth behind his captivity and Woo-jin informs him that he has a mere five days to do so. Mido and Dae-su engage in a relationship of romantic nature, and after they sleep together for the first time, Woo-jin poisons the pair with a sleeping gas in order to enter their bedroom unnoticed. As the pair wake up they discover a purple box containing the hand of the prison leader which, in turn, leads to their discovery of them having been under Woo-jin's surveillance. This fuels Dae-su in his search for the truth and, in order to protect Mido, he locks her in the same building where he spent the past 15 years of his life. Together with his friend Joo-hwan (Ji Dae-han), Dae-su discovers that he and Woo-jin attended school together. While in high school, Dae-su learnt that Woo-jin had an incestuous relationship with his sister and spread the rumour to his friends. The result of this rumour was Woo-jin's sister's death and Dae-su detects that this is the reason behind his imprisonment. He manages to find the building in which Woo-jin resides and confronts him, only to be informed that Mido is in fact Dae-su's own daughter. Dae-su desperately attempts



to persuade Woo-jin not to inform Mido of the truth behind their relationship, and offers himself as a servant to Woo-jin in return for his silence. Woo-jin laughs at Dae-su's offer, so the latter concludes that the only way for him to atone for his sins against Woo-jin, is to ensure that he can no longer spread rumours, thus he cuts off his tongue. In response, Woo-jin walks away and as he enters the elevator, a flashback is presented, showing the details of his sister's suicide, young Woo-jin holding on to her before she jumps off of a bridge and into the water below. As Dae-su has managed to answer adult Woo-jin's questions, the latter concludes that his quest for vengeance is complete and shoots himself dead. The next scene displays Dae-su being hypnotised by the woman who performed the same act on him while he was incarcerated, removing from his mind the truth behind his relationship with Mido. The latter appears and the pair stand together on a snowy mountain top, peering into the distance as the credits begin to roll.

## 4.2 - Reception

*Oldboy* is feasibly the most commonly known, and best received, of the films within the trilogy, particularly in Western communities. The film holds an approval rate on IMDb.com of 8.4, with 25.5 percent of all the votes giving it a perfect ten (2016e). Jung writes: "Even though *Oldboy* was released through only twenty art-house cinemas in the UK, in eight weeks, following its first screening on October 15, 2004, it earned more than US\$539,000," (2011: 124). He continues, stating that the film was also highly successful in South Korea, and sold more than 3.1 million tickets across the country (2011:124). Taylor-Jones writes that "it was *Oldboy*'s macabre, violent and highly transgressive narrative that saw Park become one of the most well-known and popular South Korean directors on the international circuit," (2013: 123), which might be mostly due to the recognition it received during the Cannes Film Festival in 2004, where it was nominated for the Palme d'Or award and won the Grand Prix Jury Award. The president of the Cannes Film Festival Jury in 2004 was the acclaimed director Quentin Tarantino, who had previously praised Park for his work as a filmmaker. The two filmmakers met at the festival, and when asked about what the pair had discussed, Park stated that Tarantino was enthusiastic and throughout their two-hour long conversation, "he said as much [...] as most people would in a whole day," (Young, 11.10.2004). The film was also recognized on the domestic award circuit, particularly during the Grand Bell Awards

where the film was awarded Best Director, Best Actor: Choi Min-sik, Best Music; Jo Yeong-wook, Best editor; Kim Sang-beom and Best Lighting; Park Hyun-won (Taylor-Jones, 2013: 138).

While *Oldboy* saw its domestic release in South Korea in 2003, it did not reach the international market until 2004. According to Box Office Mojo, the three biggest box office hits of that year were *Shrek 2*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Spiderman 2* (2016a), all three films sequels to already large franchises. Though between them they vary greatly in theme and style, they are both similarities and differences between them and *Oldboy*. The one that sets itself most apart is *Shrek 2*, a family friendly animation film by DreamWorks. The film uses a comedic language along with a colourful animation style, which gives it a light, humorous tone. The other two films, in contrast, present darker themes more similar to *Oldboy*, still they are more confined by the Euro-American way of making films, where continuity editing is often taken in use to make the narration flow smoothly. In contrast, Park Chan-wook often reminds the audiences that *Oldboy* is, in fact, a film. He achieves this by suddenly stripping away the ‘reality’ of the shots. He often uses birds eye view shot at an angle, making the frames distorted. At the film’s climax, as Woo-jin reveals his story and plan for vengeance to Dae-su, Park uses a split screen of the two characters and ultimately their faces are superimposed, suggesting that the two are morally similar.

*Oldboy* has scored high on both Rotten Tomatoes and on the Internet Movie Database, the former giving the film a score of 80 percent on the tomato meter. The audience approval rate on the same site is at 94 percent (2016b), while users of IMDb have scored the film 8.4. Similar to the first feature of Park’s *Vengeance Trilogy*, *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, there are mostly males between the ages 18-44 who have cast their votes and rated the film on the Internet Movie Database. Together they represent 232.842 of the 290.828 total votes where gender is specified, however, the film has a larger female following than the predecessor in the trilogy. Females of the same age group represent 32.468 of the total votes. In total, 254.955 of the votes were from male viewers, and 35.873 were from females (2016e). Here, the female voters represent 12.3 percent of the votes, a slight increase from the earlier film in the series. The film has over 800 user reviews on IMDb, and one by author Nils Meester from the Netherlands has the headline “If only we were all living in Asia...”. The author of the text

compliments the visual aspects of the film, stating: “When it comes to screenplay Park Chan-Wook is unique (at least for western standards) in his way of filming. The colours are so vivid and it seems like he wanted every shot to be a piece of art,”. He also states, in reference to the official IMDb top 250 list: “I really appreciate this film being respected as it should be, by having a place in the top 250. If, however, it was up to me it would be even higher in the ranking. I don't see why films like *The Usual Suspects* or *Memento* [...] are higher in the top 250 than *Oldboy*'. [...] The one and only reason is that those two films are better known and from a western production company. If we were all living in Asia, no doubt *Oldboy* would be in the top 20 of all time,” (19.12.2007). Another user, screen name Ryuakamrvengence, wrote: “*Oldboy* takes a hammer and "batters" its American equivalents, leaving them as pulped as a chewed up squid. Park Chan Wook displays what America misses with his ultra-stylish, ultra-violent thriller,” (07.03.2007). This user likewise claims that Park Chan-wook sets himself apart from the Hollywood blockbusters that were popular in the Western communities at the time. He also chooses to bring forward the lead actor Choi Min-sik, setting him as a contrast to American actor Ben Affleck who “spectacularly [fails]to summon any displayable talent,”. This person’s username is also a direct reference to Park’s earlier film, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, something which thus suggests that the user is incorporating his fandom into his everyday life. Similar to the reviews for *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, these two commentators present *Oldboy* as an alternative to Hollywood blockbusters due to the stylistic content, the quality of acting, and violent aspects. However, they do not speak of the symbolism and history found in the plot and mise-en-scène, it is therefore possible to conclude that the average viewer of *Oldboy* in the Euro-American region does not seek social commentary from these films. Simultaneously, it is also quite possible to assume that the average viewer fetishizes South Korean and other East Asian cinema simply because, in their eyes, it offers an ‘other’, something ‘different’.

The fans of *Oldboy* have actively shown their support for the film, not merely through the IMDb comment section, but also through other forums. Several fans have cosplayed (abbreviation of the words Costume Play) as the characters and added pictures of themselves in costume to online forums such as DevianArt and Tumblr, and the website Carboncostume.com also links to other web sites that sell all that is required to reproduce Oh Dae-su’s look, including a suit, a theatre knife, a hammer, theatre blood and a wig. The site also presents a still picture of Oh Dae-su holding a hammer, taken from the corridor fighting

sequence (CarbonCostume, 11.10.2013). The popular art site DevianArt displays 324 results when searching for *Oldboy*, and amongst the art it is possible to find drawings of Dae-su, Mido, and the other characters (DevianArt Search, 08.03.2016). Seemingly most popular to recreate in art are the corridor fighting scene and Dae-su's consumption of a live octopus. The personal blogging site Tumblr also has a variation of fan edits, mainly in the form of GIF- and still image sets. These combinations of pictures and GIFs, however, are a bit more varied, ranging from the sentimental and the tragedies within the narration, to the more grotesque violent scenes, and to the sexual sequences featured in the film (Tumblr Search, 2016a). Here, the fans have worked directly with the source material and edited it, rather than creating unique works of art.

#### 4.3 – Similarities to Hollywood features

As mentioned in the chapter on *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, there are clear Euro-American references in Park Chan-wook's work. This is also true for *Oldboy*, and again, it is possible to draw lines between the film and the work of Alfred Hitchcock. Voyeurism is a recurring theme throughout the film, as parts of the story are being told through the eye of an in-frame camera, for instance through surveillance cameras. Once Dae-su finds the building he was held captive in he learns that his entire time spent in captivity has been recorded. Through this, he detects that the person who ordered his incarceration must also have been recorded prior to his imprisonment, which leads to him finding an important clue to the mystery; a tape with Woo-jin's voice explaining that Dae-su *talks too much*. The plotline is thus pushed forward through the use of cameras and other recording devices, such as audio recorders. Another example is the young Woo-jin's use of his camera. As Dae-su starts to remember his past and how he first met Woo-jin, the latter is shown holding a camera, taking pictures of his sister as she undresses. The audience also partially witness Woo-jin's sister's suicide through his photo camera as she looks directly into it as she falls backwards off the rail of the bridge and into the water below. As part of the memory sequences are hidden by Woo-jin's camera, it can be suggested that Park incorporated this element as a means of displaying that memory is subjective and often distorted. Similarly, the truth behind Mido and Dae-su's relationship is revealed through a photo album. Park Chan-wook's use of the camera as part of the narrative can be linked to Hitchcock's film, *Rear Window* (1954).

It is also possible to assume that the scenes involving ants are linked to Western film history. The audience's first glimpse of the ants is when they are emerging from within Dae-su's skin, crawling all over his body. It is plausible that the ants are portraying his isolation and increasing madness as he first sees the ants after hearing the news of his wife's death (Taylor-Jones, 2013: 141). Later in the film, a cut scene portrays Mido sitting on an underground carriage, an ant staring at her, smoking a cigarette. It is reasonable to suggest that the use of ants within the film is a filmic reference to Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), where a shot of a hand covered in ants is presented. At the time of Buñuel and Dalí's film's release, surrealist features were seen as an alternative to the classical Hollywood film making which was emerging at the time, something it is clear that fans of Park's work are in search for.

#### 4.4 – The importance of names

Similar to western names, South Korean names also possess a meaning, given names and surnames alike. The name Lee Woo-jin can be analysed as to having a greater meaning for the plot. Lee is today one of the most common surnames in South Korea, alongside Kim and Park. In 1980, it was reported that 22 percent of the South Korean population had Kim for a surname, 15 percent Lee, and 8.5 percent Park (Savada & Shaw, 1992: 102). The reason for these names being so common is dated back approximately 2000 years, when the Korean population was divided into clans, or *tongjok*'s. Each *tongjok* had a separate surname from other *tongjok*'s and the largest where the Kim's, Lee's, and Park's. The main purpose of this division was to ensure that no two persons with the same last name could wed (Savada & Shaw, 1992: 102), now, however, it is often considered a source of pride of your ancestry. When asked about his frequent use of the surname 'Lee' in his films, Park stated: "That stems from my feeling about this particular name. "Lee" is simple both in writing and pronunciation. This simplicity evokes a sense of purity, cleanliness and naivety – an image of something undecorated, unadorned," (Choi, 2008). The fact that Woo-jin's surname is Lee might be a testimony to Park's fondness for irony, as the name is used for the antagonist of the story. While Woo-jin does is not presented as a morally pure man, he is, however, presented as a meticulous man, one who is quite focused on keeping a clean and pure image.

Park Chan-wook has also stated that Oh Dae-su's name is of great importance. He explained that he chose to name the main character this in order for the audience to think of Oedipus, something which would suggest already at the film's opening that there would be Oedipal themes covered within the film. During the montage depicting Dae-su being held in a police station, he mentions that his name means 'he who gets along with people'. It is possible to assume that Park intended this to also serve as a kind of humorous irony, due to Dae-su's unwillingness to obey the policemen's orders and him causing a disturbance at the station.

#### 4.5 – Representation of class

In similar fashion to *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, *Oldboy* presents a great divide between the classes. There is Dae-su, who represent the lower class, and Woo-jin, who represents the upper class. In this film, however, the presentation of the upper class is handled differently than in the first film in the trilogy. Woo-jin has a rather fantastical way about him, something which is particularly evident near the film's climax. A long shot portrays the character lying on his stomach in his luxury apartment, and slowly his legs go upwards until he somewhat resembles a scorpion. Of the sequence, Park Chan-wook explained that the pose "is intended to show him as a man beyond the realm of the ordinary. It is a beautiful and sacred pose, conveying the image of Apollo, based on a polytheistic religion like that of India or ancient Greece," (cited in Choi, 08.06.2008). There is also a distance set between the character and the audiences in the way Park has chosen to present him on the screen. The audience first see Woo-jin as Dae-su faints on the street after the fight in the corridor. Woo-jin's face is completely hidden by his hat until it is abruptly revealed through a close up, lasting no longer than a couple of seconds. The young Woo-jin is, as aforementioned, mostly shown with a camera covering his facial features, and the older Woo-jin is often looking in mirrors, letting the audiences see his reflection. The appearance of mirrors within films is often used as a method of showing that a character is morally divided. In Woo-jin's case, it can be said that he harbours a deep pain after the death of his sister, a vicious anger towards Dae-su, and also a desire to make everything right again, to find peace within himself. A different way Park wished to uphold the distance between character and audience was by comparing Woo-jin to Frankenstein's monster. In a scene, which was edited out of the final cut, Dae-su was sitting in his cell, watching *Bride of Frankenstein*. Park explained: "There's a scene where the

monster destroys everything in which a high tower collapses. So I wanted to give an analogy between the high tower which collapses, and the high tower in which Lee Woo-jin shuts himself,” (cited in Young, 23.03.2004). This scene would have further reminded the audiences that the character has no base in reality, as he is firmly compared to the fictional character of Frankenstein’s Monster.

The difference in class is also presented through the *mise-en-scène* within the living spaces of Mido and Woo-jin. Mido’s living area is cluttered and colourful, whereas Woo-jin’s is quite the opposite. There is a dark ambiance over the minimalistic apartment Woo-jin resides in. Of Woo-jin’s apartment, Park stated: “I wanted to give the space a feeling of emptiness. Although it is a large space where only the rich can afford to live, I wanted the audience to think: OK, it’s a rich, large space, but I don’t want to live in such a place: dry, empty concrete space,” (cited in Young, 23.03.2004). As mentioned, Mido’s apartment presents a large contrast, and one feature in particular is important to note; the wall paper. The walls are similar to the ones within Dae-su’s prison cell, which brings forth two important plot points. Firstly, it demonstrates that there is a connection between all three characters, one that is deeper than first meets the eye. One can assume that the wall paper is so suggestive because Park wishes to subtly hint towards the fact that Mido has been a vital pawn in Woo-jin’s game from the start. Secondly, it is also possible that the walls are decorated in that particular fashion in order to further create a sense of imprisonment for the characters, that they are stuck playing Woo-jin’s game. Park himself stated that the pattern within the prison cell is important. He explained: “I wanted to say, ‘There are no exits, we can’t get out of here,’” (cited in Choi, 08.06.2008). Lastly, Park has stated that he wished to shy away from the stereotype that the poorer communities live in terrible conditions compared to the wealthier population: “In every country, including Korea, you can find a visually astonishing and unique beauty in slums and poorer communities. This beauty is not created by professors and world-renowned architects, but cobbled together out of mismatched furniture or wall paper as time goes on. It’s easy to overlook. [...] everyone has a unique personality and ability, so I’m doing my best not to simplify this fact,” (cited in Choi, 08.06.2008). Park gives character to Mido’s apartment in order to give life to the person residing in it, giving Mido, and through her, Dae-su, more dimensions and levels of personality than Woo-jin, who is solely driven by his desire for revenge.

A third way the class difference is presented is through the physical actions of the characters. Dae-su is primitive in nature, resorting to his senses to help him find answers. As he is released by his captor, Dae-su encounters a man on top of a building. Without speaking a word, he begins smelling the man, using not only his sense of sight to identify the male. In order to discover which restaurant provided him with dumplings for the past 15 years, Dae-su resorts to his sense of taste, reminding the audience that since he has eaten the same food item for more than a decade, he is more likely to achieve faster results by using his mouth. While captive, Dae-su begins training for physical fights in anticipation of being released, waiting for the day when he can challenge his captor, in other words, he relies on brute strength to achieve his final goal: vengeance. His primitive nature is further enforced upon audiences in a scene that takes place in Mido's apartment. Immediately after the pair meet, she brings him to her home after he has fainted in her restaurant. She informs him that she is in need of using the toilet and brings with her a knife as the lock is broken, warning him that he will be hurt if he tries to enter without her permission. Just as she has removed her underwear and seated herself, Dae-su enters and attempts to sexually force himself on her. She manages to hit him hard with the back of the knife until he stops, and leaves her be. This form of sexual primitivism is also visible immediately after his release, when he masturbates in an elevator at the first sight of a female. Dae-su's sexually primitive tendencies might be a trait he developed during his 15 years in imprisonment, however, it is also possible to assume that it serves as a reminder of his position in comparison with Woo-jin; Woo-jin is the upper-class hunter, Dae-su is the lower-class animal. Lastly, rather than a gun or a knife, he uses a tool, more specifically a hammer, to attack the prison guards. Woo-jin, on the other hand, is more reserved in his actions. For the most part, he does not physically play a participatory role in the events that occur, he uses his financial status to persuade others to take action on his command. The most notable example of this is his bodyguard. Whenever Woo-jin is in physical danger, his bodyguard intervenes and fights on his behalf. The fact that he paid his doctor for the option to turn off his pacemaker also works as a protection method, insuring that Dae-su will not be able to physically harm him. Within the course of the film, there are only two occurrences of Woo-jin participating in physical conflict, the first being when Joo-hwan insults the memory of his sister. Woo-jin reacts to the situation by breaking a CD in pieces and stabbing the other male multiple times. The other occurrence takes place during the final act of the film. As Woo-jin stands in the elevator after Dae-su's confrontation, he remembers his sister's suicide. The flashback is interrupted by the sound of a gun firing, and



Park cuts to a shot of Woo-jin falling to his death. While it is not a physically clean death, it is a quick and simple one, one that requires no physical exhaustion.

#### 4.6 – Social context

Oh Dae-su is kept imprisoned for 15 years before his sudden release, and there may be two possible explanations as to why. Firstly, it was vital for Woo-jin's plan to succeed that Mido was old enough to engage in sexual relations with Dae-su. Park confirms this when asked about the duration of Dae-su's imprisonment, stating: "[...] it is the time it takes until Mido, his daughter, is grown up so that Lee Woo-jin's vengeance can be accomplished," (cited in Choi, 08.06.2008). Secondly, and just as importantly, the statute of limitations in South Korea, which includes murder cases, was at the time of the film's release 15 years. In 2007, it was extended to 25 years, and as of 2016, the statute of limitations no longer includes murder cases (scmp.com, 25.07.2015). During the montage of Dae-su's imprisonment, the audience witness him being drugged by gas, and while he is asleep, his room is tidied up. A scene shows a glass being taken from the room, and not long after, a news report regarding the murder of Dae-su's wife is played on the television in his room. The news reporter states that Dae-su is the main suspect as a glass with his DNA on it was found at the crime scene. It is possible to assume that Woo-jin orchestrated this in order to alienate Dae-su completely from his old friends, ensuring that they will not search for him while he is imprisoned. This statute of limitations can also further explain the exact time of Dae-su's time away from society. In order for Woo-jin to extract his revenge on Dae-su, he requires the authorities to stay clear of the path. In the United States, for instance, there is no statute of limitations when it comes to murder cases, which quite possibly could have shortened, or lengthened, the period of time Dae-su spent locked away from society (FindLaw, 2016).

An important theme within the film is the concept of time. This becomes evident early in the film, as the opening sequence bears a visual resemblance to that of a digital clock. During Dae-su's imprisonment, the passage of time is presented through the television set in his room. Park uses a montage of important historical events, both domestic and international, to give impression of time passing. The footage shows, amongst other events, the transformation

of South Korean politics from a repressed police-state dictatorship to a democratic nation and the terror attack against America, more concrete the attack on New York on the eleventh of September, 2001. Even though Park stated that he did not intend for audiences to see the montage as a comment on the social and political development within South Korea (Young, 23.03.2004), it is still important to see the sequence within its social context. Not only did South Korea go from a military state to a democratic republic while Dae-su was incarcerated, the country was also faced with an economic crisis. This crisis is evident within the characters and their place within society, as previously discussed, through Park's depiction of class.

It is also important to here note the one-take fighting sequence between Dae-su and the prison wardens. As mentioned, Dae-su chooses a hammer as his weapon, and the numerous people he is in fight with use sticks and small knives in return. This is not merely to add length and drama to the scene, it is also a testimony of the strict rules against firearms within South Korea. Despite all South Korean men being drafted for military service, and thus they learn how to operate a firearm, the number of civilians owning such a weapon is very low. Kim Young-won notes that "In Korea, gun possession is prohibited except for soldiers, police officers, hunters and other specially licensed people. However, civilians can hold air guns with a calibre of 0.20 (50 mm) or smaller," (21.04.2013). Na Jeong-Ju further comments that while ordinary South Korean citizens are allowed to be in possession of a hunting weapon, it is only permitted to be used during the hunting season. Outside said season, they are advised to keep their guns at their local police station. He also notes that it is illegal to advertise for firearms and ammunition, and that "manufacturing arms, ammunition and their components is permitted only if the maker holds a license," (25.01.2013). Keeping this in mind, it is simple to understand the logic behind Oh Dae-su's weapon of choice. He would not be able to acquire a firearm firstly due to his time limit of five days, and secondly because he has previously been accused of murdering his wife. Because of this gun restriction, it is also reasonable that the men working at the prison are not in possession of any firearms. Of course, this is not to say that Park Chan-wook necessarily made this creative decision purely based on the rules of his country, it is also possible that he intended for the scene to serve as a way for audiences to further empathize with Dae-su. This will be further discussed later in the chapter.

## 4.7 – Aesthetics

Water is an important element in *Oldboy*, something that also recurs through Park's other works. Woo-jin's apartment contains a small body of water, of which Park stated: "I provided water to give a bit of an 'accent' to the space. Water is often used in films to symbolise life – creation of life. In my film the water is used to symbolise the water in which a certain person has drowned," (cited in Young, 23.03.3004). The certain person Park is referring to in the above comment is Woo-jin's sister, Soo-ah. This shows that Woo-jin is not able to rid himself of the guilt and sadness her death brought him, but it also plays an important part during the film's climax. Dae-su cuts out his tongue as a symbol of his regret for spreading the rumour that led to Soo-ah's death and spits his blood into the pool of water. By knowing the reason why Woo-jin's apartment contains this pool, the sequence creates a new meaning. The analytic mind could easily assume that the red blood mixing with the green water represents the fusion of life and death, that both Dae-su and Woo-jin are living in a state of limbo, a place between the realm of life and afterlife. One can also assume that the scene is meant to represent the purification of Dae-su, that he is being forgiven for his sins as his blood is purified by the water. However, seeing as the water represents something even deeper within the filmic space, it is possible to assume that Dae-su's blood blending itself with what can ultimately be seen as Soo-ah's blood, Woo-jin is finally able to feel that his quest for vengeance has come to an end, that Dae-su's morality and pureness is taken from him.

Park uses small visual clues in order to foreshadow the narrative. For instance, as Woo-jin remembers the day his sister committed suicide, his hand forms into the shape of a gun after he lets go of her hand, hinting to the audience both that a part of him died that day, and also that he will shoot himself dead after his ploy for vengeance is completed. The flashback sequence is also composed exactly as the opening shot of the film, where Dae-su holds a man up by his tie as he is about to jump off the roof of a building. The camera is placed at a high angle, showing the man in a medium shot, his face contorted with anxiety and desperation. Dae-su's outstretched arm is also visible as it is grabbing the man's tie. Despite the exact same composition in the flashback scene, a high angle shot of Woo-jin's arm grabbing his sister, there are two crucial differences. Firstly, Woo-jin is holding on to Soo-ah's arm, depicting an act of love compared to Dae-su's more threatening hold of the man on the roof

top. Secondly, Soo-ah's face does not express sadness or anxiety, rather it expresses peace and relief. While the composition can function as a foreshadowing of Soo-ah's suicide, it also connotes that Woo-jin has found peace, as he remembers his sister, and his quest for vengeance is over. Park also uses colour and light to bring the plot forward, particularly violet. Taylor-Jones explains: "Lee uses violet as the colour to wrap the information that he gives to Oh; these purple boxes serve as harbingers of distress since the first one contained a severed hand and the second one contains the photo album of Mido. In the end sequence when Mido sits before the box, the colour reflects on her face, evoking the fact that if this box is opened her entire life will be marked by it forever," (2013: 144). Early in the film, as Oh Dae-su is at the police station, he shows the officers a pair of angel wings he intends on giving his daughter for her birthday. The audience see him with the wings tied around his shoulders as he is bobbing his arms in order to create an illusion of the wings in flight. The significance of these wings is not clear until later in the film, when Dae-su learns the truth of his incestuous relationship with Mido. As Woo-jin speaks, Park cuts to a shot of adult Mido, the wings tied around her shoulders as she moves her arms just as Dae-su did earlier in the film. This is not merely used as a way to tie the story together and force the filmic truth upon the viewers, it also illustrates Mido's position within Woo-jin's game of vengeance. She is innocent and pure, just like a child, and Dae-su is willing to do whatever is necessary to keep it that way. Similarly, her innocence is portrayed through her pale skin being tainted by the violet of the box in which the photo album arrives in. Building on Taylor-Jones' theory of how the box holds the power to change her life, it is also possible that, if opened, the box will also change her morality; if she knows the truth, her innocence will be lost and it is not unlikely that she, too, will be driven to madness.

Perhaps one of the most infamous scenes within the film is Dae-su's consumption of a live octopus. Almost immediately after his release, Dae-su enters a sushi restaurant and specifically asks for something that is alive. The chef, Mido, brings him a live octopus and offers to cut it in slices for him. Before she has a chance to do so, however, Dae-su begins to engulf the octopus, the animal slithering on his face as he chews. While it is not entirely uncommon to consume live octopi in South Korea, it is not usual to consume them whole. For this reason, the scene did not only shock the Western audiences, but also the South Korean viewers. Taylor-Jones suggests that Dae-su's desire for eating an octopus while it is still alive stems from the last 15 years spent in captivity. She writes: "The eating of a live octopus is the

direct opposite to the last fifteen years of bland Chinese dumplings consumed in front of the television in that it is raw, uncooked and is devoid of links to the highly controlled environment in which he has resided over the years in captivity,” (2013: 142). While it is a plausible explanation, it is also possible to suggest that the scene acts as a representation of the life Dae-su is about to lead; one filled with pain, horror, and ultimately, death. Though both Dae-su and Mido are alive as the film reaches its conclusion, their innocence and Dae-su’s memories are, figuratively, dead. The sequence can also be seen as a representation of Dae-su’s primitive nature. He does not wait for Mido to cut his meal for him, rather he engulfs it as soon as it is given to him. Park stated in an interview that: “Eating is more a basic act than any other in human life. How and what people eat shows who they are,” (cited in Choi, 2008).

In addition to artistic imagery, Park relies heavily upon non-diegetic voice-overs within the film. Oh Dae-su’s voice-overs allows the audience to enter his inner monologue throughout the film, which provides them with further narrative information, for instance that he is released upon the exact location as where he was abducted. This hints at just how meticulously Woo-jin has been planning to extract his revenge upon Dae-su (Thanouli, 2009: 228). The use of voice-overs also permits the audiences to further empathize with the character Dae-su. In contrast to the distance set between the spectators and Woo-jin through long shots and hidden facial features, Dae-su’s voice-over shows his struggle with his quest, his regrets of the past and his anger towards his captor. This allows the viewers to feel sympathetic towards Dae-su’s inner hardships and to cheer him on in his pursuit for vengeance.

There is a large contrast in the sense of reality when it comes to the scenes set in Dae-su and Woo-jin’s memories. The colours are far less vivid, presenting a more realistic view of the natural surroundings. However, the scenes are not without unrealistic elements. As aforementioned, Park Chan-wook plays with time, and as Dae-su remembers his time at school, he is able to physically trace his memories of what he did to offend Woo-jin. Again, this serves as a reminder for the audience that the film is not meant to portray a realistic, concrete view of modern day South Korea, rather, it comments on the unrealistic way of modern living. The contemporary Seoul within the film is filled with bright colours and deep

contrasts, the shots having a cartoonish quality about them, while the scenes from Dae-su's past are bleak and pale. It is possible to assume that Park is attempting to remind the viewers that the past was *not* an easier time, the memories of the previous years are just as odd and unrealistic as the events from the present (Taylor-Jones, 2013: 143). These sequences can act as a reminder to the viewer that memories are subjective, and they are easily forgotten, and more easily tainted by the individual's desire of remembering differently. The older Dae-su chases the younger version of himself in an attempt to understand what had occurred all those years ago, but he is driven by his curiosity, not by his desire to change what he has done. Because of this, the scene symbolises that things will not change for Dae-su, they will, ultimately, repeat themselves due to his lack of self-awareness.

A popular scene amongst fans to re-enact is the fighting scene, which takes place in a long, narrow corridor within the building he was held captive. The sequence is introduced with Dae-su raising a hammer over his head as a prison guard is staring back at him. A dotted line appears on the screen, connecting the hammer to the guard's head. The scene that follows is filmed from a long shot angle and is uninterrupted; the entire scene takes place without a single cut. Here, Dae-su fights a large number of prison guards, all active participants using whatever they have at hand, such as small knives and wooden sticks. The scene continues until Dae-su stands as the victor and it only cuts after an elevator door opens and additional guards appear. Park cuts to a shot of the elevator door reopening, but this time Dae-su stands tall as the aforementioned guards all fall to the floor. Park here shies away from the traditional action blockbuster fast paced editing, yet he does not reserve on the action. Park stated in an interview that the scene was rehearsed for "three months before shooting. It was shot for two days and there were about seventeen takes. The main difficulty was on Choi [Min-sik], who had to do all this fighting, and me, who had to watch him suffer," (cited in Young, 23.03.2004). Park has not commented on which of the numerous takes ended up in the final cut of the film, but it is probable that Choi's exhaustion within the scene was genuine, not purely a result of acting. With this in mind, it is clear that Park had a set vision for how he wanted the shot to look, and the fans have received the scene in a highly positive manner.

Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* was well received by Western audiences as well as South Korean ones, albeit for different reasons. The South Korean audiences did embrace the film but not

due to its narrative, nor because of the aesthetic elements. Rather, the film was appreciated due to the success it gained abroad through winning numerous awards at international film festivals. Euro-American audiences, on the other hand, praise the director's filmic style. It is clear that Western audiences are attracted to this film in particular compared to the other two within the trilogy based on the high audience scores on both Rotten Tomatoes and the Internet Movie Database. The fact that the film gained so much positive attention from both critics and other film directors such as Quentin Tarantino likely intrigued Western audiences curiosity about the feature, which might be part of the reason for the films initial success in Europe and North America. Still, audiences comment on the director's use of camera angles, mise-en-scène and on the performance of the actors and actresses rather than the prestige of the film. In addition, the fans are not occupying themselves with attempting to make meaning of the signs within the film, rather they are merely accepting the film as a means of entertainment, one that differs from the Western options both in style and narration.





## Chapter 5

### Spike Lee's *Oldboy*

It is not uncommon for filmmakers in Hollywood to remake foreign films for Western audiences. For instance, the American version of the Swedish film *Let The Right One In* from 2008 premiered in 2010, several Japanese horror films have been adapted by American filmmakers, and in March 2016 it was announced that Bryan Cranston and Kevin Heart would star in the Hollywood remake of the French drama comedy *The Intouchables* (Pulver, 31.03.2016). Justin Bowyer opens his introductory chapter in his book *The Cinema of Japan and Korea* with the following words: “If imitation truly is the sincerest form of flattery then an unparalleled degree of flattery is currently being bestowed upon South East Asian cinema by Western – and particularly, of course – Hollywood filmmakers [...] Of course imitation can, and often does, result in a pale reflection,” (2004: 1). This form of reproduction of cinema has had both negative and positive responses from audiences. In 2013, Spike Lee's adaptation of *Oldboy* was released, and already prior to its premiere it received negative remarks from critics and spectators alike. Fans of the film were aggravated that the story which brought Park world fame was to be remade so shortly after the original was released, and several discussion boards were created in anticipation of the film. Fans were curious as to how Lee planned to adapt the film, if he would stick to the source material or if he would stray from the hyperbolic violent imagery of the original. They were also curious as to whom would play the protagonist and the antagonist, and if they could bring the same level of intensity as the original cast.

#### 5.1 – Film synopsis

While the plot of Lee's film is similar to Park's in many ways, there are a few changes that have been made for the American version. The story follows Joe Doucett (Josh Brolin), a

seemingly alcoholic man who makes his earnings through advertising. After fighting with his ex-wife over him not being able to attend his daughter's third birthday, and losing an account due to his inappropriate advances towards the client's girlfriend, he goes on a drinking rampage, raving aimlessly through the streets. He encounters a street sales-woman and purchases a rubber duck which he intends to give his daughter as a birthday present, before knocking on the door of his friend Chucky's (Michael Imperioli) bar. After being turned away by his friend, he sees a woman holding a yellow umbrella with red markings and approaches her before suddenly disappearing, the rubber duck the only item left behind. He wakes up in what appears to be a hotel room, but he quickly realises he is being held captive. Joe spends 20 years in this space, his only information about the outside world being fed to him through the television set up in his room. Not long after his incarceration he discovers his ex-wife has been murdered and he is considered the prime suspect as his DNA has been found on the murder weapon and throughout her house. He also learns that his daughter has been adopted, and once he hears her play the cello on television, he vows to better himself for her sake, and promises to ultimately reunite with her. He begins training and quits drinking, anticipating the day he will be free. Joe manages to dig a hole through the wall and almost escapes, but he is drugged via gas, and wakes up in a box left on a field. He has been dressed in a suit, and in its pockets he finds money and a cell phone. A woman holding a similar umbrella as the one he saw on the night of his kidnapping is standing not far away, and Joe chases after her. His chase is interrupted by a group of men playing sports, creating an opportunity for him to test if he is able to fight as he trained so hard for. He succeeds and continues his chase, only to find that the umbrella has been passed on to a man waiting in line for a medical inspection. Here Joe meets Marie Robinson (Elizabeth Olsen), a young nurse who gives him her number in case he is in need of medical attention in the future.

Joe makes his way to Chucky's bar and shares his story with his friend before receiving a phone call from a number saved on his phone as 'The Invisible Man'. Not long after, Chucky discovers Joe unconscious on the floor and dials Marie's number. As she arrives and cares for him, she discovers the letters he has written to his daughter while incarcerated and decides to help him in his quest for the truth. Together they search for the Chinese restaurant which has provided Joe with food for the past 20 years, and once Joe has located the correct one, he follows a man who picks up a large take away order to the building he was imprisoned in. Once there, he finds the man who runs the prison, Chaney (Samuel L. Jackson) and tortures

him for answers before fighting numerous men in order to escape the building. After the fight, Joe is brought back to Chucky's bar and here he meets his captor, Adrian (Sharlto Copley) for the first time. Adrian offers Joe exoneration, a large collection of diamonds and the safe return of his daughter if he manages to uncover why he was held captive and who Adrian is. Joe is informed that he has 46 hours to provide Adrian with answers, or else he will murder his daughter. Adrian also informs Joe that Marie is in immediate danger, so the latter male hurries to Marie's apartment and discovers that Chaney has broken into her house. Chaney and his aids manage to restrain Joe, and just as Chaney is about to extract Joe's teeth he interrupted by a phone call. Chaney is offered a large sum of money from the person on the other line if he leaves without harming Joe. He agrees, and shortly after Chaney and his aids depart, Joe receives another phone call, but he does not answer. He points out to Marie that there is a specific ring tone set to his captor's number, and Marie discovers that it is the school song of Joe's High School, Evergreen. The pair travel to Evergreen High School, and while looking for answers to the mystery, Marie and Joe's relationship evolves into one of a sexual nature, the two having intercourse while Adrian watches through a surveillance camera set up in their room. By searching through a year book found in the school's formal principal's home, Joe discovers the name of his captor, and by searching through the files kept at the school he encounters the file belonging to Adrian's sister Amanda, which triggers his memory. When Joe was in school, he witnessed the girl engaging in sexual relations with an older man and spread the information to his peers. As an adult, Joe realises that the man was in fact Amanda and Adrian's father, and shortly after young Joe witnessed the father and daughter have intercourse, the father shot his entire family, including himself, Adrian being the sole survivor. As Joe is running out of time, he rushes to find Adrian and confronts him, giving him the answers to his questions. Adrian further explains his own and his sister's relationship to their father, stating that it was a consensual relationship and an act of love between family members. When Joe asks to see his daughter, Adrian leads him to a small film studio, revealing that everything Joe has seen on TV while imprisoned has been fake and that the girl he believed to be his daughter was in fact an actress; Marie is his true daughter. Upon learning this, Joe begs Adrian not to share this knowledge with Marie and also for his own death, but Adrian does not grant him his wish, rather he takes his own life by shooting himself in the head. Joe then writes a letter to Marie, explaining that they are not to see each other again and that she should not look for him. Ultimately, Joe pays Chaney to keep him imprisoned once more.

## 5.2 - Reception

According to IMDb.com, Lee's adaption had an estimated budget of 30,000,000 US Dollars (2016c). The film premiered on 27.11.2013, the day before the American federal holiday Thanksgiving. By researching the box office history of previous years, the films that prove most popular around that weekend are family orientated features or films for young adults. In 2008, 2009 and 2011 the first three films of the *Twilight* saga were number one at the November box office, and in 2010, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* was the highest earner. The top earners of November 2013 were *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* and *Frozen*, both premiering on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the former mentioned a young adult dystopian fantasy film, the latter a family friendly Disney animation feature, while *Oldboy* ended on the 21<sup>st</sup> position (Box Office Mojo, 2016b). The film was projected on 583 domestic screens, and earned 885,382 USD during its opening weekend, it's all time gross being 2,193,658 USD domestically and 2,667,364 USD on the foreign market (Box Office Mojo, 2016d). The film earned just below five million USD, meaning it did not break even, in fact, it grossed less than 20 per cent of its production budget. The film scores an average of 5.8 of 10 on IMDb, 32,886 of the 49,722 voters being males between the ages 18 and 44 (2016f). On Rotten Tomatoes' internet site, the feature has an audience score of 37 percent and it scores 47 percent on the Tomatometer (2016c).

Scott Mendelson wrote in an article for Forbes that "Josh Brolin and Elizabeth Olsen are not box office draws, and frankly neither is Spike Lee. With lousy reviews, no buzz, and a flurry of adult films competing for ticket buyers, *Oldboy* will probably get lost in the shuffle," (27.11.2013). In his article, Mendelson predicted that the film would not be successful based on the lead actors involved in the project, ultimately expecting that the fans will have a "distinctive mode of reception", which is the first of Jenkins's fan behaviour categories (Staiger, 2005: 98). On the Internet Movie Database, one user with the screen name MisterBabadoo, asks if the film is "worth watching for Elizabeth Olsen's nude scenes," and proceeds by commenting "I love the original and I have no doubt this one is nowhere close to being as good," hinting at the fact that he is only interested in watching it for the nudity of the above mentioned actress (12.03.2016). This can prove that potential audiences of the film are not interested in the product as a whole, rather, they choose the film based on which actors

and actresses are involved in the production. Audiences search for their favourite performer's upcoming films and watch them based on their star status alone. This mode of reception can also hold negative aspects for directors and actors, especially when remaking films with an already established fan base. On the film's comment section on IMDb several users express their strong feelings against Lee's version, one commenter writing: "Haven't seen the remake, nor do I plan to," (ForTheSafetyOfPuppies, 27.09.2014). Due to the dedication fans have to the original, they refuse to watch the remake on principle alone.

The main characters are portrayed by Josh Brolin and Sharlto Copley. The latter saw his filmic debut with the film *District 9* (2009), a science fiction action feature. There is a discussion on the IMDb message board entitled "It's almost amazing how bad Sharlto was in this movie", originally posted by user AnotherCleverName on 19.02.2015. The commenter writes "I mean it was like he was trying to be awful. Every scene he was in it was like watching some amateur actor attempting to portray a parody of a caricature of a British villain. He's never been a spectacular actor, he was pretty good in D9, but the fact they let any of his scenes make it into this movie (and actually paid him for it!) is actually pretty absurd,". Another user, Luigitornado, added about the performance "I was laughing [at] how absurd the whole thing was," (14.03.2015). User MartenBroadcloack wrote that, like the original poster, they had enjoyed Copley's performance in *District 9*, but not in *Oldboy* (20.02.2015). It is thus clear that the spectators have taken into consideration the actors previous works and they are comparing the two. Despite Copley receiving several negative comments by audiences, Owen Gleiberman, a writer for Entertainment Weekly, wrote in his review: "Sharlto Copley, as an enigmatic billionaire, hypnotizes you with his wounded malevolence. (Please cast him as a Bond villain.)," (04.12.2003).

The issue of Lee's casting was viewed as problematic already during the film's pre-production stage. The casting call released by Feature Film caused a controversy for the production, in particular for the descriptions of people of colour. A blogger expressed his anger with the description of one of the characters in particular. The role was described in the following manner:

[ASIAN WOMAN] Female, Early to mid 20s, Asian. A mysterious exotic beauty sitting at the bar observing Joe. MARTIAL ARTS EXPERIENCE A PLUS (Angry Asian Man, 03.08.2012)

He further commented that connoting martial arts with an Asian character was a racial stereotype. Other complaints centred around the fact that most roles offered were for Caucasians, while the roles advertised for people of colour were described with words such as “A drug addicted nutcase in the Mobile Hospital,” and “A bullishly strong street thug/criminal,” (Angry Asian Man, 03.08.2012). In addition, people reacted to the lack of diversity, as only four of the advertised roles were for people of colour while 12 were specifically requesting Caucasians. To the complaints, Spike Lee took to his twitter account and responded: “People You Need To Relax. The Cast Of OLD BOY Will Be Diverse. If You Think Otherwise You Do Not Know My Work. Bother Other Directors 'Bout Dat,” and later added that the casting call descriptions had been altered (04.08.2012). As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the issue of diversity within Hollywood, or rather the lack thereof, has been widely discussed in recent years. The fact that the film is originally set in South Korea, and based on a Japanese Manga, might have made fans unwilling to see an adaptation consisting of a nearly entirely Caucasian cast.

### 5.3 – Similarities and differences between Lee’s *Oldboy* and Park’s *Oldboy*

Throughout the feature, Lee makes several references to the original film by Park, ultimately making the film a work of meta cinema. The audiences are reminded that they are watching a remake through both subtle clues and obvious connections to the 2003 film. For instance, as Joe search for the Chinese restaurant that has provided him with food for the past 20 years, he notices a water tank, an octopus clinging to the glass wall. He walks up to it and inspects it, as if he has seen it somewhere before. For audiences who have not seen Park’s film, it might just appear as though Joe is intrigued by the octopus, hence his inspection, but for fans of the 2003 feature, it is a clear nod to said film. It is also plausible that Lee recognises Park’s later work, more specifically the third film in the Vengeance series, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*. The main character of said film, Lee Geum-ja, uses red eye makeup as a symbol of her thirst for vengeance, and in Lee’s *Oldboy*, Adrian’s female bodyguard is donning a similar look. While it is a possible coincidence, it is still likely that Lee acknowledges Park’s work within his

film. These signs are arbitrary, as one must have seen the films of Park in order to fully understand the signified concepts. Not merely does this illustrate that Lee recognizes Park, it is also a way for the director to make the audiences who have seen Park's feature feel included. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, fans can often feel as if they are more intellectually adept than non-fans in terms of reviewing features. In this case, fans of Park have the opportunity to feel knowledgeable as they are able to form a link between the two films.

Spike Lee has also chosen to present the hammer fighting scene in a similar fashion as Park did. The entire sequence is one continuous shot, taking place over several stories of the building Joe was held captive in. Like Park, Lee does not cut away until a second unit of fighters arrive, and the shot is followed by the protagonist standing alone while the others have fallen to their deaths. It is possible to assume that Lee had several reasons for making that particular artistic decision. Firstly, as the scene had proven itself beloved and admired by fans and critics alike, it might have been cause for disappointment if the scene had differed too much from Park's version. However, the fact that Lee decided to stick so close to his source material was cause for criticism from viewers. One user on IMDb wrote: "[...] the fighting was so choreographed. Joe was kicking people into the air, it was too stylized for what the rest of the film was. Whereas by this point in the original, we'd seen some ridiculous [...] squid eating, ants crawling all over his body, etc... so when the stark realism of the original hammer hallway scene starts, the realism of what's going on feels more tactile because you've seen unrealistic things leading up to it," (Thanlon11, 24.06.2014). Secondly, the slow editing adds a degree of exhaustion for audiences, as mentioned in the previous chapter, which ultimately allows the viewers to feel empathetic towards Joe as they are experiencing the action in the same fashion as he is. However, the choice of keeping the scene so similar to Park's is not without complications. As mentioned, in the previous chapter, the lack of firearms in Park's *Oldboy* is in great deal a depiction of South Korea's strict rules against guns; it would be nearly impossible for Dae-su to acquire a weapon of the sort. However, it is not as difficult, nor uncommon, for an American to be in possession of a gun. The second amendment was added to the American Bill of Rights in 1791, and it states: "A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed," (Gerber, 2011: 5). The amendment has been widely discussed and protested against due to the numerous incidents of gun related violence

within the country. Yet, it is still not difficult to acquire a gun in the United States, which makes the matter of guns, or rather lack thereof, within the film implausible. Steve Rose wrote in an article for *The Guardian* that “In Hollywood, you can simply spray the bad guy with bullets; in Korea, you’ve got to think out of the box. The toolbox, most often,”, stating it as one of the reasons as to why American filmmakers do not “get South Korean cinema,” (29.11.2013). Due to this, it is likely that Lee made his decision based on aesthetics rather than for a realistic portrayal of violent events in contemporary America. However, as the scene has been quite similar to the one directed by Park, the scene proceeding it was drastically changed. Lee’s portrayal of the torturing of the prison guard is more visual and detailed compared to Park’s. In order to access the room in which Chaney resides, Joe must make it past a guard. He manages to do so by smashing a hammer into the man’s skull, blood spraying out of his cranium. This scene is similar in aesthetics as the one in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* featuring a screwdriver, discussed in chapter three. This type of violent and gory hyperbolic aesthetic is a trait often found in horror films, or more accurately splatter films. Splatter films are a sub-category to horror films, intentionally focusing on over the top graphic images of blood and violence. The torture scene of the film involves Joe cutting off parts of Chaney’s neck little by little, then he proceeds by pouring salt directly into the wounds until Chaney answers his questions. Compared to Park, who prefers to suggest the acts of violence rather than showing them directly, it is possible that Lee uses this type of B-film aesthetic as a shock factor, in other words as an attempt to create a reaction from the audience, thus the signified concept presented in Park’s film is lost in Lee’s rendition.

When Joe first meets Marie, he uses an alias, changing his last name. It is plausible that the reason behind this action is that he was accused for the murder of his ex-wife while imprisoned. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is no statute of limitations in cases involving murder in the United States, therefore, it is possible to assume that Joe is worried he will be reported to the police if he gives out his real name. In order to make the story coherent and plausible for an American audience, Spike Lee needed to make this change from the original. By adding this into the storyline, Lee is also able to add to the violent imagery within the film. Adrian offers Joe full exoneration in return for him answering his questions, and he does so by showing Joe a videotape of himself raping and murdering his ex-wife. The video is filmed with a shaky, hand held camera, the footage becoming more realistic when contrasted to the more stylised camera work otherwise presented in the film. The fact that Adrian is in



possession of this video also provides a valid reason as to why Joe is reluctant of harming him. Similar to Woo-jin's remote controlled pacemaker in Park's feature, the promise of exoneration works as a form of insurance; it almost certainly guarantees that he will not be the subject of torture or murder. Here, the signified concept of protection has been altered into a new form of signifier.

The largest contrast between the two films is the introduction of the protagonists and their time spent in incarceration. Park Chan-wook first presents Dae-su on top of the building where he was released, as he is holding on to a man by his necktie. The man seems frightened by Dae-su and asks him what he wants, to which Dae-su replies he just wants to talk. The man asks him for his name, and as Dae-su replies, Park cuts back in time, to when Dae-su was held in custody by the police. Viewers then get to witness a drunk Dae-su yelling at, and pleading with, the police before he is released into the custody of his friend. Not long after he is taken to his cell. Dae-su is released about 18 minutes into the film, which is under one fourth of the two-hour film. By presenting Dae-su's descent into madness and the seemingly unfair treatment of him in such a quick paced manner, the audiences are sooner able to sympathize with the character. In Lee's film, however, the protagonist is presented differently. Joe is, as aforementioned, first introduced by appearing intoxicated at work, arguing with his ex-wife on the phone, swearing at her, making advances at his client's girlfriend and urinating in the streets, ultimately having the opposite effect as that of Dae-su's introduction. In addition, the incarceration sequence in Lee's film lasts for 30 minutes, in other words a third of the film's length. Due to this, the rest of the film is compromised, moving in a faster pace than Park's. This leads to less time for character, and story, development.

Another large contrast lies within the narrative. The incestuous relationship between Woo-jin and his sister in Park's feature has been altered into a relationship between two children and their father in Lee's. A user IMDb commented that they "thought it was a cop out having the father be the one having sex with his children, as that is clearly abusive. In the original the brother and sister were in a consensual sexual relationship which is more disturbing," (MrsBuckyBarnes, 27.10.2015). It is likely that Lee chose to change the nature of the relationship in order to ultimately change the audiences' perception of the antagonist. By changing the relationship, Adrian ultimately becomes a victim of personal trauma, despite

himself expressing that the relationship was consensual. According to the National Children's Alliance, "1,520 children died from abuse and neglect in the United States," in 2013 (2014). It is likely that Lee also altered the relationship to serve as a reminder to the American viewers that child abuse is a growing national issue, one that is in need of being addressed. This is particularly plausible due to Adrian's commentary on the matter. Adrian constantly stresses that the relationship was consensual and evidence of the love his father had for him. He refuses to believe that the relationship was morally wrong and harmful, despite his father attempting to murder him. This comments on the innocence of children who are victims of parental abuse.

#### 5.4 – The focus on technology

Within the film there are several products that are easily recognizable in the modern Western world. For instance, when Joe is released, he finds himself locked inside a Louis Vuitton trunk and discovers an Apple iPhone in his pocket. An article published on BrandonGaille.com suggests that Apple is the most recognizable brand in the world. The article states that the company has a brand value of 185 billion USD and accounts for 39 percent of the American smartphone market (17.09.2013). Marie also uses an application on her own smartphone, Shazam. The mobile application allows users to record parts of songs they are hearing and immediately discover the name of the song as well as the recording artist. By using this application, Marie is able to discover that the ringtone on Joe's phone is in fact the official song of Joe's former school, and through that, they are able to find the kidnapper's identity. According to the company's internet site, they connect "more than 500 million people," (Shazam, 2016). The showcasing of these products is possibly an act of product placement, a method which entails that companies provide financial aid in exchange for visible advertisement, yet it can also be interpreted as a symbol of Joe's solitude. As he has spent the past twenty years of his life locked away from the evolution of modern society, he struggles to understand the new technology. An example of this is when Chucky shows Joe how to use a search engine on his computer, a form of technology used frequently in contemporary society. Joe's confusion over the technical advances made might also symbolise his confusion in terms of his situation. He does not know how the modern world

works, nor does he know why he has been imprisoned; he lives in a constant state of uncertainty.

While Joe was in solitary confinement, the outside world did not stop progressing. He learns it has evolved into a world that heavily relies on technology on a daily basis. As mentioned above, technology serves a great help to Joe on his search for vengeance, yet at the film's climax, technology betrays him. Joe learns that the videos he has been shown while confined, ones he believed to be true television series, have in fact been produced by Adrian, Joe being the only audience. He learns that technology has been a vital part in Adrian's quest for vengeance, not only in his own. It is quite reasonable to assume that Lee uses this turn of events as a critique of the modern world's dependency on technological devices. Statistically, the social networking site Facebook has over 1,374,000,000 users worldwide, and the United States is listed as number ten on most hours spent on social networking sites with 7.6 average hours per month (Statisticbrain, 01.12.2015). This can also be seen as a critique of the world of media. In the film, Adrian says "People just believe what they see on television,". This remark implies that it is simple for television networks to manipulate footage to their own advantage, something which American news stations have been accused of doing in order to manipulate the American people (Holiday, 16.07.2012). The fact that Adrian is in control of the media shown to Joe also comments on Adrian's social standing. He is a man of wealth, and like Woo-jin, he uses his finances to achieve his final goal. It is quite likely that Lee intended on creating a discussion regarding this problem, as he not merely *suggests* that media has control over Joe's life, he says it outright.

As discussed, the film did not do well on the Western film market, barely earning 20 percent of the original production budget. Despite Lee's attempts at creating a narrative more suitable for the American and Western society, with their own history and social issues at the forefront, the film was mostly met with negative reviews. As the film already had an established fan base within Europe and America, it proved difficult for Lee to create a film that would be welcomed by said fans, as they have been unable to view it as a film independent from the original by Park. In addition, the fans and film critics vocalisation of their dismay with the remake would ultimately lead to other audiences shying away from the theatres. One critic on Yahoo Movies wrote "Why pay 12 bucks to see a watered-down

version when you can watch the ground breaking original on Netflix?,” (Enk, 02.12.2013), arguing that the film is a lesser version of the story. As discussed in the introductory chapter, fans feel a sense of ownership of the films they support, and with this sense of ownership comes a sense of protection. Fans have argued against the remake, stating that it will not be able to live up to the one directed by Park in terms of aesthetic value and plot points. They have also suggested to others that they should not view the film, rather they should only watch the original, thus the fans of Park’s *Oldboy* have been a major contributor to the failure of Lee’s film at the box office.

## Chapter 6

### *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*

The third, and final, instalment in what would be known as the *Vengeance Trilogy* was *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, (*Chinjeolhan Geumjassi* in Romanised Korean, meaning ‘kind hearted Geumja-ssi’). It was never planned that director Park would create a trilogy about the theme ‘revenge’. He is reported to have stated: “I didn’t feel like making another vengeance film after *Sympathy* [for Mr. Vengeance]. The producer suggested it. [...] I really didn’t want to make a third one at all. When I was doing press conferences in Korea, so many people asked me why I was making a second vengeance film, so many of them it made me cross. So I answered ‘Vengeance story is a good theme. I can make ten films out of it, and I’m planning the third one!’ – out of anger,” (cited in Young, 11.10.2004). The film premiered in July 2005 in South Korea. Though the film did draw a respectable amount of audiences to the cinema, it did not match the success of Park’s previous feature, *Oldboy*.

#### 6.1 – Plot synopsis

The story begins in medias res, with a woman named Geum-ja’s (Lee Young-ae) release from prison. The audience is informed that she has spent 13 and a half years in incarceration, and, as per tradition, she is offered tofu by a preacher, a symbol of her commitment to living a sin-free life once released. The story goes back in time to show Geum-ja’s crime and arrest. She was sentenced for kidnapping and murdering a five-year-old boy, Won-mo, and the media were quite focused on her appearance, comparing her beauty to that of the Argentinian actress Olivia Hussey. A reporter also comments that due to her attire on the day of her arrest, a polka dotted dress, that pattern became fashionable within South Korea. The flashback ends and back in the present time, Geum-ja observes the tofu offered to her for a brief moment before throwing it to the ground, saying to the preacher “Why don’t you go screw yourself?”. Geum-ja visits a hair salon owned by a friend she made in prison, Kim Yang-hee (Seo Yeong-ju), her fellow inmate thrilled to once again meet Geum-ja. A flash-back shows Yang-Hee’s arrival to the prison and she states that she heard rumours of another inmate being an angel with a face that shines. The viewers learn that Yang-hee was a prostitute, imprisoned for

strangling her pimp to death. Geum-ja teaches her to pray for forgiveness for her past sins, the former's face glowing as she prays. In present time, Geum-ja is offered an apartment by Yang-hee. Geum-ja accepts and falls asleep during an evening prayer, dreaming that she is pulling a dog with a man's head through a winter landscape. As the hybrid creature growls and whimpers, she points a gun at it and shoots it dead. She smiles as she is dreaming this. The following day, Geum-ja has entered the apartment of Won-mo's parents, and as a symbol of her regret and desire for forgiveness she cuts off her finger, stating that she will cut off each one until they have pardoned her. The couple panic and call an ambulance, managing to restrain her until the paramedics arrive and bring her to the hospital. As the hospital bill required Geum-ja to spend all her money she finds a job at a bakery owned by a man named Mr. Chang (Oh Dal-su). Here she meets a man, Geun-shik (Kim Shi-hoo), a worker at the bakery who immediately takes a liking to her. Geum-ja meets a second friend from prison, Woo Su-young (Kim Bu-seon) and a new flashback depicts the time when Geum-ja first arrived at the prison. Su-young narrates and explains that she used to find Geum-ja irritating due to her excessive crying. Su-young was imprisoned after robbing a bank along with her husband, stating that being so far away from him made her feel as if she was dying. She passes out in the prison court yard and informs the viewers through voice-over that she suffered from kidney failure, resulting in Geum-ja donating her own to Su-young. Back in present time, Geum-ja informs Su-young and her husband that she is in need of a firearm, stressing the importance of the appearance of it by presenting them with a drawing. Geum-ja returns to her apartment only to find the preacher waiting for her, pleading for her return to the church. Geum-ja dismisses him and informs him that she is now of Buddhist faith and has no interest in returning.

Another flashback presents two further inmates: Oh Soo-hee (Ra Mi-ran), a woman who was forced to perform oral sex on a fellow inmate, Ma-nyeo (Go Su-hee), who is in prison for murdering and eating her husband along with his lover. A scene shows Soo-hee unwillingly performing this sexual act on Ma-nyeo in a prison bath house in the foreground, while a woman mops the floor in the back. Once Ma-nyeo is satisfied she walks away, whereas Soo-hee is left crying by herself. Ma-nyeo slips on the floor and Geum-ja enters, smiling as she shows Soo-hee a bar of soap, illustrating that she caused the accident in order to send Ma-nyeo to the prison hospital ward. The present Geum-ja meets Soo-hee, who is now a sculptor, and asks her to produce a small crest for her in silver, which is to be placed onto the gun. Soo-

hee accepts and Geum-ja returns to the bakery. While working she encounters her former case worker, and the film travels once again back in time to the time of Geum-ja's questioning. The case worker shows clear doubts regarding Geum-ja's guilt as she seems uncertain of details of the murder. As a result, she is asked to reconstruct the incident. The area of where she is to do this is filled with reporters and Geum-ja's attention is caught by a man standing a bit away holding a baby in his hands. The man, who is later revealed to be Mr. Baek (Choi Min-sik), watches as Geum-ja reconstructs the murder and she looks to him to signal the correct colour of the pillow used to strangle the boy. Present day Geum-ja is shown entering an adoption agency, asking for files which the woman working there informs her that she is not able to give her. The story flashes back to a younger Geum-ja making a call while at an aquarium. She calls her teacher, Mr. Baek and informs him that she is pregnant and in need of a place to stay. He agrees to take her in and meets her at the door, wearing nothing but a towel.

In the present, Geum-ja shares a drink with her co-worker, Geun-shik. He asks her about her time in prison and in return she asks him if he is attracted to her. He answers yes, and shortly after, Geum-ja brings him to her apartment and the two engage in sexual relations. After the act, Geum-ja informs him that Mr. Baek was the person responsible for the kidnapping and murdering of the child, but he had threatened to kill her new-born daughter if she did not confess to the crime. Geum-ja leaves Geun-shik at the apartment and breaks into the adoption agency to recover the files needed, discovering that her daughter has been adopted by an Australian couple. She travels to meet her daughter, Jenny (Kwon Yae-young), and upon meeting her real mother, she threatens to kill herself if she is not permitted to travel back to South Korea with her. Jenny's wish is granted, and once in South Korea the mother and daughter acquire a puppy. Along with Geun-shik, they travel to an abandoned school, and while Geun-shik teaches Jenny Korean words, Geum-ja is standing outside, her gun pointed at the dog. She remembers her former teacher and visualises him before shooting the animal. The film cuts to present day Mr. Baek eating breakfast with a woman named Park Yi-jeong (Lee Seung-shin). He stands up and beckons the woman to do the same before pulling down her underwear and engaging her in sexual relations. Yi-jeong narrates about her time in prison and it becomes evident that she befriended Geum-ja while incarcerated. Yi-jeong was bullied by Ma-nyeo, and as the latter was emitted to the hospital, Geum-ja volunteered to look after her. Geum-ja spent three years poisoning Ma-nyeo's food with bleach, and upon the latter's

death, Geum-ja was praised by the other inmates. In present day, Yi-jeong assist Geum-ja in her quest for revenge, informing her of where she can find Mr. Baek, but their alliance is discovered by the prison preacher. Still holding a grudge over Geum-ja's refusal to return to church, he informs Mr. Baek of their friendship, which leads to Mr. Baek hiring two assassins to murder the women. Geum-ja manages to shoot the two assassins with her newly attained firearm, and together with Ji-yeong she is able to bind Mr. Baek and bring him to the abandoned school. While there, Geum-ja discovers that Mr. Baek has kidnapped and murdered four other children, thus she involves the families of all the victims, inviting them to the school. As she has found video tapes of the murders, she systematically goes through them and asks the parents what they wish to happen to Mr. Baek. Together they decide to seek vengeance through one by one stabbing the murderer until he is dead. They bury the body and gather at the bakery before parting their ways. Geum-ja walks back home and on her way she meets Jenny. In her hands, Geum-ja holds a white cake which she offers to Jenny, telling her to "be white, live white, like this,". Jenny tastes the cake before Geum-ja engulfs the rest, her face planted in the white substance as the credits begin to roll.

## 6.2 - Reception

The film has an average rating score of 7.7 on IMDb.com (2016d) and an audience approval rate of 84 percent on the Rotten Tomatoes website (2016a). Like the previous features of the trilogy, the voters on IMDb are mainly made up of males between 18 and 44. The film has been voted on by a total of 52,425 users, a mere 6,144 of which were by women (IMDb, 2016d). This is likely due to the film being the last of a trilogy marketed for young, male audiences by Tartan Asia Extreme. According to IMDb, the film had an estimated budget of 4,2 billion Korean won, which is approximately 3,6 million USD. The film grossed over 22 million USD in South Korea, and 211,667 USD in the United states (IMDb, 2016a). Box Office Mojo also notes that the film grossed 7,382,034 USD during its domestic opening weekend (2016c). Though there is a rather large distinction between the two countries in terms of revenue, it is important to note that the film was screened at no more than 15 theatres in America. Despite the fact that the film grossed over double the estimated production budget, the film did partly receive negative reviews from the South Korean audiences. Choi Aryong suggests that this might be the result of a complex narrative with too many characters,



which makes the plot hard to follow, and the elements of fantasy and surrealism that occur within the film. He particularly brings forward the scene which depicts Mr. Baek as half man, half dog, stating that whenever he “talks to non-Korean viewers about [Park Chan-wook’s] films, they always mention the fantasy scene in *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* [...] Still, Korean audiences don’t seem to like that sort of thing,” (08.06.2008). To the latter statement, Park replied: “No, Korean audiences don’t go for that sort of thing. Korean audiences put up a struggle before they accept fantasy, it’s true. Maybe Koreans traditionally reject the use of fantasy,” (cited in Choi, 08.06.2008).

The success of *Oldboy* on the foreign as well as the domestic market, and the filmmaker’s new found status as a world known director, Park Chan-wook was once again a respected visionary in South Korea. For his final feature in the *Vengeance Trilogy* he cast actress Lee Young-ae, a woman whose star persona was that of a beautiful woman of the upper class, who acted with elegance and grace. The actress was at the time particularly popular for her role in the historical drama *Jewel in the Palace*. In his book, Kim explained that the immediate success of *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (hereinafter *Lady Vengeance*), which broke box office records during its weekend release, was “thanks to the rising name value of Park Chan-wook, award-winning director at Cannes, and audience curiosity about the transformation of Lee Young-ae,” (2007: Loc 158). This proves that also the South Korean audiences conform to a distinctive mode of reception. They were drawn to the cinema based on the choice of lead actress and on the success of the director’s previous film. By taking an actress known for her beauty and elegance and turning her image around entirely, Park ultimately used the audience’s preconceptions of the actress to create layers to the character of Geum-ja. Underneath her anger, and the hatred she feels towards Mr. Baek, there is a beautiful woman who has been wronged by a person she trusted. In his interview with the director, Kim Young-jin commented that the Western based media had predicted the film would be more successful amongst Euro-American Christian audiences due to its views on morality and redemption (2007: Loc 1630), a statement which Park disagreed with. He replied: “I think that *Lady Vengeance* is a movie with a strong regional character. It’s a movie with a character that’s basically hard to enjoy seeing if you’re not a viewer used to the existing image of the actress Lee Young-ae. I’m also opposed to the opinion that sees the themes of sin and redemption or guilt and obsession as Western concepts. Those concepts are already exceedingly well established as routine in our lives as well,” (cited in Kim, 2007: Loc 1640).

With this, Park confirms that he chose the actress Lee Young-ae based on her cinematic appeal, and that she is one of the attractions of the film.

A scene which caused controversy amongst Western viewers was the one where Geum-ja seemingly shoots a puppy outside the abandoned school. IMDb.com user BlackDog123 posted on the film's discussion board that she "absolutely loved this movie and gave it 8 out of 10. However - what was with the puppy? [...] I honestly wish that scene had been cut. It didn't add anything but me wondering how she could do such an awful thing when she was trying to redeem herself to her daughter," (28.11.2011). Another user wrote: "Hard to feel "Sympathy ... for Lady Vengeance" when she kills an innocent dog. I like to imagine her getting mauled by a pack of them after the credits roll," (Esbpca, 03.09.2009). It is important to recognize that the killing of the dog serves a purpose within the story. Firstly, a scene earlier in the film, when Geum-ja is dreaming, depicts Mr. Baek as half man and half dog. It is therefore possible to assume that the dog is a symbol of the man who has done her wrong. Secondly, dogs, particularly puppies, are seen as innocent creatures, not much unlike children. Thus Geum-ja, by proving to herself that she is able to kill such a creature, she knows she is able to also murder a human being.

As discussed in chapter one, Janet Steiger adds a sixth type of fan behaviour to Jenkins existing five; "the extension of fan partialities into everyday living," in her book *Media Reception Studies* (2005: 105). This type of fan behaviour is varied, and includes for instance collecting memorabilia from films, action figures and similar items and "naming children and pets after characters [...]," (2005: 106). The main character in the film wears a characteristic, bright red eyeshadow as she is on her quest for vengeance, the makeup removed once her vengeance is complete. Several users of the video sharing website YouTube have added makeup tutorials, demonstrating how to apply eyeshadow like Lee Geum-ja wears. The most viewed video is by user Haynep. In the description, Haynep writes "Red eyeshadow is apparently hot for spring, and combined with having recently watched *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (oh dear lord, it is definitely one movie I don't mind re-watching!), I decided that I had to make my own interpretation," (21.01.2011). By copying the makeup look of Geum-ja, Western fans have attributed the style not merely into their own lives, but they also share it with others, teaching them how to do the same.

### 6.3 – Historical and social context

In order to fully comprehend the film's general acceptance from the South Korean audiences, it is important to place the story within its historic context. In 1991, five young boys, aged between nine and 13, were going on a mountain hike searching for frogs in the Daegu region. The boys never returned to their homes, and despite a long-lasting, thorough search, which dispatched some 300.000 military and civilian searchers, they were not found (Lee, 11.01.2001). It was only eleven years later, in 2002, that a hiker discovered a human skull that had washed down the hillside after a heavy rainstorm. After a new search, investigators discovered a shallow grave containing the five bodies, buried neatly next to each other (Hickey, 2015: 420). In *Lady Vengeance*, the first murder and kidnapping out of the five took place nearly 14 years prior to the filmic present, the same year of the real life disappearances. Park has confirmed that the case of the Missing Frog Boys, as it was later referred to, did influence him in his decision of making *Lady Vengeance*. A book was written about the case, one that was never released due to the possible protests it would receive from the parents of the missing children, though Park still believed "The story [...] was worthy of a film," (cited in Choi, 2008). By referencing the case of the Missing Frog Boys, Park is approaching the South Korean audience's cognitive memories, as well as their personal memories. Cognitive memories relate to for instance historical facts, while the personal memories relate to subjective experiences (Staiger, 2005: 187). The cognitive memories in the film would be the ones of the dates and the facts that were uncovered during the investigation of the murders of the young boys, while the personal memories relate to the South Korean society, how they responded to the national tragedy. The murders called for a national grieving period, and the society were asking questions as to who would be able to murder young, innocent children, and as to why the authorities were unable to locate the perpetrator. In 2006, the statute of limitations expired, and the case remains unresolved as of 2016. In 2011, a film entitled *Aidul* (in English, Children) was set for a South Korean February cinema release, despite concerns of the plot being inappropriate for audiences. The film directly tells the story of the Missing Frog Boys and how it affected the community, and most importantly, the families involved in the case. Prior to its release, the film was subjected to critiques, the South Korean people and film critics curious to see whether the director would handle the matter in a respectful manner, or if it was merely a filmmaker exploiting a nation's grief for entertainment purposes (Lee, 11.01.2001). Park Chan-wook, on the other hand, decided to take a more indirect approach to

the case, ultimately allowing the families of the victims to extract their revenge. It is possible to assume that this subtle approach, which results in the death of the culprit, offered the South Korean a platform in which they could reflect over the tragedy, and ultimately find inner solace. Simultaneously, Park's approach to the matter of vengeance might also be a factor of the acceptance from South Korean audiences. He shows that turning from victim to aggressor will not end in happiness, something which is evident by the café sequence by the end of the film. The parents are sitting together around a table, all of them unable to properly take in their surroundings, too focused on their guilt.

A scene in the film depicts Lee Geum-ja with the parents of the murdered boy. The scene first appears threatening as Park has chosen to begin the scene with a close up of a knife and the parents asking Geum-ja what she wants from them. She replies in distress "Please forgive me" as she cuts off one of her fingers. It is revealed through voice-over that she had planned to cut off as many fingers as needed in order for them to forgive her for her crime. On IMDb's discussion board, user Bjar-Bjar posted a note with the headline "Why no finger?", and wrote "Maybe I missed something but why did she cut her own finger off?," (22.08.2013).

Yubitsume is an act of cutting off fingers as a symbol of regret, punishment and loyalty associated with the Japanese mafia, the Yakuza (Kirkup, 2007: 37). By cutting off this limb, it would be visible to other members of society who had crossed the mafia, serving as a warning to others who might intend on doing the same. This ritual has also been used by South Korean citizens. On the third of August 2001, twenty South Korean protestors cut off the tips of their fingers while chanting "Apologize!" in front of the Independence Gate in Seoul, which was once a prison where independence fighters were kept incarcerated during the Japanese colonial rule of Korea. This act was meant to demonstrate "the protesters' loyalty to their country," (Kirk, 14.08.2001). This demonstrates that Geum-ja borrowed this ritual as an apologetic act, desperate for forgiveness. Park states that he added the scene with the Yakuza in mind, further commenting: "Really, doing that is not going to get you forgiven [...] That's the best she can come up with after spending 13 years thinking about it in prison. She may have taken some story that she heard in prison, and put it into practice. Cutting off her finger is an act that comes from the idea that she must do something for the dead child's parents [...]. The childish action of cutting her finger doesn't have any benefit, and it's not going to make anyone feel better, and it's not going to get her forgiven, but she does it anyway," (Kim, 2007: Loc 1524). This act does not merely comment on Geum-ja's simple mind and desperate need

for pardon, it also serves as a comment on the uselessness of violent acts; they serve no purpose.

The film takes a different position on the issue of class in comparison to *Oldboy* and *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, more precisely it focuses on the misconceptions of the classes. Geum-ja explains to the families of the abducted children that Mr. Baek chose his victims partially based on their social standing. She tells the families that they were chosen due to them being able to send their children to an expensive private school, and he therefore believed they would have the financial aids needed for the ransom he requested. The audiences learn, however, that the families were in need of working extra hours in order to even afford sending their children to the private school. One woman mentions that as a result of the high ransom set by Mr. Baek along with the tuition already paid to the school, her family ended up without a home and with an enormous debt. This serves as a commentary on the lengths South Korean families are willing to take in order to ensure their children's future, as well as the desire for the countries inhabitants to appear of a higher class. The focus on social standing within South Korea is high, and one of the more common ways for people to rise in class is to be accepted by a well celebrated university (Nardini, 2013: 19). The fact that the families spent nearly their entire income on their children's education is also a statement against the South Korean focus on schooling. In Korea, there is an obsession with studying, nationally referred to as "education fever," (Seth, 2002: 1). Seth explains: "Everywhere there are 'cram schools' [...] where elementary, middle, and high school students study late in the evenings and on weekends [...] Adults, too, study at night schools, attempting to advance their education. Real estate prices depend as much on the reputation of local schools as on the inherent desirability of the location or the quality of housing [...] Education pops up in conversation often, and the success of a son, daughter, or grandchild at entering a 'good' school is a source of great pride" (2002: 1-2). Albeit Park uses a rather hyperbolic approach to the matter of excessive focus on education, he comments on the danger that follows it.

## 6.4 – Meta cinema

Due to the film's complex narrative, several users of the IMDb discussion board have explained that they were in need of several viewings of the film in order to fully comprehend the plot. Choi Aryong also notes that the complexity of the relationships between the characters in *Lady Vengeance* added to the difficulty in following the narrative (08.06.2008). On the matter, Park stated that he “tried to choose actors who would make you interested and excite curiosity just from looking at their faces,” (cited in Kim, 2007: Loc 1602). While *Lady Vengeance* is the first film to feature Lee Young-ae, several actors and actresses from the previous two films appear in the final part of the trilogy. Most notable might be Choi Min-sik, who portrays Oh Dae-su in *Oldboy* and Mr. Baek in *Lady Vengeance*. Different from the former mentioned film, Choi's character in the latter is not presented as a lower class, incompetent father worth the audiences' pity due to his involuntary entry into the world of violence, rather, he portrays an authority figure, a teacher who kidnaps and murders young children for his own personal gain. During their discussion of what to do with the teacher, the parents ask Geum-ja what he needed the ransom money for if he did not have any children of his own, to which she replies that he wished to purchase a yacht for himself. This egotistical motive further promotes the image of a man without a conscience. Park stated that due to the fact that the film did not have time to explore the character of Mr. Baek in as much depth as he had wished, he chose simplicity over complexity, particularly during the scene where Mr. Baek greets the teenage Geum-ja in just a towel. He explained that he wished to present Mr. Baek as an object of the teenage school girl's sexual fantasy (Choi, 08.06.2008).

This type of meta cinema is visible through more characters than Mr. Baek. After learning that his girlfriend is in touch with Geum-ja, he hires two assassins to murder the women. The two assassins are portrayed by Shin Ha-kyun and Song Kang-ho, who portrayed Ryu and Dong-jin in the first film of the trilogy, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. Ryu and Dong-jin have an antagonistic relationship in the aforementioned film, and thus, Park commented that he intentionally included this “chummy” relationship between the characters in *Lady Vengeance* as a form of self-parody (cited in Kim, 2007: Loc 1571). Not only does the friendly relationship between characters serve as a light comedic effect to the audiences who have seen *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, it additionally allows the viewers to draw parallels

between the two films. Of the two, Song's character is the only one who is shown speaking or otherwise producing sounds. Much like the deaf character of Ryu, Shin's character in *Lady Vengeance* is purposefully kept quiet. One part of the short sequence in which they appear is taking place within a car. The camera is placed inside the vehicle when Song's character speaks, and just as Shin's character is about to open his mouth to reply, the camera shifts to the outside of the car, the audio completely muted. This is a direct reference to Shin's character in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, where he portrayed a deaf and mute factory worker. Yet again, the audiences are prohibited from hearing his voice. Another interesting parallel between Park's film is created by his adding of Kang Hye-jeong to the cast. In *Oldboy*, Kang plays Mido, the daughter of Oh Dae-su. During his incarceration, Dae-su sees whom he believes to be his daughter through the television set in his cell, and in *Lady Vengeance* Mr. Baek is seen watching the television coverage of the arrest of Geum-ja, the reporter played by Kang. This does not merely function as a visual parallel, but also a thematic one. *Oldboy* comments on the power of media, how it has the opportunity to cause damage to people's lives, the most obvious example being the photo album that proves Mido is Dae-su's daughter. By placing these two performers together in the above mentioned scene, Park also makes it possible for audiences to deduct that Geum-ja was framed for the crime she is being incarcerated for, much like Dae-su was framed for the murder of his wife.

It is not merely the characters that can be seen as a reference to Park's previous works. After Geum-ja and Geun-shik have slept together, he asks her about killing. Geum-ja replies by explaining to the man what happened nearly 14 years prior. She explains to him that she was coerced into aiding Mr. Baek in the kidnapping, that he had said to her that there are two types of kidnappings, *good* ones and *bad* ones. He had further explained to Geum-ja that good kidnappings are when the child is returned safely to its family, ultimately creating a stronger family bond. This is the exact same argument used by Yeong-mi when she attempts to encourage Ryu to proceed with their plan of kidnapping his former boss' daughter. The main difference is the order in which the words are cited. In *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, Yeong-mi uses this argument before the kidnapping occurs, forming a feeling hope in both Ryu, and in the audience, that the kidnapping of the child might result in a family reunion and a stronger tie between father and daughter. In *Lady Vengeance*, however, these words are spoken after it is known that the kidnapping ended in the death of the child. This enforces the

audience's perception of Geum-ja as a slightly naïve character, one who was foolishly coerced by an authority figure into committing a crime.

Throughout the film, the narrator explained that Geum-ja had wished for Won-mo to appear before her so that she could ask for his forgiveness for her crime. After the families have all left the bakery, Geum-ja is seen in the bathroom removing her red eye makeup. An orange marble rolls towards her and the young Won-mo appears before her, sitting against the wall, cigarette in hand. Geum-ja walks towards him and lowers herself to his level, but as she opens her lips to speak, she is gagged by the boy. The gag used on Geum-ja is similar to the one she used on Mr. Baek as she was preparing to murder him. As the scene cuts back to Won-mo, he is now the age he would be if he were still alive. The older version of Won-mo is portrayed by Yoo Ji-tae, who played the role of Woo-jin in *Oldboy*. The scene indicates that Geum-ja has still not found peace within herself, despite having taken revenge on the man who murdered the boy. The scene serves as a parallel to Woo-jin's realization in *Oldboy*. It also proves that she realizes her quest for vengeance has been futile, as she will never rid herself of the feeling of guilt, and now, after having taken part in murdering a human being, she sees herself as no better than Mr. Baek.

## 6.5 – Colour symbolism and traditions

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the colour red serves as a symbol for Geum-ja's desire for revenge. She wears a deep red eyeshadow, something which several of the characters within the film take notice of. After Geum-ja has successfully tied Mr. Baek to a chair and prepares herself for her vengeance, the first comment he makes is in regards of her makeup. He criticises her, asking with a condescending tone what she has done with her look. Not only does this show that Mr. Baek still sees himself as an authority over his former student, it proves that the eye makeup is part of Geum-ja's current persona, it is a new trait, one that physically represents her anger and need for vengeance. The hairdresser that helps Geum-ja find a place to live also asks about the eyeshadow, albeit in a more surprised tone, compared to Mr. Baek's condescending one. To this, Geum-ja replies that she uses it because people say she looks kind hearted. Therefore, it symbolises her sins, both the ones she has committed and



the ones she is about to commit. Once Mr. Baek is killed, she removes her makeup in the bathroom at the bakery, showing that her mission is completed. In addition to the characteristic makeup, the walls of her apartment are red, and she keeps two red candles by her mirror. The candles can be linked to her quest for vengeance as they are first lit before she prays and ends up dreaming of murdering Mr. Baek. As Geum-ja prepares to leave after sleeping with Geun-shik, she informs him that he is not to let the candles burn out. Immediately before Geum-ja receives the gun from Su-young and her husband, the candles are shown, almost burned out. This symbolises that Geum-ja is closer to achieving her goal. Red candles also appear when the families are gathered in the bakery, after they have murdered and buried Mr. Baek. Geum-ja brings forth a cake with five small lit candles adorning it. The families sing the birthday song with melancholy in their voices before blowing the candles out. This is their way of symbolising the end of their pursuit of vengeance. It is important to note that the red elements do not symbolise redemption, as none of the characters achieve this by extracting revenge, it is purely a symbol of the passionate feelings of anger and hate. Within the film, the red is an arbitrary signifier but the signified concepts are rooted within the narrative, not in South Korean culture.

While the red symbolises Geum-ja's revenge, the colour white is the symbol of inner peace. Liptak and Lee write that the consumption of tofu upon being released from prison is a South Korean superstition, meant to ensure that the released party will not return to jail, that they will live a sin free and pure life (2009: 125). As aforementioned, the film's first scene shows Geum-ja refusing to accept the white tofu offered to her upon her release, saying to the preacher "go screw yourself." This is because Geum-ja is not able to commit herself to living a sin free life, not until her vengeance is complete. The final scene of the film, however, shows Geum-ja desperately burying her face in a white cake after uttering the words "Be White. Live White. Like this," to her daughter. This scene proves that even though Geum-ja believed violence would be the way to achieve pardon, it proved unsuccessful. She did not receive forgiveness by cutting off her finger and she did not find inner peace by aiding in the murder of Mr. Baek. She realizes that she is not to look for forgiveness in others, but rather, to be able to forgive herself. As mentioned, Geum-ja sees herself as partially responsible for the loss of lives of the four children abducted after being incarcerated. Because she sees herself as a responsible participant, she needs to be the one to forgive herself for her actions. Thus, by baking a cake with her own hands, and burying herself in it, she is telling herself that she is

ready to move forward with her life, to forget the past. This struggle for inner peace is visible already during the opening credits. The film opens with images of a white background, more and more black and red patterns and drawings appearing on the screen. The colours do not mix together, just as there is no harmony for Geum-ja once her vengeance is complete. She is not able to find inner peace, despite believing for so long that once Mr. Baek is dead on account of his sins, she will be contented.

## 6.6 – Aesthetics

In the two previous films of the trilogy, the protagonists are the ones who commit the acts they believe will lead them to a sense of redemption, in other words, they are the ones who physically extract their vengeance. This is not the case in *Lady Vengeance*. Though initially she had planned on murdering Mr. Baek herself, once she realizes Won-mo was not the only child killed by him, she decides to include the parents and families of the victims. This change of mind is likely linked to Geum-ja's conscience. In order to protect her own daughter from being harmed she accepted responsibility for another person's crime. As she learns that her act of, what she believed to be, protection of a child in fact resulted in the death of four more children, she no longer feels that she is the one who is in need of revenge, that she herself in fact is partially responsible for the tragic outcome. Thus, she becomes a guide for the families, allowing them to find the redemption they need. As Geum-ja informs the family members of what happened to the children she shows them a series of videos taken by Mr. Baek, all of them depicting how the children were murdered. The scene is preceded by a montage of the families reacting in anger, the audio muted. It is not apparent what they are reacting to until Park takes in use the *Kuleshov effect*, editing the same reaction shots between shots of Mr. Baek's home videos. This allows the audiences to feel as the characters are feeling, to understand the agony they are being put through. Instead of immediately allowing the characters to extract their vengeance, Park chose to create a debate between the families, one where they decide what will be their response to the information they have been given. Park explained the reason behind this decision in the following way:

*“Because of this, time goes by as the situation grows thicker and thicker. The rage in the hearts of the viewers grows thinner. Mr. Baek is a total villain, but when he suffers vengeance he looks pitiful. There is a curious reversal where the aggressor*

*seems to become the victim and the victim seems to become the aggressor [...] What this movie expresses is not rage toward the absolute evil represented by Mr. Baek but the question of what meaning there is in punishing someone [...] I didn't want to simply say that revenge is useless or foolish; I wanted to show that even if it is foolish, it's a hard desire to hold back," (cited in Kim, 2007: Loc 1596- 1604).*

Visually, the film mostly relies on dark and contrasting colours, one sequence in particular setting itself apart from the otherwise stylized aesthetic. The video's showing the murders of the children are of low quality as they are meant to have been filmed by Mr. Baek on his personal recording camera. The static quality of the tapes covers the films with a veil of realism that differs greatly from the rest of *Lady Vengeance*, creating an eerie atmosphere, not unlike the type normally seen in horror films, such as for instance *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) or *Paranormal Activity* (2007), features which use the 'found footage' style of editing and filming in order to create a sense of realism. Though Park's intent may not have been to create images suitable for horror films, he most likely rather intended on depicting more realistic images in order to make audiences feel shock, anger and grief. As mentioned, Park wished for audiences to be at the height of their anger for this sequence, thus, realistic images of the murders would prove more effective than overly stylized images. Though the images are more painted by realism than the others throughout the film, Park decided against showing the actual act of murder. At most, he presents a child standing on a chair with a bag over their head. The camera shifts and chooses to put its focus on the legs of the chair as it falls to the ground. The way Park shies away from depicting physical violence occurs throughout the film. For instance, the audiences do not see the stabbing of Mr. Baek, nor the struggle that takes place between Yi-jeong and Mr. Baek, only the aftermath is revealed. On the matter, Park expressed the reason behind it is that he does not want to show explicit violence if he is not required to; "In some cases, it is more effective not to show the violence; however, in other cases, showing it is more effective," (cited in Choi, 08.06.2008). By merely suggesting the violence, it gives the audience the opportunity to visualize the acts on their own terms, thus the violence differs in brutality based on the individual spectator.

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the film was not met with the same acceptance and appreciation by Euro-American fans as the two previous films in the trilogy had. This is likely

due to a complex narrative and a slower pace of action than its predecessors. A user on the IMDb discussion board gave the film a score of three out of ten. The reason for this low score was explained to be precisely because of the film's slow moving, hard to follow narrative: "It could've been a deep psychological study. Unfortunately, that concept is presented somewhere around the 140-minute mark. With less than 30 minutes to unfold, it never gets to go below the surface. Did the rest of the movie make up for it? No, because the plot is muddled and the characters are very boring," (IMDB\_Vits, 01.05.2016). The film, however, was generally well received in South Korea, more so than the first film of the trilogy, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. It is possible to suggest that the reason for the film's domestic success is that it touched upon a subject relevant in recent South Korean history as well as the film offering an alteration of Lee's star image. As aforementioned, the film was produced and released shortly after the discovery of the Missing Frog Boy's grave. Releasing a film such as *Lady Vengeance* could have been catastrophic for the director simply because of the abovementioned case, however Park's film rather served as a platform for the Korean people to work through their grief, and this in two ways. Firstly, the families of the missing children within the feature were able to extract their vengeance on the person who had caused them pain, and secondly, because the film concluded that the only way to find solitude and inner peace is by forgiving yourself and the people who have harmed you.

Despite the negative comments by numerous of the Western audiences, the film was still appreciated for its aesthetic style. The audiences have therefore focused mainly on the visual aspects of the feature rather than attempting to find the genuine connection between the signifiers and the signified concepts. Audiences have been active on the online discussion boards and have also created tutorials on how to look like the film's protagonist, thus fans do conform to the behaviourisms described by Jenkins and Staiger. In 2012, the film was reported to be set for an American remake, with Charlize Theron committed to portraying the protagonist. The English-language version has been in development since 2008, the rights purchased by Denver & Delilah Films and CJ Entertainment, the former mentioned production company founded and owned by Theron (Kit, 28.11.2012). The screenplay is set to be written by William Monahan, whose previous works include *The Departed* (2006) and *Body of Lies* (2008). Of the adaptation, the screenwriter exclaimed "This will be very American and very unexpected, [...] Park is a genius; it's the Everest of adaptations and I've got blood in my teeth to do it," (cited in Kit, 28.11.2012).

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have analysed Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy* and tied it to the history of South Korea, both in terms of the country's cinematic and social past. I have argued, through textual analysis, that the South Korean society plays a vital role in the narratives and themes of Park's abovementioned films. In common for all three features is the commentary made regarding the strict class system still enforced in South Korea, despite all films having taken different approaches to the subject. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* mainly focuses on the difficulties the entire country faced through the IMF crisis in 1997. It portrays how all classes are vulnerable during such a crisis, and that a person's social standing does not offer safety. As a result, there are no victors in the quest for vengeance, as there were no victors in the quest for financial status in South Korea. *Oldboy* comments on the social hierarchy by letting the lower class character of Dae-su be the victim of Woo-jin's game. Woo-jin, on the other hand, is in control of the filmic narration as he has the financial means to do so, leaving the other characters as simple pawns in his game. *Lady Vengeance* rather focuses on the misconceptions of the classes and the harm caused by striving to advance in social standing. As discussed in the previous chapter, South Korean society greatly values education, and it is seen as a definite way of entering a higher social rank. All films have, on a general basis, been well received by Euro-American audiences.

#### 7.1 – Fan participation

As seen throughout this thesis, fans of Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy* have been quite active on the discussion forums available through the Internet Movie Database network. There, they have expressed their satisfaction with the trilogy and offered their opinions. The fans have also shown great interest in other cinematic works as they refer to, and compare, the

features with other films. As discussed, the majority of fans of Park's films are male based on the ratings found on IMDb.com. This is likely due to the advertising done by Tartan Asia Extreme who have in particular aimed their promotions at the male population. Park's features have served as inspiration for several amateur artists as there are numerous drawings and edited photosets available online, however, some have argued that *Oldboy* served as inspiration for something far more atrocious. In April 2007, 23 year-old Cho Seung-hui shot and killed 32 of his fellow students at Virginia Polytech and State University before taking his own life immediately after. Born in South Korea, Cho and his family migrated to the United States in 1992 (Esposito, Potter, Schoetz and Thomas, 17.04.2007). It has been suggested that Cho was inspired by the film *Oldboy*, as a picture of the man holding a hammer in a similar fashion to Oh Dae-su in the promotional poster for the film was sent to NBC News by Cho himself. Shin notes that even though "Cho did not reference the film in any of his notes or messages, and no one can confirm that he had actually seen the film, the speculation over the possible link generated extensive media coverage and the film became the target of moral panics and denunciation of movie violence," (2009: 96). However, there were some reporters who were quick to dismiss these accusations and suggested that films were never the main cause for physical violence. In an article written for Time Magazine, Richard Corliss argued that the violent act was a result of the unrestrictive gun control within the country: "There are loads of violent moments in *Old Boy* [...] But movie violence [...] is not unique to Asia. And if you want to argue that *this* violent film provoked this disturbed young man to commit *this* atrocity, you should be prepared to explain why all those who saw *Oldboy*, and *The Matrix*, and *Saw*, didn't so the same [...] If you're looking for the villain behind Cho's sadistic spree, consider what it has in common with every multiple-murder tragedy in recent U.S. history: the young man had easy access to a few of the 200 million guns available in this country, and used them to slaughter people who never did him harm," (19.04.2007). The matter of horror and violent films being the motivation and inspiration behind acts of violence is not exclusive to *Oldboy*. As Shin noted above, the link between Cho and the film could not be confirmed but as the public were in need of a reason behind the act they blamed the world of media. It is particularly likely that the film was chosen as the explanation not merely because of the photo displaying Cho holding a hammer, but also because of the advertising of the film through Tartan Asia Extreme, who promote their films with taglines such as "exotic and dangerous thrills," and "watch at your own risk..." (Shin, 2009: 86-92).

Apart from the IMDb discussion forums, fans have been most active on the blogging site Tumblr, where they have shared their edited photosets and GIF sets. This concludes that the fans of Park's films have constituted an art world relevant to the features, which is the fourth category of fan behaviourism listed by Jenkins. In addition, fans have conformed to the third category; consumer activism. This is particularly evident in terms of the adaptation by Spike Lee, yet also in the possible adaptation of *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*. While the latter has not yet entered the production stage, fans of the original have stated that they do not wish for an American version. The casting call for Lee's *Oldboy* in particular caused controversy as the director and casting directors were accused of racial stereotyping and not focusing enough on ethnic diversity within the film. This can also be linked to fans feeling of ownership, as they feel protective over the product and do not wish to see it remade in fear of the new version being an inadequate copy. It is clear that the fan base of Park's features is dedicated to the works and conform to the behaviourist modes defined by Jenkins and Staiger.

## 7.2 – Making meaning

After reviewing the comments and critics found online, both by fans and film critics alike, it seems evident that the main attraction for Western viewers in regards to the *Vengeance Trilogy* is not the intricate social commentary found within the narration. Rather, fans have focused on the aesthetic value of the features. It can be argued that rather than making meaning of the subtexts within the films, they are making meaning by simply understanding the narrative progressions. Fans are creating meaning relevant to their own personal and cognitive history, thus they do not feel the need to analyse the director's true intentions within the film. This is likely due to the director's lenience towards creating transnational stories that anyone can, in one way or the other, associate with, while the social commentary specific to South Korea is subtly hidden in the symbols. It is also important to note that Park uses signified concepts that are not rooted in South Korean history or society, rather, they are rooted within the narration or in film history. The former is evident through Park's use of colour, in particular Lee Geum-ja's red eyeshadow. The colour does not function as a remark on the capitalist society as it does in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*; it is a manifestation of Geum-ja's desire for vengeance. The latter becomes evident through Park's referring to Western cinema. The director uses aesthetic and narrative clues borrowed from Western

cinema history, which permits viewers to analyse the features. The signs are still arbitrary, as one needs to be in possession of knowledge regarding the features referenced by Park. One does not necessarily need to understand the complex background of an art form to genuinely enjoy it, since audiences have the ability to create their own signified concepts, ones that fit into their personal societal background. This said, I do not suggest that it is not important to have an understanding of the signs, rather that one does not need to conform to the signified concepts originally introduced by the filmmaker. I would like to add that my research is not entirely conclusive and should be viewed as an analysis of the general fan of Park's work. It is likely that there are, in fact, Western based fans of the feature that do understand the signified concepts rooted in South Korean history and value the films because of them. However, the majority of comments found on discussion forums have suggested that the typical fan values aesthetics over social commentary.

Despite the fact that fans do not focus on the signified concepts intended by the director, they have been positive in their remarks about the features. As seen, several fans have expressed their satisfaction with the films being partially because they offer an alternative to Hollywood mainstream cinema. Still, as discussed, they do not analyse the historic and social commentary. Rather they infer that the filmic style and aesthetic elements serve as an 'other'. It has been suggested that Euro-American fans are simply in search for the Oriental within these films, that they view them based on a form of fetishized idea of what South East Asian cinema and culture consists of. I would rather suggest that the films are being viewed, and appreciated, for their aesthetic value. The fans are drawn to these films partially because of their branding as Asia Extreme films, but they suggest the films to others due to the stylized aesthetics. I will suggest that the films have gained their status in the Western film market largely due to the fans eager participation. The fans have, in fact, played a vital role in the distribution of the films through the streaming site Netflix as they voiced their complaints of the films being excluded from the site.



### 7.3 – Further research

In this thesis, I have discussed the American adaptation of *Oldboy*, which was released in 2013. The film has been subject of negative critique from fans of the *Vengeance Trilogy* and film critics alike. The reason for me choosing to incorporate said film in this thesis is mainly due to the negative comments made about the feature. Several statements about the adaptation claim that the film is of lower quality than the original due to the lack of understanding of Korean film and culture. Steve Rose wrote an article for The Guardian titled *Why Hollywood Doesn't Get South Korean Cinema* (29.11.2013), in which he lists reasons such as Korean filmmaker's tendency of bending genres, their preference of complicated narratives with surprising plot twists, and the aesthetic ambitions of South Korean auteurs. Still, American film studios have purchased the rights to several South Korean features, and some have already been released to audiences. This study has put its focus on the fans' abilities to understand the connection between signifier and signified concepts within Park's trilogy, however, with the amount of South Korean adaptations which are set to be produced, I intend on further researching the way these films tackle the intricate concepts and symbolisms of said films. In addition to this, it is of interest to research how South Korean directors have adapted to making films directly aimed at Western viewers. In 2013, Park had his Hollywood debut with the film *Stoker*. The film was criticised for being "an altogether less confident, more stumbling enterprise," than audiences had seen previously from the director (Brooks, 28.02.2013). The film in question relies less on violent imagery than the *Vengeance Trilogy*, and the above comment suggest that viewers of the film wished for something similar to the director's earlier features, much like South Korean spectators did after the release of *JSA*. The fifth chapter of this thesis has briefly suggested that Spike Lee has in his adaptation of *Oldboy* partially used some of the similar signifier's as Park, however, based on the social context of the film, the signified concepts have changed. Therefore, it would be worth researching how, and if, the signified concepts have been changed in Park's American feature. The matter of American remakes of East Asian films have also been a topic of discussion for netizens due to Hollywood's dependency on Caucasian actors and actresses within their films. As discussed in chapter five, *Oldboy* was not merely criticized for mainly casting Caucasian performers but also for the negative descriptions of the roles advertised for people of colour. The matter of Caucasian hierarchy within Hollywood has been under debate for a long period of time, and I wish to further explore how this has impacted film audiences in terms of their

interest in viewing films originally created with a full non-Caucasian cast. Despite Hollywood having come a long way since the early days of cinema, the lack of diversity still remains a problem, one that is in dire need of resolving.

# Bibliography

## 7.1 – Literature

Bowyer, J., (2004) *The Cinema of Japan and Korea*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Columbia University: Wallflower Press

Chandler, R., (2002) *Semiotics: The Basics*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Oxon: Routledge

Damico, A. M. & Quay, S. E., (2016) *Stories and Audiences*.

In: *21<sup>st</sup> Century TV Dramas: Exploring the New Golden Age*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. USA: Praeger, pp. 1-34

Frentzos, C. G., (2013) *Warfare and National Building in the Republic of Korea: 1953-1973*.

In: Frentzos, C. G. and Thompson, A. S., ed., *The Routledge Handbook of American Military and Diplomatic History, 1865 to Present*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, pp. 225-232

Gerber, L., (2011) *Introduction*

In: *The Second Amendment: The Right to Bear Arms*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, pp. 4-15

Harris, R., (2013) *Introduction to the Bloomsbury Revelations Edition*

In: Harris, R., ed., *Ferdinand de Saussure: Course in General Linguistics*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. xiv-xxii

Hickey, E. W., (2015) *Profile 12.1 – The Frog Boys*

In: *Serial Murders and Their Victims*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Boston: Cengage Learning, pp. 420

Jaffe, S. & Kim, M. O., (2010) *The IMF Crisis and Its Impact on South Korea*

In: *The New Korea: An Inside Look at South Korea's Economic Rise*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., USA: Amacon, pp. 46-62

Jenkins, H., (2013) *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed., New York: Routledge

Jo, J., Kwak, H. J. & Min, E., (2003) *Korean Film: History, Resistance and Democratic Imagination*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. USA: Praeger Publishers

- Jung, S., (2011) *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols*, Kindle ed. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press
- Kim, K., (2005) *Horror as Critique in Tell Me Something and Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. In: Shin, C. and Stringer J., ed., *New Korean Cinema*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 106-115
- Kim, Y. J., (2007) *Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook*, Kindle ed. Seoul: Korean Film Council
- Kirkup, J. R., (2007) *Ritual, Punitive, Legal and Iatrogenic Causes*  
In: *A History of Limb Amputation*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. London: Springer-Verlag London Limited, pp. 35-44
- Korean Culture and Information Services, (2012) *A Look Inside South Korean Cinema: K-MOVIE, The World's Spotlight on Korean Film*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. The Republic of Korea: Korean Culture and Information Services
- Lee, N. Y. J., (2008) *Salute to Mr. Vengeance!: The Making of a Transnational Auteur Park Chan-wook*  
In: Hunt, L. & Leung, W. F., ed., *East Asian Cinemas: Exploring Transnational Connections on Film*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, pp. 203-219
- Lee, S. & Liptak, P. N., (2009) *As Much as a Rat's Tail: Korean Slang*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Minnesota: Exile Press
- Merajver-Kurlat, M., (2009) *Filmography and Awards*  
In: *Kim Ki-duk: On Movies, the Visual Language*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York: Jorge Pinto Books Inc., pp. 87-90
- Nardini, D., (2013) *South Korea: Our Story*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. USA: Xlibris Corporation
- Paquet, D., (2005) *The Korean Film Industry: 1992 to the Present*  
In: Shin, C. and Stringer J., ed., *New Korean Cinema*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 32-50
- Rainey, L. D., (2010) *Confucius' World and His Life*  
In: *Confucius and Confucianism: The Essentials*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. USA: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 1-22

Savada, A. M. & Shaw, W., (1992) *South Korea: A Country Study*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. USA: Library of Congress

Seth, M. J., (2002) *Introduction*

In: *Education Fever: Society, Politics and the pursuit of Schooling in South Korea*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. USA: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 1-8

Shin, C., (2009) *The Art of Branding: Tartan "Asia Extreme" Films*

In: Choi, J., and Wada-Marciano, M., ed., *Horror to the Extreme: Changing Boundaries in Asian Cinema*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp. 85-100

Staiger, J., (2005) *Media Reception Studies*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. New York: New York University Press

Taylor-Jones, K. E., (2013) *Rising Sun, Divided Land: Japanese and South Korean Filmmakers*, Kindle ed. New York: Columbia University Press

Thanouli, E. (2009) *Looking for access in narrative complexity. The new and old in Old Boy*.

In: Buckland, W., ed., *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. USA: Wiley & Sons, pp. 117-230

Wollen, P., (2010) *The Semiology of the Cinema*

In: Furstenau, M., ed., *The Film Theory Reader*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Oxon: Routledge, pp 171-185

Zgheib, P. W., (2015) *Organ Selling: When It Becomes a Business*

In: Zgheib, P.W., ed., *Business Ethics and Diversity in the Modern Workplace*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. USA: IGI Global, pp. 268-277

## 7.2 - Online Articles and Film Reviews

Angry Asian Man, (08.03.2012) *Oldboy Remake Casting Call*

Angry Asian Man [online] Available at: <http://blog.angryasianman.com/2012/08/oldboy-remake-casting-call.html>

[Accessed 07.04.2016]

Asia-Pacific-Connections, (2000-2008) *Korean Confucianism*

Asia Pacific Connections [online] Available at:

<http://www.asia-pacific-connections.com/confucianism.html>

[Accessed 03.02.2016]

Bisley, A., (08.08.2013) *The Master: An Interview with Park Chan-wook*

The Lumière Reader [online] Available at: <http://lumiere.net.nz/index.php/an-interview-with-park-chan-wook/>

[Accessed 12.10.2015]

Brandon Gaille, (17.09.2013) *Top 5 Most Recognizable Brands in the World*

Brandon Gaille [online] Available at: <http://brandongaille.com/top-5-most-recognizable-brands-the-world/>

[Accessed 31.03.2016]

Brooks, X., (28.02.2013) *Stoker – Review*

The Guardian [online] Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/feb/28/stoker-review>

[Accessed 10.05.2016]

Carbon Costume, (11.10.2013) *Oldboy*

Carbon Costume [online] Available at: <http://carboncostume.com/oldboy/>

[Accessed 08.03.2016]

The Cinematheque, (May, 2013) *Park Chan Wook – The Vengeance Trilogy*

The Cinematheque [online] Available at:

<http://www.thecinematheque.ca/park-chan-wook-the-vengeance-trilogy>

[Accessed 02.02.2016]

Choi, A., (08.06.2008) *Sympathy for the Old Boy...*

Ikonen [online] Available at:

<http://www.ikonenmagazin.de/interview/Park.htm>

[Accessed 24.01.2016]

CNN, (21.07.2014) *A Brief History of Netflix*

CNN [online] Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/21/showbiz/gallery/netflix-history/>

[Accessed 13.02.2016]

Corliss, R., (19.04.2007) *The Movie that Motivated Cho?*

Time Magazine [online] Available at:

<http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1612724,00.html>

[Accessed 02.05.2016]

Corrigan, K., (24.11.2015) *5 Exceptional Park Chan-wook Films!*

Bloody Disgusting [online] Available at: <http://bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/3369460/5-exceptional-park-chan-wook-films/>

[Accessed 28.04.2016]

Find Law, (2016) *Time Limits for Charges: State Criminal Statutes of Limitations*

Find Law [online] Available at: <http://criminal.findlaw.com/criminal-law-basics/time-limits-for-charges-state-criminal-statutes-of-limitations.html>

[Accessed 08.03.2016]

Dargis, M., (19.08.2005) *A Child is Kidnapped and an Explosion of Shocking Violence Ensues*

The New York Times [online] Available at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/19/movies/a-child-is-kidnapped-and-an-explosion-of-shocking-violence-ensues.html>

[Accessed 04.12.2015]

Esposito, R., Potter, N., Schoetz, D., and Thomas, P., (17.04.2007) *Killer's Note: 'You Caused Me to Do This'*

ABC News [online] Available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3048108&page=1>

[Accessed 02.05.2016]

Gleiberman, O., (04.12.2013) *Oldboy*

Entertainment Weekly [Online] Available at: <http://www.ew.com/article/2013/12/04/oldboy-movie>

[Accessed 19.12.2015]

Gonzales, S., (05.06.2015) *'Friends' Fans Helped Make Monica and Chandler a Couple*

Mashable [online] Available at: <http://mashable.com/2015/06/05/friends-monica-chandler/#26vvhZD0.sqy>

[Accessed 24.04.2016]

Holiday, R., (16.07.2012) *What is Media Manipulation? – A Definition and Explanation*  
Forbes [online] Available at: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ryanholiday/2012/07/16/what-is-media-manipulation-a-definition-and-explanation/#63501f43fc6b>

[Accessed 16.04.2016]

Kim, T. J., (16.09.2011) *Organ Trafficking Increasing*

The Korea Times [online] Available at:

[http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/09/117\\_94910.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/09/117_94910.html)

[Accessed 29.01.2016]

Kim, Y. W., (21.04.2013) *Concern Grows Over Korean Gun Violence*

Korea Herald [online] Available at:

<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20130421000062>

[Accessed 12.04.2016]

Kirk, D., (14.08.2001) *Koreans Slice Their Fingers in Anti-Japan Rite*

The New York times [online] Available at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/14/world/koreans-slice-their-fingers-in-anti-japan-rite.html>

[Accessed 21.11.2015]

Kit, B., (28.11.2012) *Charlize Theron to Star, William Monahan to Adapt 'Sympathy for Lady Vengeance'*

The Hollywood Reporter [online] Available at: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/charlize-theron-star-william-monahan-395108>

[Accessed 02.05.2016]

Korea4expats.com, (16.03.2015) *Personalities by Blood Type*

Korea4expats [online] Available at:

<http://www.korea4expats.com/article-blood-types.html>

[Accessed 27.12.2015]

Korean Film (19.10.2005) *Film Award Ceremonies in Korea*

Korean Film [online] Available at: <http://www.koreanfilm.org/awards.html>

[Accessed 03.02.2016]



Lee, H. W., (11.01.2011) *Will Film do Justice to Missing Children Case?*

The Korea Times [online] Available at:

[http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2011/01/135\\_79492.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2011/01/135_79492.html)

[Accessed: 08.04.2016]

Macaulay, S., (19.05.2009) *Cinema with Bite: On the Films of Park Chan-wook*

Focus Features [online] Available at:

[http://www.focusfeatures.com/article/cinema\\_with\\_bite\\_on\\_the\\_films\\_of\\_park\\_chan\\_wook?film=thirst](http://www.focusfeatures.com/article/cinema_with_bite_on_the_films_of_park_chan_wook?film=thirst)

[Accessed 20.01.2016]

Mendelson, S., (27.11.2013) *Box Office Analysis and Review: 'Oldboy' Is, By Default, Spike Lee's Worst Film Ever*

Forbes [online] Available at: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2013/11/27/review-oldboy-is-by-default-spike-lees-worst-film-ever/>

[Accessed: 13.11.2015]

Na, J. J., (25.01.2013) *US May Learn from Korea's Gun Control*

The Korea Times [online] Available at:

[http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2013/01/116\\_129474.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2013/01/116_129474.html)

[Accessed 12.04.2016]

National Children's Alliance (2014) *National Statistics on Child Abuse*

National Children's Alliance [online] Available at:

<http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/media-room/media-kit/national-statistics-child-abuse>

[Accessed 13.04.2016]

Osenlund, R. K., (04.03.2013) *Five Questions with Stoker Director Park Chan-wook*

Filmmaker Magazine [online] Available at: <http://filmmakermagazine.com/66190-five-questions-with-stoker-director-park-chan-wook/#.VyyHxkfI3fY>

[Accessed 02.02.2016]

Paquet, D., (01.03.2007) *A Short History of Korean Film*

Korean Film [online] Available at: <http://www.koreanfilm.org/history.html>

[Accessed: 27.11.2015]

Popper, B., (19.01.2016) *Netflix Whizzes Past 75 Million Subscribers Thanks to Record International Growth*

TheVerge [online] Available at: <http://www.theverge.com/2016/1/19/10790282/netflix-q4-2015-earnings>

[Accessed: 12.04.2016]

Pulver, A., (31.03.2016) *Bryan Cranston and Kevin Heart to Star in The Intouchables Remake*

The Guardian [online] Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/mar/31/breaking-bad-bryan-cranston-to-star-in-the-intouchables-remake>

[Accessed 06.04.2016]

Rodriguez, J., (24.04.2016) *DreamWorks: Stop Whitewashing Asian Characters!*

The Petition Site [online] Available at:

<http://www.thepetitionsite.com/683/366/733/dreamworks-dont-whitewash-japanese-films/>

[Accessed 24.04.2016]

Rose, S., (29.11.2013) *Why Hollywood Doesn't Get South Korean Cinema*

The Guardian [online] Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/nov/29/old-boy-remake-south-korea-cinema>

[Accessed 24.10.2015]

Scmp, (25.07.2015) *'Cold Cases' May Walk Again as South Korea Removes Statute of Limitations on Murder*

South China Morning Post [online] Available at:

<http://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1843628/south-korea-removes-statute-limitations-murder>

[Accessed 08.03.2016]

Shazam, (2016) *About Us*

Shazam [online] Available at: <http://www.shazam.com/company>

[Accessed 31.03.2016]

Smith, H., (21.04.2016) *[Event] KCon France 2016 Releases Impressive Line-Up!*

United Kpop [online] Available at: <http://unitedkpop.com/2016/04/event-kcon-france-2016-releases-impressive-line-up/>

[Accessed 01.05.2016]

Sneider, J., (29.08.2012) *'Oldboy' Helmer Saddles Up for 'Brigands'*  
Variety [online] Available at: <http://variety.com/2012/film/news/oldboy-helmer-saddles-up-for-brigands-1118058420/>  
[Accessed 25.04.2016]

Statistic Brain, (01.12.2015) *Social Networking Statistics*  
Statistic Brain [online] Available at: <http://www.statisticbrain.com/social-networking-statistics/>  
[Accessed 31.03.2016]

Sperling, S., (16.01.2004) *An Interview With Chan-Wook Park*  
Acid Logic [online] Available at:  
[http://www.acidlogic.com/chan\\_wook\\_park.htm](http://www.acidlogic.com/chan_wook_park.htm)  
[Accessed 01.02.2016]

Ward, D., (17.11.2010) *Where Netflix Fails: Foreign Films*  
High-Def Digest [online] Available at: <http://www.highdefdigest.com/blog/netflix-foreign-films/>  
[Accessed 04.03.2016]

Young, N., (23.03.2004) *Park Life*  
Neil Young's Film Lounge [online] Available at:  
<http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/parkchanwookinterview.html>  
[Accessed 29.01.2016]

### 7.3 - User commentaries and statistics

AnotherCleverName, Luigitornado & MartenBroadcloak, (19.02.2015-14.04.2015) *It's Almost Amazing How Bad Sharlto Was in This Movie*  
Internet Movie Database Message Boards [online] Available at:  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1321511/board/thread/240486060>  
[Accessed 27.03.2016]

Bjar-Bjar, (22.08.2013) *Why No Finger?*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451094/board/thread/218695104>

[Accessed 06.04.2016]

BlackDog123, (28.11.2011) *I Could Have Done Without the Puppy Murder*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451094/board/thread/191660047?p=1>

[Accessed 06.04.2016]

BoxOfficeMojo.com, (2016a) *2004 Opening Grosses*

Box Office Mojo [online] Available at:

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?view2=opening&yr=2004&p=.htm>

[Accessed 08.03.2016]

- (2016b) *Monthly Box Office*

Box Office Mojo [Online] Available at:

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/monthly/?chart=bymonth&view=releasedate&month=11>

[Accessed 31.03.2016]

- (2016c) *Lady Vengeance (2006)*

Box Office Mojo [online] Available at:

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&id=sympathyforladyvengeance.htm>

[Accessed 06.04.2016]

- (2016d) *Oldboy (2013)*

Box Office Mojo [online] Available at:

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=oldboy2013.htm>

[Accessed 31.03.2016]

- (2016e) *Stoker (2013)*

Box Office Mojo [online] Available at:

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&id=stoker.htm>

[Accessed 05.04.2016]

- (2016f) *Thirst (2009)*

Box Office Mojo [online] Available at:

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=thirst.htm>

[Accessed 05.04.2016]

DevianArt Search, (08.03.2016) *Fan Art: Oldboy*

Devian Art [online] Available at: <http://www.deviantart.com/browse/all/fanart/?q=oldboy>

[Accessed 08.03.2016]

Enk, (02.12.2013) *5 Reasons Why Spike Lee's 'Oldboy' Bombed at the Box Office*

Yahoo Movies [online] Available at: <https://www.yahoo.com/movies/bp/5-reasons-why-spike-lee-oldboy-bombed-box-205218538.html?nf=1>

[Accessed 12.12.2015]

Esbcpa, (03.09.2009) *Hard to Feel 'Sympathy...*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451094/board/nest/146754455?ref\\_=tt\\_bd\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451094/board/nest/146754455?ref_=tt_bd_1)

[Accessed 02.05.2016]

Fanfiction.net (2016) *Search: India Stoker*

Fan Fiction [online] Available at:

<https://www.fanfiction.net/search.php?keywords=india+stoker&type=story&match=any&formatid=any&sort=0&genreid1=0&genreid2=0&characterid1=0&characterid2=0&characterid3=0&characterid4=0&words=0&ready=1&categoryid=0#>

[Accessed 10.05.2016]

ForTheLoveOfPuppies, (27.09.2014) *Movie Title*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1321511/board/thread/234929772>

[Accessed 07.04.2016]

Haynep, (21.01.2011) *Spring 2011 Red Monolid Eyes (Sympathy for Lady Vengeance Makeup Inspiration*

YouTube [Online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0E3JQRwgDKs>

[Accessed 27.03.2016]

IMDb, (2016a) *Box Office/Business for Lady Vengeance (2005)*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451094/business?ref=tt\\_dt\\_bus](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451094/business?ref=tt_dt_bus)

[Accessed 06.04.2016]

- (2016b) *Box Office/Business for Mister Vengeance (2002)*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0310775/business?ref=tt\\_dt\\_bus](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0310775/business?ref=tt_dt_bus)

[Accessed 06.04.2016]

- (2016c) *Box Office/Business for Oldboy (2013)*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1321511/business?ref=tt\\_dt\\_bus](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1321511/business?ref=tt_dt_bus)

[Accessed 31.03.2016]

- (2016d) *User Ratings for Lady Vengeance (2005)*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451094/ratings?ref=tt\\_ov\\_rt](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451094/ratings?ref=tt_ov_rt)

[Accessed 06.04.2016]

- (2016e) *User Ratings for Oldboy (2003)*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/ratings?ref=tt\\_ov\\_rt](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/ratings?ref=tt_ov_rt)

[Accessed 22.02.2016]

(2016f) *User Ratings for Oldboy (2013)*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1321511/ratings?ref=tt\\_ov\\_rt](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1321511/ratings?ref=tt_ov_rt)

[Accessed 31.03.2016]

- (2016g) *User Ratings for Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance (2002)*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0310775/ratings?ref=tt\\_ov\\_rt](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0310775/ratings?ref=tt_ov_rt)

[Accessed 18.02.2016]

- (2016h) *Reviews and Ratings for Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance (2002)*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0310775/reviews?ref=tt\\_urv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0310775/reviews?ref=tt_urv)

[Accessed 18.02.2016]

IMDB\_Vits, (01.05.2016) *3/10 Here's why*

Internet Movie database [online] Available at:

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451094/board/thread/256695105>

[Accessed 02.05.2016]

Lee, S., (04.08.2012) *Spike Lee Status*

Twitter [online] Available at: <https://twitter.com/SpikeLee/status/231929902721531904>

[Accessed 07.04.2016]

Meester, N., (19.12.2007) *If Only We Were All Living in Asia...*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/reviews?ref=tt\\_urv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/reviews?ref=tt_urv)

[Accessed 01.03.2016]

MisterBabadook, (12.03.2016) *Is It Worth Watching for Elizabeth Olsen's Nude Scenes?*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1321511/board/thread/254719157>

[Accessed 27.03.2016]

MrsBuckyBarnes, (27.10.2015) *Re: Is Adrian's Family Totally Deaf?*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1321511/board/thread/233232924>

[Accessed 14.04.2016]

RottenTomatoes.com, (2016a) *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (2005)*

Rotten Tomatoes [online] Available at:

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/sympathy\\_for\\_lady\\_vengeance/?search=lady%20vengeance](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/sympathy_for_lady_vengeance/?search=lady%20vengeance)

[Accessed 06.04.2016]

- (2016b) *Oldboy (2005)*

Rotten Tomatoes [online] Available at: <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/oldboy/>

[Accessed 04.05.2016]

- (2016c) *Oldboy* (2013)  
Rotten Tomatoes [online] Available at:  
[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/oldboy\\_2013/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/oldboy_2013/)  
[Accessed 31.03.2016]
- (2016d) *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance* (2002)  
Rotten Tomatoes [online] Available at:  
[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/sympathy\\_for\\_mr\\_vengeance\\_2002/?search=sympathy%20for%20mr%20vengeance](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/sympathy_for_mr_vengeance_2002/?search=sympathy%20for%20mr%20vengeance)  
[Accessed 08.02.2016]

Ryuakamrvengeance, (07.03.2007) *One Step Ahead of America*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:  
[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_urv](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/reviews?ref_=tt_urv)  
[Accessed 01.03.2016]

Thanlon11, (24.06.2014) *Re: The Hammer Fight Scene*

Internet Movie Database [online] Available at:  
[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1321511/board/nest/231336942?ref\\_=tt\\_bd\\_5](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1321511/board/nest/231336942?ref_=tt_bd_5)  
[Accessed 13.04.2016]

Tumblr Search, (2016a) *Search: Oldboy*

Tumblr [online] Available at: <https://www.tumblr.com/search/oldboy>  
[Accessed 08.03.2016]

-(2016b) *Search: Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*

Tumblr [online] Available at:  
<https://www.tumblr.com/search/sympathy+for+mr+vengeance>  
[Accessed 20.02.2016]

#### 7.4 – Analysis material

*Oldboy*. (2003) Dir. Park Chan-wook. [DVD] South Korea: Egg Films, Show East

*Oldboy*. (2013) Dir. Spike Lee. [DVD] USA: 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, Good universe, OB Productions, Vertigo Entertainment



*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance.* (2002) Dir. Park Chan-wook. [DVD] South Korea: CJ Entertainment, Studio Box

*Sympathy for Lady Vengeance.* (2005) Dir. Park Chan-wook. [DVD] South Korea: CJ Capital Investment, Centurion Investment, Ilshin Capital Investments, Korea Capital Investment, Moho Film, Samsung Venture Capital, TSJ Entertainment