

A Sociohistorical Contextual Analysis of the Use of Violence in Park Chan-wook's
Vengeance Trilogy

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A Sociohistorical Contextual Analysis of the Use of Violence in Park Chan-wook's
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ABSTRACT

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This article situates the three films of Park Chan-wook's, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Oldboy* (2003), and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005) within recent South Korean history and offers a historicized analysis of the films' substantial use of violence. Through contextual analysis that looks to the films as well as the history and society that produced them, this article discovers that the violence is an allegorical tool which serves to convey social commentary pointed at the processes of democratization and capitalism in South Korea.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	6
Methodologies and Approach.....	7
Chapter Summary	16
Chapter 1: The Equal Inequity In <i>Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance</i>	22
Formal Analysis and Reception.....	23
Central Themes	26
Capitalism and Ultraviolence.....	28
Patriarchy and Masculinity	31
Citizenship, National Identity, Nationalism, and The Historical Context	32
Chapter 2: <i>Oldboy</i> and the False Hope of Class Mobility	38
Formal Analysis and Reception	39
The Korea in Oldboy	41
History in Oldboy	43
Central Themes	47
Class, Masculinity, and Social Mobility.....	48
Ultraviolence as Mobility and Resistance.....	51
Citizenship, the National Body, and Capitalism.....	53
Chapter 3: The Contemporary Woman's Role in <i>Lady Vengeance</i>	58
Central Themes	59

	5
Constructions of Femininity	59
Constructions of Patriarchal Masculinity.....	66
The Historical Context.....	69
Education in Korea	69
Gender Inequity in Korea.....	71
Ultraviolence as Legitimate Resistance.....	74
Conclusion	78
References.....	86

INTRODUCTION

In his article on contemporary Korean cinema, Grady Hendrix speaks of international perceptions towards the industry as one that combines “art” and “exploitation” (18). Filmmaker Park Chan-wook is a key contributor to the creation of those perceptions. One of the more successful filmmakers to recently come out of South Korea, Park Chan-wook has contributed to the growth and increased global visibility of South Korea’s film industry. He is also one of the nation’s most controversial filmmakers. In 2004, Park’s *Oldboy* (2003) won the Grand Prix Award at the Cannes Film Festival, a controversial decision that garnered a considerable amount of criticism. Hendrix notes that by then, western audiences had already decided on Korean cinema, and by the time *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (*Boksuneun naui geot*)(2002) received a U.S. release, Park was already “a marked man” (18).

Why is Park such a polarizing filmmaker? What is it about his films that gains him awards yet also invites such criticism as “the violence carries no meaning beyond the creator's ego” (Dargis 14)? There is one binding element in Park’s most well known, if not notorious work, the Vengeance Trilogy. Graphic violence or ultraviolence is a central element in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, *Oldboy*, and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (*Chinjeolhan geumjassi*)(2005). While many in the West may perceive Asian cinema as being “extreme” (sensational, egregious, as opposed to just excessive)¹, the ultraviolence is explicit not only by Western standards but also by Korean standards.

¹ Grady Hendrix notes that Kim Ki-duk’s *The Isle* (2000) was “a whole slew of misconceptions about Korean movies and violence were cemented in the minds of western audiences (18).

Beginning with the assumption that it is the ultraviolence that ties these three films together, this thesis asks: why does Park emphasize and explore brutality in his films? What functions might it serve for the audience? If this is not gratuitous violence “for the sake of violence,” then what is its significance? While violence is the recurring motif, it is not presented in the same manner through the course of these films. This is where this study originated, with an interest in how the atrocities served different narrative functions. However, while there are differences in the actual sequences, the films reveal consistent, strong themes – themes reinforced through the different forms of brutality.

At their core, the films are concerned with issues of gender and class, and in a broader context, society and history. The personal struggles for vengeance are allegorical for social struggles and this thesis finds that specific anxieties connected to a very specific period in recent South Korean history are expressed in the films. Those are anxieties formed in the wake of the processes of democratization and capitalization in the country. The Vengeance Trilogy is speaking to and speaking of Korea, and through that dialogue we can see not only discourses of popular nationalism prominent throughout this period, but also a response and resistance to that popular nationalism.

Methodologies and Approach

For this analysis, I will turn to a number of methodologies. My term “ultraviolence” will evoke both a framework of analysis and a descriptive lens. I take my lead from an incipient body of work that studies violence in film; a principal scholar of

this field is Stephen Prince whose works include *Screening Violence* (which he edited) and *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*. Prince is less interested in definitions of ultraviolence than in rethinking the relation between film violence, history, and the viewer. He places it within a specific historical context and then assigns different attributes to it. For Prince, ultraviolence is the mode of cinema violence that appeared in late 1960's Hollywood films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Several elements facilitated its appearance including the introduction of the Motion Picture Association of America's revised Production Code of America; technological advancements in special effects; and rising social consciousness and cultural changes related to the Vietnam War and social equality movements. For Prince then, ultraviolence is a comparative mode that diverges from cinema violence before its emergence. It is not only more graphic and explicit; it is also socially conscious and an allegorical mode. Prince is also engaged with the issue of ultraviolence in relation to spectatorship, approaching it through a model of historical audience reception, but mostly through studies of the psychological effects. In addition, Prince gauges the varying responses to film violence in relation to authorial intent: while some critics found the films repulsive, many spectators seemed to find the films exhilarating, and both of these responses were incongruous with the intent of the directors (Prince, 2000).

However, Prince's work is problematic and will only be referred to as a guideline. Prince differentiates between ultraviolent directors and validates some because of their pro-social intent (Sam Peckinpah, Martin Scorsese) while dismissing others as indulgent and excessive (Quentin Tarantino). For Prince the presence of excessive violence in itself

is not significant and worth studying. Instead, it is almost as if certain authors are worth analysis *in spite* of the violence and not because of it. For Prince, the authorial intent is much more overt in these filmmakers and this is what separates them from less important filmmakers who either have “subtextual” commentary or none at all. It can also be seen that the more overtly stylistic filmmakers are decried, and that Prince is insinuating that style equals to superficiality.

Prince takes authorial intent on a direct basis; he assumes that what the filmmakers intended are directly represented onscreen (even though he does acknowledge that spectators will have different, “wrong” readings). I contend that the authorial intent is not as important as the films’ dialogues with historical audiences and I do not believe that authorial intent can be taken so directly. In addition I do not believe that certain filmmakers and certain films are more valuable than others. Rather, the use of gratuitous violence is significant in itself, because of its inclusion but also because spectators are engaging with it. Films do not exist in their own cultural vacuums and all films are in dialogue with something. These films reflect the culture, society, and history that produced them. My use of authorship in this thesis will differ from Prince’s. I will refer to Park by looking at his consistent use of violence and the formal motifs that the films share.

Prince’s use of “social effects” must also be scrutinized. Prince dismisses the idea that cinema violence can be cathartic, that aggressive emotions can be purged through the act of viewing. Prince argues that while studies on media violence have historically offered varying results, the scientific consensus is that catharsis is not a variable effect of

viewing violent content. Prince's use of social effects strays away from a cultural approach, looking to scientific data to address the elusive yet always present issue of "does violent media create violent behavior?" With the issue of catharsis, Prince is criticizing commentators who defend the use of cinema violence on the basis of some sort of positive effect. Violence can only be worthy when it exists as social commentary.

Whether viewing sadistic content can lead to aggressive behavior or not is irrelevant to a cultural study; the films will be produced and watched regardless. What *is* relevant is this very phenomenon: the condemnation of certain works in cultures where violence is abundant. And whether or not scientists have disproved catharsis, Park *contends* that he is offering catharsis (Macnab). This raises the question: cathartic to whom and to what emotions? My answer is that the "catharsis," or rather the expulsion of emotions is occurring in relation to anxieties and frustrations of developments in the historical contexts of which the films were made.

One last, important distinction that I have to make is that this study also has the possibility of falling into the same problem as Prince's work. In no way do I intend for this study to be a validation of a disreputable body of work by an ultraviolent director. I am not studying these films and saying that they are worth study because they too have social commentary and historical value. Rather, I am saying that even these films that are indicative of a "bankrupt, reductive postmodernism" are worth studying for they do not exist in a cultural vacuum (Dargis 14). Even the most disreputable films are products of a society and a culture and are reflective of that culture that produces and consumes it.

Nonetheless, this study echoes Prince's desire to make meaning out of representations of violence. I find Prince's work especially valuable for his schema of analyzing ultraviolence on three levels: history, aesthetics, and social effects. I too evoke a historical context in which the films were made, and in which the meaning of an aesthetic of savagery must be considered. To a certain degree, Prince's work also directs my own in the sense that I look to political allegory within the films, but without an added emphasis on authorial intent. Instead, my main method of approaching the films will be textual analysis, which may or may not resist authorial intent. I intend to interpret thematic, formal, and narrative motifs that occur through all three of the films, which might have special meaning or resonance for Korean spectators during those historical moments.

I look to Kim Kyung Hyun's "'Tell the Kitchen That There's Too Much Buchu in the Dumpling': Reading Park Chan-wook's 'Unknowable' *Old Boy*" in order to address contemporary existing literature on the Vengeance Trilogy. Attitudes towards the film both in and outside of academia focus on the formal strategies of the films and I use Kim's article to question those attitudes. According to Kim, there is a "postmodern" disposition to all three films where the image is simply an image. Due to its lack of any relation to reality, it is "unknowable" (84). Kim posits that the central motifs to Park's work including the "flattened mise-en-scène, the commodified body, the mystification of spatial markers, and the disjointed juxtaposition of images and sound" contribute to the creation of "the post-politics or anti history of Park Chan-wook" (87). In essence, Kim positions *Oldboy* on a formal level that renders its substanceless as intentional strategy.

Like Prince, Kim essentially also corroborates popular criticism towards the films by positing that superficiality is equivalent to overt stylization. Kim makes several strong arguments including his formal analysis but neglects to take into account the films' socially charged narratives. The films are specifically about a knowable Korea: the very Korea of the 2000's and includes images of recent history in order to reinforce that.

Kim's account of the "unknowable" is not entirely clear. He claims that his three goals in the essay are to analyze the ways in which the motifs in the films "explore the potential of cinema in ways that may have vexing epistemological implications", and to analyze Park's notions of vengeance in the context of Nietzschean thought, particularly "ressentiment" and to investigate whether a political reading is possible at all (87). His analysis of vengeance seems to be extraneous to his argument of the "unknowable" and does not aid to clarify it. I will counter Kim's essay with my analysis and argue as to why the Trilogy is not part of a "post-politics," "anti-history".

Mika Ko's "The Break-up of the National Body: Cosmetic Multiculturalism and Films of Miike Takashi" has also informed my work. Using Terry Eagleton's and Mary Douglas's models, Ko centers her essay around the use of body as metaphor and applies her methodology to the films of Miike Takashi. She argues that the body metaphor has become a key issue in Japanese cinema and its role in national identity (30). Ko situates Miike in this context by citing the abundance of violence that the body endures and links it to other motifs. Most notable is the concern with a pan-Asian Japan. Miike frequently features non-Japanese characters and/or the life of Japanese characters in other Asian countries. Ko argues that the mutilation of the personal body is allegorical for the weak

national body, and the influx of foreigners in Japan (31). Taking my lead from Ko, I too use her model of body metaphors to contextualize my analysis of violence within recent Korean history.

In order to do this, I must consider the construction of Korea and more importantly, Korean citizens in the films. First I turn to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and his statement:

My point of departure is that nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind (4).

If the nation of Korea is an "imagined community" and nationality, nation-ness, nationalism, and national identity are all cultural artifacts, how are these aspects imagined within a cultural artifact? Like Miike's construction of Japan, Park's Korea cannot exist without its citizens.

Giorgio Agamben discusses the conception of citizenship in France in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. He contends that citizenship can be defined in two ways: either through place of birth or through lineage i.e. blood (Agamben, 1998). Most of the characters in the Vengeance Trilogy either bleed or become mutilated at one point or another. These characters are citizens of the diegetic Korea, and their blood, or more specifically bloodshed defines citizenship. Like Agamben's account of life in contemporary Western societies, life itself is regulated and has a very specific role in the Korea of the Vengeance Trilogy. For Park the paradoxical spilling of blood is inherent to citizenship. Citizenship does not entail being a part of a strong national body, but rather

being a unit of a weak national body susceptible to social discrimination. This is directly linked with issues of the actual Korea, as “blood” is a central element of the Korean imaginary.

I engage Park’s films within and through a dialogue about contemporary Korea. A main discourse in relation to recent history is that of nationalism and national identity. One way in which nationalism has been propagated in the country is through “ethnic identity” and it is blood that allows for that ethnic identity. Shin Gi-wook’s *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea* is integral in understanding this phenomenon. Nationalism based on ethnic identity has been used in different ways during the rise of capitalism and democratization. The Korean government pushed their agenda by emphasizing that the citizens shared the same blood while president Park Chung-hee stressed ethnic unity by linking capitalism with Korea’s long history and tradition by citing Confucius. However, ethnic identity has been a site for resistance as well, and so Park has a predecessor. Student activists have also used blood-based nationalism in their anti-government, anti-American rhetoric as well (Gi-wook Shin, 2006). This is crucial to the analysis of Park’s films for it is my contention that the films are in direct response to mainstream notions of nationalism, and ultimately the films are about the construction of nationalism, and offer an alternative nationalism as a critique on capitalist hegemony.

Such events as these are central to the sociohistorical context of the films, the last thirty years in South Korean history. In particular I examine the cultural effect of these events: the end of authoritarianism, the beginnings of democratization, and the hope that was promised to the people of South Korea by economic liberalism. The 1980’s and 90’s

are marked by a deflation of this hope, by fear and anxiety during the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, and by a popular disappointment over the failure to diminish gender and class inequities (Abelmann, 1993; Robinson, 2007).

As far as the cinematic context is concerned, democratization brought about changes in Korea's national cinema, making cinema a central arena where social issues have been addressed. What makes Park's films stand out is his place in contemporary mainstream cinema. Even though Korean cinema has been continuously engaged with society and politics, the idea of a fractured society has seemed to vanish from mainstream popular Korean cinema. Despite any sense of polarization, Park is still considered a mainstream filmmaker who has been relatively successful at the box office. And he is a mainstream filmmaker who is still steeped in the relatively recent tradition of using his films as a medium to voice social concerns (Min, 2003; Chi-yun Shin, 2005).

Furthermore, Park has used violence as his receptacle for social commentary, and he is not alone. Other South Korean directors who prominently use violence (Kim Ki-duk and Kim Ji-woon) emerged alongside Park in the late 90's and early 2000's. Because this was a contested political period, numerous censorship laws were lifted (Min 167). Up until that point and excessive violence was not a tool that Korean filmmakers could use.

Using this theoretical backdrop, this study has found that the protagonists of the films or the citizens are locked in constant struggle that ultimately turns out to be futile. Their resistance is in vain because their citizenship demands their blood, as does the nation. The construction of the national body (capitalism and democratization) demands it. Body parts are not only disconnected from the body, they are also used as commerce,

traded in exchange for other services and/or items. This allegory of the body mirrors the argument that Korea's current economic status came at the cost of blood – starting, perhaps, with Park Chung-hee's sending of Korean troops to Vietnam in exchange for American economic support (Kwak, 2009). The characters' bodies are representative of the national body, and allegorize the lack of integrity in the nation: while the hegemonic nationalism argues that the country is at its strongest – in terms of social unity and cultural cohesion – the films are pointing to the contrary. The country is economically strong and progressing, but at an enormous price.

Chapter Summary

This thesis analyzes the films of the Vengeance Trilogy, and does so in chronological order in order to map pertinent changes – and variable positions – in the films and their treatments of Korean society. The first chapter explores *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. *Sympathy* is a complex and rich text, an ambiguous film that was critically acclaimed yet neglected by Korean audiences (Clarke). Why did Korean audiences initially shun *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, especially when Park's earlier film, *Joint Security Area J.S.A. (Gongdong gyeongbi guyeok JSA)*(2000) was the highest grossing film in Korean history? *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* is the least conventional in its narrative tendencies and the least accessible, and as South Korean audiences are still more receptive to Hollywood films and conventional narratives, *Sympathy* was a film that was a complete departure from *J.S.A.* Considering that the Korean box office is mostly occupied by comedies, romances, and melodramas, this along with the taboo themes and

social commentary presented through the ultraviolent content, all contributed to this neglect.

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance forgoes traditional narrative structure to feature two protagonists who set about exacting vengeance on one another; the only “antagonist” is the society that has pitted these two characters against one another. The two Mr. Vengeances are also stratified on a class basis, with Ryu (Shin Ha-gyun) being a deaf-mute factory worker and Dong-jin (Song Kang-ho) a wealthy industrialist. The film sides with neither character though, and in the end, both meet tragic ends.

2002, the year of the film’s release, was an important year in Korean history as Japan and Korea co-hosted the World Cup. 2002 was a year unlike any other, where nationalism was at its peak, and a palpable feeling of unity ran throughout the peninsula. The strength of the discourse could be felt for years after as clips of the event were regularly featured in the media for years to come. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* is a film in dialogue with these issues, but also in relation to Park’s own oeuvre. Coming directly after *J.S.A.*, another film that could have contributed to popular nationalism in its themes of South Korean and North Korean harmony, *Sympathy directly* refutes that. Yes the working-class and upper class protagonists were equal, but they were only equal in their equal oppression by society.

In *Oldboy* the protagonist and the antagonist are clearly designated with the middle-class white collar Dae-su (Choi Min-sik) stalking the man who imprisoned him for 15 years, Woo-jin (Yu Ji-tae). To reach Woo-jin and exact his revenge, Dae-su must navigate the concrete jungle that is present day Seoul and ascend Woo-jin’s ivory tower.

What he learns is that he himself is the target of Woo-jin's revenge for his indirect role in Woo-jin's sister's suicide. Not unlike *Sympathy*, both characters are equal in their close proximity to violence, and yet it is only the upper class Woo-jin who has his vengeance. Like Dong-jin and Ryu before him, Dae-su too undergoes a transformation in his masculine identity that is much more pronounced than in *Mr. Vengeance*. He is not only hardened and stronger, he is more sexually virile and able to ascend the social ladder and (seemingly) reach the upper class. That victory is momentary, however.

Choi Min-sik's positioning as a prominent middle-class figure in popular media around the time of these films is relevant. With the disappointment in unfulfilled promises of economic growth and modernization, the late-90's and early 2000's saw the emergence of narratives related to reinvigorating the father. Choi himself played several characters who were down-and-out fathers staging their comebacks in commercials and films. In this context, *Oldboy* too portrays a loser father against class stagnation but presents a new galvanized identity, only to squash this father at the end of the film. In effect, *Oldboy* and *Mr. Vengeance* are also offering alternative forms of masculinity, and yet overturn those identities as they are defeated by social injustices.

This could also be linked to an acceptance of the construction of gender in *Oldboy* as well as of the particular star image. Both Song Kang-ho and Choi Min-sik are now recognized as two of the country's most successful actors and the star images of both actors share similarities as well, having played down-on-their-luck father figures. This construction of the failed father has been used in mainstream media as a motif of popular nationalism. In other words, nationalist discourses have used this image to instill hope

while acknowledging the disappointment in democratization, a completely different message and purpose than how Park was using those images.

Oldboy also has a direct address of the social context of the films. In an early scene the film shows in split-screen an edited sequence of Dae-su's 15-year imprisonment juxtaposed against footage of the last 15 years in South Korean history. It is one of the most telling scenes in the film as *Oldboy* explicitly declares its engagement with South Korean history and society.

Lady Vengeance speaks of the same issues, but introduces several new ones as well, with the main concern being women's issues. On a reception level, *Lady Vengeance* is curious in that around the film's release, the mainstream Korean media focused not on the violence nor social themes but the make-up and atypical casting choice of actor Lee Young-ae. Unlike the other films, where other issues such as the content or the performances were commented on, the coverage of *Lady Vengeance* gravitated towards the physical appearance of its lead. By far, Lee's more "conventional" star image hinges on her beauty and lacks the specific class connotations to Song and Park's star images.

This peculiar marketing is supported by divergent narrative elements of the film. The protagonist Geum-ja (Lee Yeong-ae) is the only protagonist in the trilogy to succeed in her revenge and find redemption as well. In addition, Geum-ja is the only character to not take a hands-on approach, as she uses other people to commit the actual revenge. Geum-ja also does not meet a gruesome fate at the end of the film, possibly because imagery of violence perpetrated against a beautiful actor could be much less agreeable for audiences.

However, despite these discrepancies *Lady Vengeance* presents a strong critique on women's issues in contemporary Korea. Through its treatment of its title character as well as a slew of other female characters, *Lady Vengeance* addresses the marginalized role of women. This critique revolves around the woman's place in the Confucian household. A nation long influenced by Confucian thought, it still manifests itself in Korean society through gender inequity (Bell 20). For example, while women have struggled for equal rights, popular discourses have defined the woman's role as being "the good wife, wise mother (*hyonmo yangcho*)" (Ling 175). *Lady Vengeance* highlights these conflicting ideas by presenting women in the role of the Confucian wife and mother, and in peril.

Women's issues are by far the primary concern to *Lady Vengeance*, and while they are not exclusive from class struggles, they are placed in the foreground. This is not the only new issue that *Lady Vengeance* brings to the Vengeance Trilogy: education is the other. Education has historically been a concern of the Korean populace but recent years has seen the national interest in education reaching a fever pitch. Michael J. Seth cites high expenditures (in comparison to income levels), an obsession with examinations, and the desire for degrees from prestigious universities as the signifiers of "education fever" in Korea (224). Among the newer issues to emerge is the fixation with English education, and *Lady Vengeance* addresses these matters. The antagonist of the film is a kidnapper and serial murderer but also an English educator who chooses his victim through the private language school he teaches at. Furthermore, the film shows the families of the victims and the hardships they had endured in order to send their children

to the pricey schools. This does not bring them the bright futures they had expected; instead all that awaits them is tragedy. In an extreme manner, *Lady Vengeance* allegorizes the high cost of education.

The conclusion of the thesis will tie the films together and while much more work needs to be done, I will cautiously posit that the Vengeance Trilogy constructs an alternative nationalism that does not conceal the implicit struggles in contemporary Korean society. For the characters of Park Chan-wook's films, violence is the receptacle through which they can reach new identities, but identities that are doomed to fail in the face of the dominant social forces they attempt to resist. Subsequently, Park turns to violence as the main tool to present that alternative national identity.

I will also briefly address the work that must be done beyond this thesis. One crucial element that I have not approached is the issue of historical reception. The next step in this study is to gather accounts of historical reception in order to gauge whether or not audiences did engage with the social commentary. As previously mentioned, Park is not the only ultraviolent filmmaker to emerge in the late 90's. Furthermore, more and more films feature graphic violence accompanied with social commentary. The recent award-winning *Breathless (Ddongpari)*(2009) is another example. The next step would be then to situate Park with these other filmmakers and to situate him within a movement of Korean national cinema.

CHAPTER 1: THE EQUAL INEQUITY IN *SYMPATHY FOR MR. VENGEANCE*

The Korean and English titles of the first film in Park Chan-wook's Vengeance Trilogy, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), offer a point of entry to this study. The international release of the film featured the title *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, which is not a direct translation of the domestic release title, *Boksuneun naui geot*. *Boksuneun naui geot* literally translated is "Vengeance Is Mine".² Both titles connote a single protagonist while the film has two protagonists and two points of view. Each title asks different questions. The international title prompts audiences to ask who Mr. Vengeance is and why he is worthy of sympathy. My answer is that both protagonists are Mr. Vengeance and that both should be offered sympathy. The Korean title in turn elicits the question, who is claiming vengeance? Neither does.

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance initially follows Ryu (Shin Ha-kyun), a deaf and mute factory laborer whose sister (Lim Ji-eun) is dying of kidney failure. Ryu has saved up 10,000,000 won for the operation, but he is not a match and is put on the waiting list. Ryu, fired from his job, turns to black market organ traffickers who tell him they will give him a compatible kidney in exchange for one of his own. At the exchange, the traffickers take Ryu's kidney and his money. Ryu soon finds out however that a suitable donor has been found; now all he needs is the 10,000,000 won for surgery. Ryu and his activist girlfriend Yeong-mi (Bae Du-na) decide to kidnap Yu-sun (Han Bo-bae), the daughter of the factory owner to make the money, and do so. When Ryu's sister commits

² It is noteworthy that Imamura Shouhei's film *Vengeance Is Mine (Fukushû suruwa wareniari)*(1979), based on the true story of serial killer Nishiguchi Akira, is also known by the same title, *Boksuneun naui geot* in South Korea.

suicide and Yu-sun drowns in an accident Ryu seeks revenge against the organ traffickers.

The industrialist and second protagonist of the film, Dong-jin seeks his own vengeance when Yu-sun turns up dead and murders Yeong-mi. After Ryu kills the traffickers and discovers his dead girlfriend, Ryu redirects his own vengeance towards Dong-jin and the two collide. Dong-jin ultimately claims Ryu's life. The film's conclusion finds Yeong-mi's radical cohorts tracking Dong-jin down and unflinchingly stabbing him again and again before pinning a death warrant into his chest with a bayonet. By the end of the film both protagonists are dead. Although they have attempted to escape the confines of their respective places in society, they have changed nothing.

Formal Analysis and Reception

While *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* had a budget of 3.1 billion won, there are several elements that separate it from the average Korean mainstream blockbuster. The film's divergences are both on the formal and narrative level, featuring: two protagonists, minimal dialogue, long shot duration, and a downbeat ending. Shot in a near monotone, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* uses flat blue and gray tones to express coldness mirrored in the narrative and create its gloomy atmosphere. The art design maintains that tone, especially the sets, most notably Ryu's house. The sets and locations construct an uncomfortable and strange space and thus create an alienating effect. Dong-jin's neighborhood also has a sense of unfamiliarity in a different manner, as it is a relatively

stylistically tame space. The space is alienating as such affluent areas are by far a rarity in Korea.

The film has a minimal score. The frequent silence accentuates the sound effects, an important strategy in the presentation of ultraviolence: the use of sound effects. The violence takes place off-screen in many instances, with sound effects being the main way in which the violence is presented. In one sequence Dong-jin watches the autopsy of his daughter. The camera focuses on him while the mortician proceeds to use an electric saw on her body, heard and not seen.

Compared to Park's more action-oriented *J.S.A.* and *Oldboy*. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* maintains a much slower pace through its longer shot length and editing with an average shot length of 12 seconds. The film frequently relies on prolonged static shots, often with the characters directly staring at the camera. This could show awareness of the international market (and Park's place within it) as ultraviolent director Kitano Takeshi frequently uses such compositions which David Bordwell calls a "clothesline" composition (647).

Park Chan-wook had made three films before he gained widespread recognition with his fourth film, *J.S.A. (Gongdong gyeongbi guyeok JSA)*(2000). At the time of its release, *J.S.A.* was the highest-grossing film in South Korean history, a suspense/action drama with a different perspective on North/South anxieties that resonated with audiences (Chi-yun Shin 56). With *J.S.A.*, Park had become a commercially viable director, which allowed him freedom in choosing his next project, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. Essentially, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* was the follow-up to a hugely

popular film by the same hot director starring two of the same principal actors. Naturally, the studios made sure to emphasize both of these similarities in the marketing, and it is presumable that many spectators went to see the film on that basis. Historical audiences most likely noticed the discrepancies between the two films. Ultimately, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* was an unconventional film, yet targeted at a mainstream audience.

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance was not nearly as successful as *J.S.A.*, failing to break the top 10 box office films in 2002 (“Sympathy”, Cinedie). For the most part, the film was critically acclaimed but mainstream Korean audiences shunned *Sympathy*. One reviewer notes that there were reports of viewers throwing up at press screenings of the film (Eun-ju Park). Generally, mainstream Korean cinema was and still remains violent; the relatively new Korean blockbuster is filled with gunfights and explosions. Two examples are the aforementioned *J.S.A* as well as *Swiri* (1999). However, the violence of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* was different: it was more extreme and more akin to the films of international ultraviolent directors (such as Kitano Takeshi and Miike Takashi). Mainstream audiences were not used to this type of ultraviolence. The late 90’s and early 2000’s were a period in which various restrictions and censorship laws were lifted, and this is why Park was able to produce such a brutal mainstream film.

We have leniency for expressing violence, because we’ve gone through a period in which violence was all too familiar under our military dictatorship (Park, “Old Boy”).

Another, more significant reason that *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* was unsuccessful was its pointed and depressing social commentary. I believe that the

spectators' alienation was deepened by Park's challenge to and disparaging of popular nationalist notions, and his extensive use of ultraviolence to pose those questions.

Central Themes

Revenge is the projected thesis of the Vengeance trilogy and it is a central theme to all three films. However, the vengeance in itself is not as important as the presence of a central struggle and the carnage that ensues. In *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, all of the misfortune that befalls the central characters stems from their class positions. Ryu's class position is emphasized from the beginning: he is a disempowered lower/working-class handicapped factory laborer. Dong-jin on the other hand is the successful owner of a factory, and yet he too does not live a serene life. The film goes out of its way to not only code the characters by class, but to *control* them through class.

The film's preoccupation with class struggle is further demonstrated by the fact that it has two protagonists. The film gives equal weight to both characters and by doing so forgoes the conventional dichotomy of "good" protagonist vs. "evil" antagonist focusing. It instead focuses on two class-stratified characters. Furthermore, the cause and effect-based narrative gives both characters justification for seeking vengeance with points of subjectivity in both as well³. Finally, the film's ending favors neither character. Both die. Some commentators have noted of the nihilism of Park's work and that Dong-jin's death is due to the film's karmic logic. Ryu, Yeong-mi, Dong-jin, and the organ

³ The marketing of the film made it seem as if Song was the protagonist even though he is not. Song received top billing and was the most successful of the film's leads at the time.

dealers have all taken part in atrocities, and so they have atrocious things done unto them. However, Ryu's sister, Yu-sun, and Peng (the fired employee) and his family all die without having done anything deplorable. All of those characters however are linked to the capitalist motivations of the film. Dong-jin's death is not due to karma, but because he is "equal" to Ryu. While Ryu and Dong-jin are polar opposites in class, they are equal in society. Class controls them, and by extension, so does capitalism. This is further sustained by the film's most bizarre element: Dong-jin's murderers.

When Dong-jin captures and tortures Yeong-mi, she threatens him, telling him that if he kills her, the members of her terrorist cell will find and kill him. This is almost directly refuted afterwards when the detectives investigating her murder speak amongst themselves, saying that the only member of her organization was Yeong-mi herself. However, in the most fantastical scene of the film, a car pulls up to Dong-jin and four men get out and stare at him. The cinematography of the scene accentuates its bizarreness as the shot captures the men in extreme close-up, barely moving as they stare at Dong-jin and smoke. Shockingly, the men abruptly stab Dong-jin repeatedly. It is here that the audience hears a voiceover of Yeong-mi's threat, confirming the identity of Dong-jin's assailants. Many have commented on the strangeness of this sequence, leading to discussions as to whether it happens within the diegesis or not. My argument is that the nature of the scene and the attackers is not to designate it as fantasy but to disassociate the attackers and separate them: their role is to represent an abstract concept. The attackers as important as is Dong-jin's fate: death. Dong-jin's journey of revenge is at essence his attempt to transcend his own class position. And all of the class struggles of

the film and the resistance to society end with dismal results. Thus, I identify Dong-jin's attackers as representatives of society. They are killing Dong-jin not on Yeong-mi's behalf, but as surrogates for society.

Capitalism and Ultraviolence

Capitalism is almost always accompanied by violence. And there are a number of reasons why I classify the violence in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* as ultraviolence. As Stephen Prince posits in *Screening Violence*, ultraviolence first appeared in Hollywood films in the late 1960's in films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). While Prince does not explicitly define his use of the term, he does contend that it is comparatively more graphic than the violence found in films before its emergence, a graphicness facilitated by technological advancements in special effects but also the sociohistorical context that led to acceptance of edgier material. Prince also maintains that ultraviolence is socially conscious, although the term's use in mainstream media does not include this qualification (Prince, 2000). Instead, the term seems to connote any media violence that is more graphic than conventional uses of violence, regardless of media format.

One of the key characteristics of the brutality within the film and what codes it as ultraviolence is the abundant mutilation. The body is particularly susceptible to graphic mutilation in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. The body cannot be contained and this "lack of bodily integrity" is demonstrated through either dismemberment and removal of body parts, or the release of bodily fluids (Ko 31). Ryu has his kidney stolen and he in turn

steals and eats the kidneys of his enemies. Dong-jin then murders and cuts Ryu into pieces. Ryu, Dong-jin, Yeong-mi, Ryu's sister, Peng, as well as the organ dealers all bleed profusely as the result of cuts and/or other wounds. Yeong-mi in particular exemplifies this letting of bodily fluids as her torture leads to the secretion of both blood and urine.

This motif of the lack of bodily integrity makes it evident how the body serves as the site where capitalism and bloodshed intersect. The bodies in *Sympathy For Mr Vengeance* are commodified. This is because body parts are actually used *in* the economic dealings of the film. Ryu's sister needs a kidney but Ryu cannot offer his own for he is incompatible. Ryu turns to the organ dealers – a business that deals in the body – to trade them a compatible kidney for his own. The dealers steal both Ryu's kidney and his money and thus when a compatible donor is found for Ryu's sister, Ryu is unable to “purchase” the kidney. This then leads to Ryu and Yeong-mi's kidnapping Dong-jin's daughter for ransom, the ransom that will go to the operation. The body is constantly victimized by violence, but it is also a cause of the violence; the body must be sacrificed in the name of capitalism.

This commodification and mutilation of the body constitutes the film's central objects of criticism in South Korean history: the nation's process of capitalization. One of, if not the most central figure in the capitalization of South Korea was military president Park Chung-hee. It was Park's dealings with the United States that were crucial to the capitalization and modernization of South Korea and some of those dealings revolved around in the Vietnam War. The U.S. agreed to support South Korea financially

in return for Korea's agreement to send troops to Vietnam to support the U.S (Kwak, 2009). In essence, the modernization and capitalization of the country was paid with the blood of young Korean men. Similarly, Republic of Korea forces were sent to support the U.S. in Afghanistan, a move that was decried by many, not helped by recent anti-American sentiments in the country. Equally, in a more indirect and abstract manner and yet pertinent manner, industrialization has occurred at the expense of the exploitation of the lower and working class, and in recent years the growing class divide has become a major problem in the country, with the upper-class growing smaller and richer and the lower-class growing larger and poorer. What the film is ultimately contending is that the bodies of Korean citizens have built and sustained the nation.

The brutality in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* is intrinsically linked with issues of capitalism, and thus fulfills Prince's criteria of being socially motivated. Noting of both director Park Chan-wook's work as well as fellow ultraviolent Korean director Kim Ki-duk, Grady Hendrix comments "the use of violence" is "the great leveller between classes" (19). The ultraviolence in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* levels classes, but also *negates* them. In other words, violence negates classes by executing the rich and the poor alike. Class status becomes a moot point. There is also a dimension of false hope to the violence that mirrors the false hope that the Korean people were given through the processes of democratization and capitalization. Initially, aggression gives social mobility to the disempowered (Ryu), and seems to be the great leveler of class in that sense.

Ryu gains the means to retaliate against proponents of a society that has repressed him through violence. Dong-jin does not gain social mobility, but the means to act on his

own social anxieties. Ultraviolence brings both men to an equal playing field and into close proximity. They are two men at the opposite ends of the social spectrum, a factory worker and a rich industrialist. Such a meeting would most likely never happen in the capitalist setting of contemporary South Korea. In essence, both men gain new identities, and indeed new, close *masculinities*.

Patriarchy and Masculinity

Patriarchy is an issue that is integral to masculinity. A nation still rooted in Confucian ideology, South Korea still tends to think in patriarchal terms. Confucian patriarchal ideology manifests itself in a culture that emphasizes the family with an added prominence of the father (Bell 20, 22). While Confucian thought originally stressed respect, compassion, and understanding, the significance of the father has been interpreted and transformed into practices of sexism, racism, and class-based bias. Chan Sin Yee points out such an interpretation centering on the Confucian concept of *yin-yang*. According to Chan, while the *yin-yang* distinction was meant to be complimentary, later applications interpreted it as a distinction of gender hierarchy (322-323). How do the main characters of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* fare as patriarchal figures?

Ryu is the victim of a patriarchal society. Initially Ryu is inept due to his physical handicap. Because of his weakness he cannot provide for his family in the ways a male figure should, and his sister dies as a consequence. In addition, Ryu's girlfriend Yeong-mi dominates Ryu. Similarly, Dong-jin, a nontraditional single father cannot protect his

daughter. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* depicts the compromising of a “traditional” patriarchal father figure *and* a male disempowered by the effects of a patriarchal society.

Those roles change when both characters set out for revenge and both become the aggressors. Even though the protagonists have gained the tools and mobility with which to resist oppression as well as transcend their traditional patriarchal social roles, they have lost just as much as all parties involved and die. In *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*’s South Korea the new masculinity and opposition are essentially futile. Its society allows absolutely no possibility of a better future.

Citizenship, National Identity, Nationalism, and The Historical Context

I now turn to an inspection of the film’s construction of national identity and of citizenship. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* offers a myriad of characters that function in the diegetic society in different capacities. Dong-jin and his friend are rich industrialists who aid the economy through their businesses but also through their roles as consumers (they dine at the American family restaurant T.G.I. Friday’s). Ryu and Peng are the hard-working lower-class laborers who serve as the backbone of those industries. Yeong-mi, the activist questions her government in contrast to the other female characters, Ryu’s sister, and Yu-sun, who cannot fend for themselves. Finally, the organ dealers exploit and take advantage of the other citizens.

If we consider that the film is specifically speaking of Korea, then take into account that the characters are citizens of that Korea, how does *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* define citizenship? Ronald Beiner notes that citizenship is “what draws a

body of citizens together into a coherent and stably organized political community, and keeps the allegiance durable.” In relation to contemporary North American society Beiner contends that citizenship revolves around capitalism in a social and economic capacity, and “intellectually to some variety of liberalism” (1).

If one of the key functions of citizenship is to allow inclusion into a political body that protects the citizen from “belligerent people who will harm us or seize our possessions.” This protection will come from the political body, the state, and through other citizens who act for the state, sometimes at the cost of their own lives (Wulf 1). The citizenship in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* directly refutes this. There is no protection from those belligerent people on behalf of the state; the state is nearly non-existent. In one case, the state as represented by the detective (Lee Dae-yeon) actually aids Dong-jin in tracking down his quarry and expedites the violence (for money, nonetheless). Thus inclusion to the political body in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* not only offers no mediation between citizens, it actually fosters it and requires it.

If national identity can be considered to be multi-faceted and consists of (but not limited) to identification of the citizen in the capacities of family, territory, class, religion, and ethnicity, then *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* ponders national identity in many of those lights (Smith 4). This national identity differs drastically from that presented by much of popular nationalism in the last thirty years. With the transition from dictatorship to democracy came promises of great hope from the government to the people. A poor country with a long history of war and defeat, the advent of democracy, industrialization, and capitalization gave newfound hope to Koreans for a bright future. And in order to

facilitate their agenda, the past presidents have turned to a nationalism based on blood and ethnic unity (Gi-wook Shin 3-4). Early in the process Park Chung-hee promoted the prospect of capitalism by linking it with Confucius and thus linked it with the long history and culture of the nation (Gi-wook Shin 14). The hope of the 80's did not last and the 90's brought a deep-seeded disappointment exemplified by the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (Abelmann 4; Robinson 173). By the turn of the century, however, hope was renewed, and nationalism was once again strong, with the 2000 Intra-Korean Summit and the 2002 Japan-Korea World Cup. Never before had the peninsula seen a people so united, with millions of citizens hitting the streets, donned in blazing red, cheering along with several key phrases including, "We are one" (Gi-wook Shin 4). Popular discourses maintained that Koreans were linked by blood, one people that could trace its ancestry to its first ancestor, a people that was strong and united (Gi-wook Shin 2). *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* also links the citizens of the Republic of Korea through their blood, but not in the same way.

In his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben speaks of the concept of citizenship in the French Revolution. Agamben notes that there are two ways that citizenship was defined: either the individual was born on French soil – which includes French territory as well as the mainland – or the individual's parents were French citizens. In other words, the individual becomes a citizen through blood or land. This stress on citizenship through blood also sets up the future of France, as the passing of blood to the progeny of French citizens ensures future citizens as well (Agamben, 1997). According to this schema then the characters of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* are

Korean citizens because of their blood, but more specifically through the shedding of their blood. And again, the nation is not only constituted of citizens who gain citizenship through their blood(shed), it is also a country whose economic prosperity is built on that blood. What identifies a citizen of Korea in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* is their sacrifice. Blood lost through violence fuels the economy and the economy fuels the country. The country is economically thriving but what is the country for? The nation is prospering at the cost of its citizens' lives, and in its current state, this is the only way that it can prosper. Furthermore while the nation may thrive on an economic basis, it literally has no future. Because blood is shed, it cannot be passed to future generations and indeed all of the children in *Sympathy* are dead.

A parallel can be found in the work of Japanese ultraviolent filmmaker, Miike Takashi. Miike's work is notorious for its shocking, bizarre ultraviolence. Mika Ko's work on Miike has also identified social commentary within his oeuvre, and in particular Ko identifies a dominant motif of the lack of "bodily integrity" in Miike's films. I follow Ko's model in a number of ways. Ko begins by looking to Terry Eagleton and Eagleton's claim that the body has become the center of contemporary critical theory (30). Similarly, Steven Shaviro notes the importance of the body in society, contending that it can be a means and end to social control (135). Ko uses Eagleton's model of looking to body metaphors but notes that Eagleton does not effectively use body metaphors in "contemporary critical discourse." She then argues that the body metaphor is increasingly important in contemporary Japanese cinema, especially in relation to issues of national and personal identity (30). Ko looks to anthropologist Mary Douglas to flesh out her own

use of body metaphor. According to Ko, Douglas attempts to situate the body within society and argues that society is not necessarily a body in itself, but instead contends that the body is “a site of information.” Ko notes, “For Douglas, the body expresses the relationship of the individual to the group and it both represents and contributes to the social situation at any given moment” (35). For Ko then, Douglas’s formulation allows her to see the text as a body. The filmic body’s treatment of itself and of the actual bodies within its text can be considered to be sites of information that embody notions of the society that the bodies exist within (35).

According to Ko, Miike is addressing notions of multiculturalism in an increasingly globalized Japan through his frequent use of non-Japanese and mixed ethnic characters. The bodies of these characters and others represent the national body and the notion of *kokutai*. Kokutai is the belief that the national body is one, and that the citizen’s body represents the nation and thus are united in that way as well. Ko then identifies bodily mutilation and the lack of bodily integrity as being Miike’s signifying a weak national body. Ko does make sure to distinguish her argument and notes that her study is one that is centered on the relationship between body and national mythology more than nation.

Using Ko’s model then, I contend that the filmic body (the text) and the film’s representations of the body are relating the body with popular nationalism. These same motifs of the lack of bodily integrity and the national body as individual’s body can be found in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. The body metaphors in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* allegorize a construction of national identity that is in response to the popular

dominant presentations of national identity. Shaviro argues that social hierarchies can be subverted through the body and this is exactly what the film is attempting to do (65).

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance is the first film in a series of films that contain social critiques of contemporary society and present alternative national identity. Both *Oldboy* and *Lady Vengeance* must be considered in order to postulate just how exactly the Vengeance Trilogy does so. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* is undoubtedly about the contemporary South Korean experience, providing a ground zero for this alternative national identity in the Vengeance Trilogy. The Koreans in the film are bonded by their victimization to capitalism, and their ultimate fates.

CHAPTER 2: *OLDBOY* AND THE FALSE HOPE OF CLASS MOBILITY

Oldboy (2004), the best-known film of the Vengeance Trilogy, made Park Chan-wook famous in South Korea and internationally. In her *New York Times* review, Manohla Dargis noted:

The fact that "Oldboy" is embraced by some cinephiles is symptomatic of a bankrupt, reductive postmodernism: one that promotes a spurious aesthetic relativism (it's all good) and finds its crudest expression in the hermetically sealed world of fan boys (14).

The characterizations of *Oldboy*'s style as substanceless abound in reviews of the film. As Dargis derisively notes, the film found an audience with fans of genre cinema, as evidenced in its North American DVD release under the "Tartan Asian Extreme" label. Even most advocates of the film only speak of the film's style. Kim Kyung Hyun's reading of *Oldboy* equates its stylistic "flatness" to superficiality then argues that the substanceless is purposeful critique (Kim, 2006).

Oldboy's style is anything but traditional in its presentation of the narrative. The *mise en scène* is heavily stylized, especially in the art design while the acting is emotionally heightened, and the opposite of the subdued acting in *Sympathy*. The cinematography is also nonconventional, with frequent camera movements including quick zooms and jarring pans.

However, *Oldboy*'s popularity in Korea and abroad does not hinge just on its style. The film's formal structure and its ultraviolent content explain its popularity and

provide the grounds for its negative critical reception. The form of *Oldboy* remains relatively traditional, especially in its narrative structure.

Oldboy (loosely based on the Japanese manga of the same title) follows the story of kidnapping victim and 15-year captive Oh Dae-su (Choi Min-sik). Upon his release, he meets a young female sushi chef, Mi-do (Gang Hye-jung) who joins him on his quest for answers and revenge. Lee Woo-jin (Yu Ji-tae) soon reveals himself as Dae-su's kidnapper, and invites him to play a game with the truth behind Dae-su's incarceration and his connection with Woo-jin as stakes. The film culminates with Woo-jin telling Dae-su that his sister Soo-ah (Yun Jin-seo) committed suicide in high school in part because of Dae-su, and that he kidnapped and held Dae-su captive as revenge. Before shooting himself in the head, Woo-jin informs Dae-su that Mi-do is his daughter. After this confrontation, Dae-su seeks out a hypnotist in order to forget his adventures, but the ambiguous ending suggests that Dae-su has instead forgotten his life before the events of the film.

Formal Analysis and Reception

I contend that *Oldboy* was more successful than *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* because of its conventional narrative structure. Although *Oldboy* features two characters seeking revenge on one another, the plot follows the progress of Dae-su's revenge. In doing so, the film is essentially a linear causal-based quest. Another reason I posit that it was more successful is that *Oldboy* seems to play with genre conventions. Critics and commentators have discussed all three of the Vengeance Trilogy films as being horror

films with some writers situating the films in the context of contemporary East Asian horror, another reason why they are released through Tartan Asian Extreme, which predominantly carries horror films. While *Oldboy* does have affinities with other East Asian horror films, it also contains many markings of an action film. For example, one sequence has Dae-su fighting gangsters in a hallway. Another has Dae-su fight a number of street thugs while there is a prolonged skirmish in Woo-jin's penthouse. All of these scenes function as action set pieces. In stark contrast with *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, *Oldboy* offers more pleasurable action sequences, making the ultraviolence more palatable, and the film more enjoyable. The narrative presents Dae-su's quest for revenge as justifiable and thus acceptable. Dae-su's socially acceptable violence in turn invites the spectator's approval and enjoyment. Additionally, *Oldboy* presents its social commentary less pointedly, obscured by the elaborate set pieces and ultraviolent sequences. Furthermore, *Oldboy* was awarded the Grand Prix Award at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, which also added to its international box office receipts.

The film's pacing bolsters its action and conventional narrative arc. *Oldboy* moves more quickly than *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. In contrast to the methodical, cold-blooded Dong-jin, the hot-blooded Dae-su tears through the space of Seoul and through the film. Editing maintains *Oldboy*'s pace with an average shot length of 8 seconds and nearly 300 more shots than *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. Furthermore, while the majority of shots in *Sympathy* are static, there is constant movement in the shots of *Oldboy*, either by the actors or by the camera. Surprisingly, commentators have noted of the violence in the actual editing locating the film's brutality in its form as well as its

narrative. And indeed, many of the cuts are jarring jump cuts, with little narrative motivation.

At first glance, it would seem that *Oldboy* has a conventional happy ending. The protagonist, Oh Dae-su seeks revenge of his kidnapping and imprisonment, eventually coming to a stand off with the antagonist, Lee Woo-jin. By the end of the film, his enemy is dead and Dae-su remains alive and with his lover/daughter Mi-do. Like *Sympathy For Mr Vengeance*'s protagonists, Dae-su has not "won." But unlike *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, *Oldboy* attributes victory to a single character, namely, Woo-jin. However, the film's ambiguous ending, with Lee dead and the incestuous couple still alive makes it seem less tragic than *Sympathy For Mr Vengeance* and adds to its conventional nature.

The ultraviolence in *Oldboy*, although more pleasurable than the atrocities in *Sympathy For Mr Vengeance*, retains many of the functions it had in the earlier film. It serves as receptacle for the film's social commentary, is used in comedic capacities, but also to incite repulsion. In all of its functions, the violence is designed to affect the spectator. The themes from *Sympathy* appear in *Oldboy* as well and more importantly, just as in the previous film, those themes make ultraviolence a social critique.

The Korea in Oldboy

In order to locate that social critique I again turn to Kim Kyung Hyun's reading of *Oldboy*. Kim describes the South Korea in *Oldboy* as "unknowable" and his most convincing argument revolves around the film's style. Kim cites the film's cinematography as one of the elements that renders the film unknowable:

This “unknowable” attitude can be seen stylistically in Park’s reconstitution of the visual plane, which deliberately rejects realist depth-of-field and instead opts for a flattened mise-en-scène that relies heavily on wide-angle lenses and reducing the distance between the camera and its subjects. These techniques, which deny any density beyond surfaces, once again underscore the relentlessly superficial domain of the unknowable (89).

The cinematography of *Oldboy* at certain points does “deny density.” However, in addition to the fact that the contention that flatness connotes superficiality is problematic, the film’s narrative structure counters the atypical style. Subsequently, the bizarreness and *not* the superficiality (if there is indeed any) in the film’s style is undermined by its themes.

The film’s camerawork is not the only element that can be considered unknowable. The locations can as well. Notable examples would be Dae-su’s “jail” and its bizarre décor, the incredibly slick penthouse with its indoor stream, and Mi-do’s restaurant and apartment, none of which present themselves as particularly Korean. However, several spots are *distinctly* and *unmistakably* Korean. The Yongsan Electronics Market is a notable example. The numerous Chinese restaurants that Dae-su goes to while generic, still look like any Chinese restaurant found in Korea. The Number Three Line Subway of the Seoul Subway System as well as the numerous generic apartment complexes and the streets of Seoul that Dae-su navigates are also unmistakably Korean. These locales can only be considered “unknowable” insofar as places like them can be

found in nearly any Korean city and Kim does note in relation to the restaurants and their dumplings that ubiquity becomes anonymity and that anonymity creates the unknowable (100).

Kim notes that the provincial accent used by a number of characters is disembodied due to the fact that the exact location is never named (102). However, Kim himself notes, “the use of provincial accents clearly marks identities and boundaries that in turn provide a sense of “knowability” and “familiarity”” (100). While the exact city is not named, the accent is very distinguishably from the Kyoungsang province and again grounds the film in Korea.

While the generic streets and/or restaurants may prevent the spectator from knowing those specific locations, they do not contribute to an entirely unknowable space. They are still components of Korea, point out Korea, and tell the spectator about Korea. Kim also notes that the Korea in *Oldboy* is “a mythical, transhistorical world beyond the mundane realities of a legal system” due to the lack of state presence (89). The Korea in *Oldboy* is anything but transhistorical, as the film is specifically set within the years of 1988 and 2003, a period with significant moments in Korean history, moments that the film explicitly references.

History in Oldboy

Oldboy comments on recent South Korean history even more than *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and furthermore grounds the film’s Korea as knowable. The film does this by including specific diegetic images of recent history. It is the television that presents these images. During his imprisonment, Dae-su narrates in voiceover, speaking

of his 15 years in captivity and how he preserved his sanity by watching television. At one point in the sequence the news plays in the background, announcing the 1994 collapse of the Seongsu Bridge, a major bridge in Seoul that collapsed, killing dozens.

As the sequence continues, we watch Dae-su in split-screen, side-by-side with news footage of contemporaneous Korean history beginning with 1988 and ending with 2003. The montage begins with the arrest of former president Chun Doo-hwan on charges of corruption. It continues showing images of some of the proudest and promising moments in recent Korean history including the end of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the 2000 Inter-Korea Summit, the 2002 Japan Korea World Cup, and the elections of former presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. These images represent the great hope instilled in the nation by the promise of democratization and industrialization. This hope is mirrored with Dae-su's own hope. This is why the images are juxtaposed with the image of Dae-su digging through the wall of his prison.

This sequence is integral to reading *Oldboy*. In it the film is specifically and explicitly referencing Korea, but also recent Korean history. The film predominantly shows positive, hopeful images, but the lengthiest news segment and the only one with diegetic sound depict the Seongsu Bridge collapse. The incident in turn alludes to and brings to mind the 1995 Sampoong Department Store collapse that killed hundreds of people. Nancy Abelmann goes so far as to submit "collapse" as a keyword of South Korea in the 1990's. She cites the collapse of the Seongsu Bridge and the Sampoong Department Store and a high rate of car accidents in the early 90's. This all culminated

with the economic crisis in 1997. Abelmann contends that Koreans understood that it was a natural consequence of the country's "rapid-fire economic development" (6).

The seemingly hopeful images that the sequence features also have tragic epilogues. Former presidents figure prominently in the sequence and this is because each new president brought with them new hope. Chun Doo-hwan's presidency came with the end of Park Chung-hee's authoritarian regime (Abelmann 5). Roh Tae-woo brought significant change with his inauguration (Robinson 168). Kim Young-sam, the first civilian president, began his presidency with a number of significant, popular decisions as well (170). Kim Dae-jung's presidency saw the beginning and end of the Asian Financial Crisis or the IMF (International Monetary Fund) Crisis as well as the first Inter-Korean Summit. Finally, Roh Moo-hyun was elected in 2003, the year *Oldboy* was released.

Each of the last five presidents of South Korea who held office during the process of democratization after the assassination of Park Chung-hee, brought with them hope. Each of their terms ended in shame and disappointment. The Kwangju Massacre, where hundreds of student activists were killed and wounded, defined Chun's presidency. Roh continued many of the corrupt practices of Chun's corrupt practices (Abelmann 5). Shockingly, both were arrested, tried, and convicted in 1997 (Robinson 172). Near the end of his term, Kim Young-sam's son was swept up in a financial crisis and Kim had an approval rating of four percent (Abelmann 7; Robinson 173). Kim Dae-jung finished his terms much in the same way, with his son in the midst of scandals and unable to implement many of the reform ideas he had presented (Robinson 181). And even though

the film was produced in 2003, sure enough Roh Moo-hyun faced accusations of corruption that eventually led to his suicide in 2009 (Sohn).

The sequence with the collapse of the Seongsu Bridge as well as the images of recent South Korean history, accompany Dae-su's digging through the prison wall. Dae-su excitedly states that he'll be out in a month. He is released the next day. Dae-su's unexpected release undermines his efforts to escape. One of *Oldboy's* central motifs, Dae-su's release into the world signifies his entrance into a "wider prison." Dae-su's troubles just begin upon his release and eventually lead to his destruction. Ultimately, the film completely dashes his hopes. Park turns Dae-su's disappointment into an allegory for South Korea's disappointment following the period between 1988 and 2002.

The first sequence of the film also evokes historical hopes. At a police station, a poster of the 1988 Seoul Olympics mascot Hodori is prominently featured. The 1988 Olympics heightened South Korea's international profile in hopes of increasing South Korean prosperity.

On his release, Dae-su notices the apartment complexes springing up everywhere, and the camera pans to reveal the skyline filled with these "skeleton apartments." Dae-su asks why he was imprisoned for 15 years, and the allegorical answer lies in the great hopes of 1988 followed by 15 years of national disappointment. *Oldboy* recognizably refers to this Korea. While Dae-su's incarceration prevents him from partaking in these historical events, he must navigate this Korea when he leaves his prison, the very same Korea that lays waste to him.

Park made *Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance* and *Oldboy* in 2002 and 2003 respectively, and historical changes in Korea over those years partially account for the differences between the films. Park may have made *Oldboy* a more conventional film as a reaction to *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance's* commercial failure, explaining its more straightforward presentation and less obvious social critique. *Oldboy* also seems more aware of the international market. The inclusion of scenes from other countries' histories (including Princess Diana's death and the 9/11 terrorist attacks) in the news sequence, allude to this. Stylistic affinities with Kitano Takeshi's films and ultraviolence akin to both Miike Takashi and Quentin Tarantino attempt to address this international audience. *Oldboy* won the Grand Prix Award at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, while both *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and *Lady Vengeance* (2005) were theatrically released in the United States after *Oldboy's* success (albeit to limited success).

Central Themes

Thematically, capitalism mediates revenge in both *Oldboy and Sympathy*. Woo-jin does not capture Dae-su himself. Instead he hires a gang that runs a "hotel" for those who have reason to imprison someone for extended periods of time. Not unlike the organ dealers in *Sympathy*, they are running a morally despicable operation simply because a demand exists. Even when Dae-su goes back to the gang for help, Dae-su and the boss Park Cheol-woong (Oh Dal-su) express sentiments that Dae-su's captivity was simply business. Furthermore Woo-jin's massive wealth allows him to hire the gang, which the film explicitly acknowledges several times, not only through the dialogue (when he is

hiring the gang) but through the *mise en scène* as well. Woo-jin's class status is signified through his wealth, his acquisitions (his building), his employees (willing to give life and limb), and his clothing. Dae-su on the other hand is initially coded as a middle class white-collar businessman. He wears the uniform of the businessman (the suit), flabby, patriarch of a standard nuclear family, and he is an alcoholic, a product of Korea's corporate culture (Onishi).

Class, Masculinity, and Social Mobility

Oh Dae-su first appears at a police station, detained because of his drunken behavior, like a common South Korean businessman on a night out, standing in for the working middle class. The film presents Dae-su as flaccid, undisciplined, and unhappy; he is a bad friend, and a bad father. Dae-su jokes about his name and thus indicates his middle class status in the name itself. Dae-su's name in Korean is 오대수, and he plays with words using the syllables of his name, saying it means “오늘만 대충 수습하면서 살자.” This roughly translates to, “Let's just get through today.”

In stark contrast, the Dae-su released from his prison is stoic, disciplined, hard, strong, and capable of great violence. Changed by revenge, and the violence that accompanies it, Dae-su gives himself a new moniker of “Monster,” noting that he is not the same Oh Dae-su. Violence makes him wealthy. Now he wears designer clothes and carries a thick wallet. Violence also gives him mobility. Before his release, Dae-su appears only in confined spaces: the police station, the telephone booth, and the prison

cell. Monster navigates not only Seoul, but also the entire country with ease. Violence enhances his virility, enabling him to sleep with the much younger and attractive Mi-do. Finally, violence gives him means to resist against his upper class oppressor. But this newfound masculinity and the promises that it holds soon turn into disappointments, as *Oldboy* too ultimately reveals that resistance is futile. Dae-su eventually ends up shedding his new masculinity of Monster and reverting back to Dae-su. He does this when Woo-jin reveals his master plan and his superiority. Dae-su, losing all his stoic demeanor and monotone, begs at Woo-jin's feet.

In the early 2000's, class was a prominent aspect to Choi Min-sik's star image. Choi frequently portrayed down-and-out-of-luck middle/working class men and reinvigorated middle class men in various media. The depleted middle class and its disempowered father figures figured prominently in popular discourses of Korean nationalism, indirectly acknowledging disappointment in the state. E.g., in a popular credit card commercial, Song Hye-kyo sang the children's song, "Cheer up daddy." In another commercial, Choi's sings, "Let's run forward" to cheer up a friend and/or co-worker. In 1999 Choi starred in *Happy End*, playing a disempowered middle-class husband whose wife cheats on him, while in 2001 he played an aging and marginalized gangster who falls in love with a dying illegal immigrant in *Failan*. Choi also starred in *Crying Fist (Jumeogi unda)*(2005) a film about a down-on-his-luck boxer who stages his triumphant return. *Oldboy's* construction of Choi as a reinvigorated middle class male fits perfectly with his star image.

In *Oldboy*, Dae-su's new masculinity is in vain because Lee Woo-jin holds all of the cards. Woo-jin outsources Dae-su's 15-year imprisonment. He uses his extensive resources to have his wife murdered. He also has both Dae-su and Mi-do hypnotically programmed to follow his directions to the letter. He is so resourceful that he procures illegal firearms. While the film suggests that the two class-coded characters eventually play on a level field, the narrative ultimately reveals that Dae-su was able to face Woo-jin because Woo-jin allowed him to. Dae-su seemingly emerges victorious. He learns the reason for his imprisonment. He reunites with his daughter. His enemies die while he lives. At the end of the film however, Dae-su wears a smile that resembles the smile in a grotesque painting on the wall of the prison along with the quotation expressing one of *Oldboy's* central themes: "Laugh and the world will laugh with you. Cry and you will cry alone."

In contrast, Woo-jin acquires everything that he wanted. Not only does he already have financial success, he also succeeds in his master plan of revenge, fully realized and executed flawlessly and played out over two decades. By the end of the film, Woo-jin has successfully made Dae-su commit to an incestuous relationship that he cannot end without ruining his daughter's life. Woo-jin has made Dae-su beg and grovel at his feet, and as if that weren't enough, his victory extends beyond the grave, as Dae-su cannot find solace even after Woo-jin is dead, with the botched hypnosis. Woo-jin's final words before he shoots himself in the head, "What do I have to live for now?" acknowledge the fulfillment of all his desires.

And so, even though class divides Dae-su and Woo-jin, just as class divides Dong-jin and Ryu, Woo-jin clearly wins this game. *Oldboy* suggests that in contemporary Korea the upper class reigns supreme. This change in attitude reflects the widening class-divide that emerged as one of the largest social problems in recent history. Characterized as having endless resources despite having no visible source revenue, Woo-jin represents the upper class and the *cheabol*⁴. Or more tellingly, his positioning as an antagonist and his struggle with a middle-class character expresses anxieties about the wealthy upper class. Kim Kyung Hyun argues that vengeance is always on a personal level in Park's films and that it is "almost never against state institutions" (88). While this is true, the individuals are still representative of a larger group and thus the violence does enter the public sphere. According to the film's logic, the upper class not only have an almost immeasurable amount of wealth (and time) they are beyond the law (as evidenced by the lack of state presence), have the ability to manipulate the middle/working class, and cannot be overthrown, even when someone who is inclined to do so gains the means.

Ultraviolence as Mobility and Resistance

The capacity for ultraviolence separates Oh Dae-su from Monster. The upper class clothing, sexual virility and stoic demeanor that identify Monster come as results of his potential for violence. During his imprisonment Dae-su hones himself, watching televised boxing matches intently, drawing a figure of a man on the wall and hitting it. The first time, he keels over in pain, but his body hardens over the years and he assaults

⁴ Chaebols are Korean conglomerates that emerged in the wake of economic growth in the 1960's. Includes Samsung, Hyundai, and Daewoo (Robinson 193).

the imaginary figure mercilessly. Freed, Dae-su tests his imaginary training. He effortlessly dispatches a number of street urchins. When he reaches Woo-jin's penthouse he puts down Woo-jin's "dogs" quickly and efficiently. In the most revealing sequence Dae-su, formerly an ordinary office worker fights off and defeats nearly twenty hardened gangsters by himself. This sequence not only demonstrates Dae-su's skill, it also portrays his mobility.

In the sequence where Dae-su fights off the gangsters, he once again finds himself in a confined space but demonstrates how he has changed, in contrast with the scenes in the police station, telephone booth, and cell. Here, we see Dae-su able to navigate the space through violence. The camera follows Dae-su in a single take as he moves to and fro in the hallway, fighting back legions of adversaries with a hammer and his fists. By the end of the sequence, only Dae-su is left standing.

Not only is he able to fight his way through dangerous locales, he also has the money to navigate various locales of the country and is shown doing so. During his search for clues Oh goes to a pricey Japanese restaurant, the Yongsan Electronics Market, numerous Chinese restaurants, a hair salon, and his far away alma mater. Finally, he enters the heavily restricted penthouse of the wealthy Lee. Before his transformation, Dae-su's movements are constantly restricted. Police officers constantly restrain his flailing limbs; the telephone booth and his best friend Joo-Hwan (Ji Dae-han) confine him; gangsters constantly monitor and regulate his movements in prison. Dae-su's mobility comes as a result of his violence, and as in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, it is just one site where violence and capitalism intersect.

Citizenship, the National Body, and Capitalism

In *Oldboy* too, the citizens build the nation by allowing the commodification of their bodies. *Oldboy* also features the body in peril, characterizing bodies as lacking integrity. Subject to frequent assault and mutilations, bodies in the film provide many opportunities for bloodshed and dismemberment. In addition, characters make deals using body parts throughout the film. One of the first instances of such commerce in bodies comes when Dae-su seeks revenge on the gang that runs the hotel. Dae-su uses a hammer to extract Park Cheol-woong's teeth, saying that one tooth stands for one year of imprisonment. Woo-jin cuts Cheol-woong's hand off and gives it to Dae-su as a present. Woo-jin buys Cheol-woong a building to compensate him for his hand. Dae-su also attempts to barter a body part with Woo-jin. Apologizing for his part in Soo-ah's death and begging for forgiveness – as well as accepting his place beneath Woo-jin and his class position – Dae-su offers his tongue and cuts it off himself.

If *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* presents the body as commodity, *Oldboy* presents bodies as legitimate and regularly traded currency. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* emphasizes the demand for bodies. *Oldboy* emphasizes the use of body parts in exchange. Time and time again, characters fall back to taking or giving body parts in negotiations. Dae-su does not plan to take nor want Cheol-woong's teeth. Woo-jin does not want Cheol-woong's hand (although Dae-su does), and Woo-jin does not want Dae-su's tongue. However in each of these situations the characters decide to turn to the body. And in each of the situations the transaction is "successful." Kim situates this trend within the context of contemporary Confucian society:

Debunking the mantra of the Confucian society, which posits the familial collective and consequently the nation as being organically linked to individual bodies, the bodies in Park Chan-wook's films are regarded as commodifiable, their organs usually quantifiable in terms of monetary value that can be bought and sold (98).

However, Kim also argues that Cheol-woong's willing mutilation is tarnishing the act of sacrifice as activism in recent Korean history (one such act is Peng's self-mutilation in *Sympathy*)(98). By doing so Kim is connecting the films with Korean history and contradicting his argument of the "unknowable". Additionally, this argument is not as prominent as the film's argument concerning the place of the body in capitalist Korea.

Consumption also plays a part in the film. On numerous occasions Dae-su states that when he finds Woo-jin, no one will ever be able to find his body because Dae-su will chew him up, demonstrating once again the close relationship between the body as commodity and consumption of said commodity. When Dae-su is released he goes to a Japanese restaurant. Dae-su tells the chef, Mi-do, "I want to eat something live," And he proceeds to devour a living squid. Dae-su's newfound masculinity and class identity makes the pricey upper-class cuisine affordable. On the contrary, when Dae-su was still in the midst of his transformation, he only eats the Chinese dumplings fed to him during his imprisonment, a food of the working lower class.

The ultra wealthy executive, Woo-jin deals in human life, as well as bodies. Woo-jin controls the deaths and lives of other characters. In one sequence we see that his own life is not exempt. When Dae-su first confronts Woo-jin and threatens him with a

hammer, Woo-jin relates that his heart needed a pacemaker. He also lies to Dae-su, telling him he asked the foreign doctor to install a remote control suicide switch. Woo-jin says he told the shocked doctor, "I'll give you \$100,000 more!" The spectator, and Dae-su are both led to believe that Woo-jin indeed had the remote control installed and that such an operation was possible because of the close nature of life and capitalism.

Woo-jin's superiority manifests itself in the fact that although he is a capitalist that deals in the body, he is not a victim of the trade like Cheol-woong. He simply observes, above the others, and reaps benefits. At his base of operations, Woo-jin observes Seoul from above, its citizens barely visible and inconsequential. *Oldboy's* characterization of its antagonist as an evil character thriving in and representing a contemptible society functions as a critique of capitalism.

Woo-jin's evil can run unchecked because in *Oldboy's* Korea, the state plays a minimal role. Whereas *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and *Lady Vengeance* feature detectives, a minor character and a supporting character respectively, *Oldboy* has no such role. Kim notes that the lack of state presence signifies that the main characters operate outside of the law, and that it is to suggest a "mythical, transhistorical world" and that *Oldboy* follows along Philip Weinstein's ideas of modernist narratives that are "beyond knowing". Kim continues, arguing that the lack of state presence is a strategy so that the film may withstand "objective mapping and mastery" and may subsequently become unknowable (89). The lack of state presence does serve to present how Dae-su and Woo-jin operate outside of the law, but it does not function to render the film unknowable.

The film begins in a police station and the police officers are faceless, disembodied voices that serve only to repress Dae-su, who then represents the working class. While they use time and energy in containing Dae-su, both Woo-jin and even Monster go completely unchecked in their numerous acts of sadism throughout the rest of the film. Woo-jin's elite upper-class status grants him immunity, and Dae-su is temporarily granted the same exemption because of the upper class markings Woo-jin gives him. Ultimately then, according to the film, the state serves only to inhibit the middle/working class. The upper class on the other hand proceeds without caution, as does all of the violence that happens in the name of capitalism and industrial growth. Because for the film, this is the reality of South Korea, a reality that puts national growth ahead of human life, and indeed, requires human life.

As with the other films in the Vengeance Trilogy, this weakness of the body allegorizes the weak national body. Rampant violence comes to the citizens of *Oldboy*'s Korea because of the state's weakness. Upper class perpetrators kill men and women with abandon and the higher the perpetrator's social standing, the more unrestrained the violence becomes. Bodies and violence play such a large part in the economy that the body must be sacrificed.

One of the images of Korea in *Oldboy* is the image of the 2002 Japan Korea World Cup. Shin Gi-wook notes that on June 11th 2002, hundreds of thousands of Koreans could be found in front of Seoul City Hall, and that twenty thousand Korean Americans were at the Staples Center in Los Angeles (1). He continues, noting the significance that the World Cup had to Koreans all over the world. A survey in July

revealed that 75 percent of the participants felt “strong pride”. Shin’s studies reveal similar results, with national pride and nationalism stemming not in location, but blood.

In 2002, the year before *Oldboy*’s release, the country was united in its support of the national soccer team. It was one country, one people, and one bloodline. *Oldboy* features one image from that time. And while it shares the same preoccupation with blood, it is with the blood that is shed, not shared.

CHAPTER 3: THE CONTEMPORARY WOMAN'S ROLE IN LADY VENGEANCE

Sympathy for Lady Vengeance is an ironic film. It is not the film's content though that is responsible for the film's irony. Instead, it is how the film was handled and received. *Lady Vengeance* departs from the first two films of the Vengeance Trilogy, shifting its main focus from class inequity to gender inequity, and attempts to address the plight of the woman in contemporary South Korean society. However, attitudes towards the film, both in the film's marketing as well as the film's reception only served to further illustrate those inequities.

The reason lies with the film's publicity. Some dealt with the fact that it was the latest film from Park Chan-wook. There was also some coverage because it was the third and final film of the Vengeance Trilogy. But media coverage also diverged from topics such as the films' ultraviolent and taboo content, and the performances and instead focused on the casting of *Lady Vengeance*. At the center was the notion that the star Lee Young-ae was an unusual choice for the project and that the film was an unusual choice for Lee. This was because the beautiful Lee had mostly starred in melodramas and romances. In essence, she was too pretty for the film.

This focus on the exterior did not end with the casting, it also centered on a very specific element of the film: her make-up. In the film, Lee as the title character Geum-ja wears bright red eye shadow around her eyes. It is a prominent motif that is not only visually striking but also significantly different from contemporary trends in women's make-up in South Korea. Advertisements at the time made sure to emphasize "Geum-ja's way of make-up." Iope, the manufacturer of the make-up used in the film, held several

events where they sold the make-up and demonstrated its proper use (as it is done in the film) in popular metropolitan areas of Seoul (Choi). This preoccupation with the exterior illustrates practices of gender inequity and the issue of physical appearance and women in South Korea. Ironically, this is exactly what *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* is about.

Central Themes

Constructions of Femininity

The third and final film of the Vengeance Trilogy, *Lady Vengeance* too is concerned with South Korean society. The original Korean title of *Lady Vengeance* offers insight into the film. Originally titled *Chinjeolhan Geum-jassi* (친절한 금자씨), the title literally translates to “Kind Ms. Geum-ja.” Through the Korean and international title, the spectator is offered a dichotomy, that of Lady Vengeance and of Kind Ms. Geum-ja, and *Lady Vengeance* too charts the trek of Lee Geum-ja and her transformation. The film begins with Geum-ja in prison, serving a sentence for the kidnapping and murder of a young boy. Geum-ja was wrongly convicted, agreeing to turn herself in for the real murderer, Mr. Baek (Choi Min-sik). She did this as he threatened to kill her newborn daughter Jenny (Kwon Yea-young). It is during her sentence that she picks up two monikers, “Kind Ms. Geum-ja” and “Witch”. The first she earns because she so selflessly helps the other inmates. The second, Geum-ja earns through her murdering another inmate, the prison’s resident bully. All of these deeds were part of her preparation for revenge. Once released from prison Geum-ja seeks out all those who were indebted to

her during her sentence and with the help of the families of Baek's victims, she has her vengeance.

Lady Vengeance's concern with women is evidenced in its large cast. It is a predominantly female cast. A bulk of the film takes place in a women's penitentiary and while it is Geum-ja who has agency, the other inmates of the prison have narrative relevance as well. Four primary supporting characters play significant parts in her scheme: Oh Su-hee (Ra Mi-ran), Kim Yang-hee (Seo Young-ju), Park Yi-jeong (Lee Seung-shin), and Woo So-young (Kim Bu-sun). Each character serves time along with Geum-ja, is aided by Geum-ja in some way, and helps her in her plot. Each character is introduced through flashbacks of their first encounters with Geum-ja.

Oh Su-hee is in prison for adultery. It is unknown whether or not the male party was convicted, but it is assumable that he was not. Kim Yang-hee is a prostitute who killed her pimp. Park Yi-jeong, who has the largest role in Geum-ja's plot, is in prison for fraud. The bully of the cell, the Witch (Go Su-hee) calls her a "꽃뱀" (*Gotbehm*).

Literally translated, "꽃뱀" means "Flower snake" and the term refers to female scam artists who generally have sex with men before robbing them. Woo So-young is a peculiar character that deviates from the other supporting characters. She is in prison for robbing banks with her husband. She is not an independent woman like the other inmates, and furthermore she is coded as being happily married. Her crime and her position do not directly relate to the woman's place in contemporary South Korea.

This is not the case with the remaining three inmates. The film only shows a woman being held accountable for adultery. This is reflective of the dominant acceptance of sexual promiscuity on the part of males, but not females. The prostitute, Yang-hee, further demonstrates this point. A government study in 2003 found that Korea's sex industry had a profit margin of 26 trillion won in 2002 with 260,000 women employed (Moon). Furthermore, prostitution is often considered to be a "necessary" part of the workplace and is often knowingly neglected. On the other hand, the few practices that cater to women are stigmatized and condemned. Yang-hee is in prison for killing her pimp, a man who was exploiting her by selling her to other men. And yet she is the one who is punished. Yi-jeong is an extension of that. She is able to operate within her chosen "occupation" because there is a demand. In other words, she can scam men using sex because there is a steady supply of men looking for promiscuous encounters⁵. Yi-jeong's part in Geum-ja's plan has her being exploited again, as she plays the part of a traditional housewife to the patriarchal figure.

Geum-ja is the ultimate victim. Not only does she serve the longest term, Geum-ja is also innocent. Geum-ja's misfortune begins when she is a teenager. Faced with an accidental pregnancy in high school, Geum-ja turns to Baek, her former student teacher. The film characterizes the pregnancy not only as being a problem, but *her* problem as Jenny's father is completely absent; when Baek asks her about the father Geum-ja completely disregards him. Baek takes her in and it is evident that that she must give into

⁵ Prostitution is illegal in South Korea but persists due to a number of reasons, partially because businesses have become increasingly creative in avoiding laws and also because of the government consciously neglecting the practice.

his sexual desires. This not only points to perceptions of teenage pregnancy and single parent pregnancy, but also to the issue of underage sex, solicited and otherwise. Baek's exploitation continues as he frames the helpless Geum-ja for the kidnap and murder of Won-mo. After a brief media circus (that focuses on the young age and beauty of the perpetrator), Geum-ja goes to prison. The media and indeed the country have already made up their mind and the film entirely skips the trial.

Geum-ja is also a woman who is denied her right as a mother. Not only does Baek hold Jenny ransom, he also puts her up for adoption while Geum-ja is in jail. When Geum-ja is released she seeks out information on Jenny at the adoption agency but is denied due to confidentiality policies.

Like Dong-jin and Dae-su before her, Geum-ja too undergoes a transformation in her identity. The first identity, "Kind Ms. Geumja" is when she is in prison. People know Geum-ja for her sweet smile and her kind deeds. She helps the constantly antagonized Su-hee and Yi-jeong by killing the first Witch. She helps So-young by giving her a kidney. She is active at the prison church and takes care of an elder invalid inmate, a crazed North Korean spy that everyone avoids. She is beautiful and she is kind, and through these virtues Geum-ja gets what she wants.

The narrative goes out of its way to point out Geum-ja's transformation. People give her the moniker "Witch" when they find out that she killed the original Witch. The transformation happens in earnest when she is released from prison. She wears flashy clothes, does the iconic eye makeup, and wears high heels. She rarely smiles, speaks in a monotone, and is sexually aggressive. The change is noticed; several times the other

characters either comment on how much she has changed, or ask her why she chooses to wear makeup the way she does. In one instance, she simply replies, “Because I didn’t want to look kind.”

This is an explicit reference of her “Kind Ms. Geum-ja” persona, as well as a conscious and aware rejection of that persona. This also shows how Geum-ja’s transformation is not only more pronounced than those of Dong-jin and Dae-su, but also more *calculated*. While Dong-jin’s new masculinity through violence seems to be more naturalistic and an effect of the events surrounding him and Dae-su’s transformation into “Monster” a bit more deliberate yet still unavoidable, Geum-ja’s change is also partially an unveiling of the façade. In other words, she does not necessarily change into “The Witch” so much as she had purposefully assumed the guise of “Kind Ms. Geum-ja.”

The help of the other inmates is integral to Geum-ja’s plot. And the best way for her to gain the aid of those inmates was for her to ingratiate herself with them, and the best way for her to do this was with her beauty and benevolence. What the diegesis is essentially arguing is that these are the two main attributes that a woman needs in order to gain what she needs. Geum-ja simply was what was expected of her: a good woman. Incidentally, this image is not far removed from Lee’s star image: quiet, reserved, beautiful, and kind.

When Baek first comes face to face with the woman whose life he has ruined, the first thing he says is, “Why would you do your eyes like that?” Baek is not only showing disdain for Geum-ja’s eye shadow, but also the woman that she has become, a far cry from the subservient, weak young woman she was before prison, and the quiet,

kindhearted woman that she was in prison. She is now a dominant strong figure that commands the attention of all around her, male and female, gains the means and mobility to navigate the space of Korea, and to provide for a new sexual appetite. The new violent femininity is beneficial for Geum-ja.

Geum-ja's transformed identity of "The Witch" is coded as being distinctly feminine. This is a considerable contrast compared to Lee's other collaboration with Park in *J.S.A.* In *J.S.A.* Lee plays Major Sophie E. Jean, the Swiss-Korean Major assigned with investigating the skirmish between South and Korean soldiers. In *J.S.A.* Lee's Jean is an asexual character, a plot device there to offer cohesion to the narrative. Lee does not wear much make-up, speaks in a succinct, direct manner, and wears a stark military uniform throughout the film. Her gender neither adds nor detracts from the role and indeed the character was originally male. Geum-ja's gender on the other hand, is emphasized time and time again, in her physical appearance but also her demeanor.

The film's construction of femininity and what it considers to be "feminine" is complicated if not problematic. If we consider the film's assignment of importance then we can consider that Geum-ja is foremost as she is the protagonist, and then we can consider "The Witch" to be the more valid identity as it is "real." Regardless of Lee's inherent femininity, the character's gender is otherwise nondescript: Geum-ja (Witch) is reserved, cold, and taciturn. She is capable of great violence and seems to show little if any emotion. The initial marker of Geum-ja's gender is in her love and devotion to her daughter Jenny. The other, more problematic indicator is in her preoccupation with physical appearances.

After Geum-ja's release, the church group that had aided her throughout her sentence is there to greet her. Geum-ja's sentence ends in winter, and she exits the prison wearing the outdated summer dress she wore when she was first incarcerated. This prompts the preacher to scold her asking her why she didn't wear the coat that he had sent her. From the beginning we see Geum-ja's concern with her appearance. In another moment the film shows Geum-ja doing her make-up. In another she asks Yang-hee – who is offering her a place to stay and clothes to wear – if she has any high heels. When she goes to So-young and Su-hee who make her a gun and the plaque that will go on the handle of the gun, the women ask her why she is so set on such a strange design. Geum-ja's answer is, "It has to be pretty..."

Beauty is one of the elements that are central to society's construction of the woman, and Geum-ja plays on this in her "Kind Ms. Geum-ja" persona. But while her "Witch" persona refutes nearly everything else about her earlier identity, she retains a fixation with outer beauty. In that sense, Geum-ja even in her Witch persona is stereotypical in her depiction of femininity. She is like a post-vengeance Dong-jin but with a penchant for pretty things. This is problematic, but could be commentary on the fact that Geum-ja, or rather Lee *had* to be pretty as well. In other words, even though *Lady Vengeance* is a blood-splattered revenge film, it is a blood-splattered revenge film starring a woman, and because it stars a woman, it was only commercially viable if the lead were physically attractive.

Constructions of Patriarchal Masculinity

This is the reality that women face in the Korea of *Lady Vengeance*. Women are marginalized, disempowered, and relegated to specific roles that benefit the patriarchal male. Choi Min-sik who played Oh Dae-su in *Oldboy*, returns to the Vengeance Trilogy to play Mr. Baek, the antagonist of *Lady Vengeance*. Baek is a successful English teacher at private language schools and also a serial murderer who has killed at least five children.

Mr. Baek plays three different roles that are all related to contemporary social issues. He is the capitalist, the patriarchal figure, and the private educator. The Vengeance Trilogy returns to the issue of kidnapping and references *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* when Geum-ja speaks the same dialogue that Yeong-mi does, saying that there is “good kidnapping” and “bad kidnapping”. Baek is a bad kidnapper. He kidnaps children and kills them purely for personal gain and pleasure. While Won-mo the first victim was for the money, the subsequent killings were not financially motivated. Baek taped the killings and seems to be enjoying himself in the tapes. This is not to say that there isn’t a capitalist thread to Baek’s crimes. In another sequence the victims’ families, who had all paid the ransoms ask why someone without any children would need so much money. Geum-ja answers that he was planning on buying a yacht, much to the shock of the families.

Baek’s patriarchal role comes in earnest through his marriage to Yi-jeong. In a number of sequences the film cuts to Baek at home. Anytime the film shows Baek at home he is eating silently with his wife. This highlights the importance of meals, but

more importantly, the role of the wife in ensuring that a meal is prepared. In one sequence, Yi-jeong hesitantly asks Baek for permission to meet her friends. She assures him that dinner will be ready for him when he gets back. Later Yi-jeong tells Geum-ja that she must hurry home because Baek will be home soon and that she must fix him dinner. Baek's sexuality also defines him. In the same sequence where Yi-jeong asks him for permission, Baek pauses mid-meal and walks over to his wife. He silently gestures for her to rise and she obediently does, setting dishes aside. Baek undoes his zipper and proceeds to have brutal intercourse with Yi-jeong. He finishes, pats her on the back and walks back to his seat and finishes his meal. In *Lady Vengeance*, this is the woman's role in the patriarchal household, to provide food and sex.

What is problematic to Baek's role as a patriarchal figure is that he is not a father. When asked if Baek has his own children, Geum-ja notes that he is sterile and does not. This could be connected to the theme of the absence of the father figure that the film conveys through the absence of Jenny's biological father and also the prominence of Geum-ja's motherhood. It could also be a commentary on the patriarchal figure as being a non-existent father in contemporary society. In either case, even though Baek himself is not a father, he is still obviously coded as representative of patriarchy, and this is also connected to his role as an educator.

A Korean proverb states, "The king, the teacher, and the leader are one." Education has historically been a primary concern in Korean culture, and this is true now more than ever. In his reintroduction Baek is with his students, singing and dancing to the nursery rhyme, "Are you sleeping?" Baek also translates for Geum-ja when she talks to

her daughter Jenny. His modus operandi is choosing his victims from his schools, and promptly moving to another school after killing the children; this is how he was never implicated.

Baek is a very specific type of educator. He does not teach at elementary, middle, and high schools, and he does not teach at college. Baek is an English teacher at a private language school for children. He is a despicable character with no redeeming qualities and elicits no sympathy from the spectator. Through Baek, the film's construction of education is one that decries English education as well as private education and early education.

Baek chose his victims from his schools because he knew that they came from wealthy families. The high tuition is further emphasized when a victim's sister says that her family was only able to pay by both parents working full-time. This also speaks of the necessity of private education and the lengths that families will go to. Furthermore, Baek's ability to find at least five different schools speaks of the high demand.

The victims' families play a crucial part in the film. The families represent the upper class, and this is evident not only in the tasteful clothes they wear, but in the way that they are introduced. The families all enter the film when Geum-ja gathers them at an abandoned school to decide Baek's fate. The film introduces the families initially by their cars, panning slowly across the expensive foreign cars lined up in front of the school. Foreign cars are one of the signifiers of the upper class in South Korea, and this instantly identifies them as such, especially when contrasted against the lone domestic car, a beat up truck. The truck introduces the single working class family. And even though the

upper class families invite the spectator's sympathies, there is a hint of animosity pointed towards them.

In one sequence the middle class family's daughter gossips about one of the other mothers, commenting on how she took off her nice boots (so they wouldn't get dirty) and how she is inappropriately dressed for a rather dark occasion. She says that she can't understand how someone could do that in such a situation and the question seems to be posed as a legitimate one. Later, after they kill Baek, the families return to Geum-ja's bakery. After a few moments of mourning and contemplation, the families get down to brass tacks: money. While it is the working class character that asks Geum-ja if the ransoms found in Baek's house will be returned, she is coded as a more sympathetic character; the film notes the vast amount of trouble that her family went through after the kidnapping. This applies less to the rest of the families who seem to be doing fine yet promptly follow suit and hand Geum-ja their account numbers too. The inclusion of the scene indicts the victims' families and suggests that money can and will help them overcome their grief and even fill the places of their lost children.

The Historical Context

Education in Korea

How does this Korea depicted in *Lady Vengeance* correspond to the recent history of contemporary Korea? Michael J. Seth summarizes the country's relationship to education in the last few decades as such:

The fever-pitch obsession with education has been a fixed feature of South Korean society. Most of the striking products of this obsession – the enormous costs of education, the sacrifices families were prepared to make to meet them, “examination mania,” and the nearly universal drive for high-status degrees – remained unaltered at the end of the twentieth century (224).

Seth goes on to note education as being deeply connected to the process of democratization as well as the country’s increasing economic prosperity (224). Those high-status degrees that Seth mentions are related to the close proximity of Confucian values and education; this is because of the idea that higher education at prestigious institutes instantly leads to status (251-252). Jobs at conglomerates such as Samsung and LG have become more and more coveted, and degrees from the top ranked universities in the country are considered the fast track to such jobs. While entrance into universities has long been a priority, competition has risen and with it the need for private education with a special focus on English. There is an economic dimension to this new focus as it is part of a motion to internationalize education for “English was both the language of democratic nations and the medium of global commerce, science, technology, and culture (234).

This all takes a toll on parents, compared to personal income, South Korean education “was possibly the world’s costliest educational system” (Seth 172). This is because students and their families predominantly covered the expenses themselves (as opposed to the state). A significant part of those costs went to private tutoring and after

school lessons (186). Parents use millions in South Korean won a month on private education and the consensus has become that it is impossible to procure a future for your children without private education. Parents are not only spending more money on their children, they're also starting earlier. More and more programs and schools are targeting children with the base age lowering. The sharpest rise in educational costs in the 90's was for elementary school students with English education seeing the highest rise (188). This is what *Lady Vengeance* is addressing. It allegorizes the current situation with private education and poses the question, what exactly does it cost? At least according to the film, it may cost the child.

Gender Inequity in Korea

The situation with gender inequity is equally difficult. The country has made progress in social rights, with the 90's marking an aggressive movement by women to gain equal rights (Shin Ki-Young 2006 in Robinson 177). However, the struggle for progress is as slow as it is ongoing and even today South Korea is a nation where female fetuses are commonly aborted (Seth 245). According to Cal Clark and Rose J. Lee, a two-fold disappointment for women characterizes recent history in Asia: the process of industrialization and democratization. Neither has improved the status of women (9). L.H.M. Ling posits that the process of democratization in East Asia has been a "hyper-masculine" process that has ended up with women marginalized and "rationalized as invisible (housewives), cheap (factory girls), expendable (migrant workers), and/or available (sex workers)" (170, 173). According to Ling, modernization is hyper-

masculine in response to a historical characterization by the West of Asia as being feminine and weak. This is why the woman's role during the process has been defined as "the good wife, wise mother" (*hyonmo yangcho*)(175).

Confucius thought has changed with the times but for the most part the woman is still defined in relation to the man. In their volume discussing Confucianism's role in modern Asia, Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong agree that, "The domination of men over women seems to be one of the defining characteristics of Confucian theory and practice" (20). On another note, Ling points out that Confucianism is not the sole thread to contemporary East Asian culture, noting influences of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Shinto as well. However, she does remark that one strain persists: patriarchy (Ling 175). Whereas the patriarchal male's role is that of father, leader, and teacher, the woman is still mostly relegated to the role of wife and mother. Now, even though the woman's place in the workplace has expanded, there are still different standards. One such example is that more and more women are seeking plastic surgery because it will help their chances in job hunting but also in the workplace itself.

Conversely, Mahmood Yousefi argues that while gender inequity still exists within the country, women have as well benefitted from Korea's economic prosperity, noting that "Women in Korea today are more educated, healthier, and bear fewer children than they did thirty years ago" (57). Yousefi goes on to chart the progress in education, growth, and health care, and looks to issues of employment and earnings for women in Korea. In particular, Yousefi notes that within the 173 nations in the UN, the 1993 Human Development Index indicated that the gender-disparity-adjusted ranking placed

South Korea at #28 (62). This is an issue that I will briefly address in the conclusion of this thesis, but the objective reality of contemporary South Korea, while important, is tricky and debatable. What remains central to this study is that the films of the Vengeance Trilogy do not agree with these contentions.

On first glance, state presence is a tricky issue in *Lady Vengeance*. Like *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, *Lady Vengeance* introduces state presence in the form of a detective, Detective Choi (Nam Il-woo). Choi is sympathetic to Geum-ja, and knows that she is innocent. In one key sequence Geum-ja is forced to reenact the murder in front of the press and the victim's family. After tying the dummy up it is her turn to smother it with a pillow but she does not know what color pillow she is supposed to use. Choi sees this and points to his watchband, clueing her into the color of the murder weapon: orange. Even though Choi knows the truth, he is just one man who is unable to help Geum-ja; she was doomed to begin with.

Choi is presented less as a representative of the state, and more as a sympathetic character who is disenchanted with the state and the country. Despite Geum-ja's innocence, she wrongfully goes to jail. Other than Choi, the state is unaccounted for as there is no trial and there are no correctional officers in prison. After she is released, Choi decides to help Geum-ja in her revenge. When Geum-ja presents him with unequivocal evidence that Baek is guilty, Choi goes along with Geum-ja's plan of leaving his fate in the victims' families' hands. The families decide to not give Baek over to the authorities, demonstrating their own lack of faith in the judicial system. Choi, the disillusioned state official, goes along with this eschewing of a fair trial, and actually aids in the murder.

Ultraviolence as Legitimate Resistance

Ultraviolence is the tool that makes this all possible. Like Dong-jin and Dae-su before her, ultraviolence is what gives Geum-ja her mobility. It is her first act of violence that precedes her release into the world from the confines of prison. Geum-ja roams through a wider space after this act. There is an added dimension to Geum-ja's social mobility in the fact that she gains connections. In addition to her numerous good deeds, it is an act of murder that gains her allies who facilitate more ultraviolence.

Lady Vengeance also adds an extra dimension to the issue of social mobility first seen in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. Both films show that savagery can be a way to *kill* mobility. In *Sympathy*, Dong-jin cuts Ryu's Achilles tendons in order to stop him from escaping. In *Lady Vengeance* Geum-ja shoots Baek (who is already bound and gag) in the toe. There is no possibility for Baek to escape and this marks the beginning of the end for him. While he too has had social mobility and financial success through brutality, Geum-ja's act has negated his own upward trajectory.

Ultraviolence is once again a means of social resistance. Geum-ja's violence gives her the means to resist against the oppressive patriarchal figure. Likewise, aggression gives the upper class the means to resist against the parasitic capitalist who has taken their money and their children. What sets apart *Lady Vengeance* from *Sympathy* and *Oldboy* is the fact that this new femininity and social mobility is *not* overturned and *not* futile; instead it goes off without a hitch.

The body is still the target of ultraviolence in *Lady Vengeance*, and it is still commodified. In the first instance, Geum-ja is able to gain Woo So-young's assistance by giving her a commodity, once again a kidney. In the second, Geum-ja goes to the parents of Won-mo, the first victim, and offers her pinky for their forgiveness. The voiceover states that Geum-ja was ready and willing to give all her fingers in exchange for their forgiveness. It then immediately notes that Geum-ja spent all of her savings from her time in prison on surgery, once again explicitly linking the body and issues of money. Finally the film returns to issues first brought up in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* with commerce of the whole body, or kidnapping.

While *Lady Vengeance* is concerned with the same issues as *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and *Oldboy*, the conclusion it reaches makes it a more challenging film within the trilogy's schema. This is because despite its critique, *Lady Vengeance* is not about dashed hope, but possible hope. Because Geum-ja has her revenge and gains redemption (as evidenced in the last sequence), the film eschews any sort of bleakness in relation to the reality of women in contemporary Korea, and instead presents a hopeful situation that is more aligned to the discourses of nationalism that it is critiquing. It must be noted however that even though the film may be demonstrating its own gender bias in its differences from the other two films, the Of course even though While the film could simply be offering a more hopeful nationalism in order to reinvigorate female spectators, it is my contention that the thematic inconsistencies (in relation to the other films) make it problematic and demonstrative of its own gender bias.

In his review of *Lady Vengeance* for *Sight and Sound*, Roser Clarke states:

Up to that point, however, *Lady Vengeance* is a film of minimal seriousness, full of pratfalls and in-jokes: it's almost as if Park can't bring himself to portray the vengeance of a woman in the same stark way he used with men in the first two parts of his trilogy (68).

There are a number of reasons that this could be argued, beginning with the “team dynamic” of the film. Unlike Dong-jin, Ryu, and Dae-su, who all embark on their quests alone or with little aid, Geum-ja initially has four allies. She then adds Choi the detective. Eight other people commit the actual murder. It is almost as if Geum-ja is incapable of pulling off her elaborate scheme, especially the physical part. The sequence where she manhandled in one sequence by Baek's hired assassins supports this. Geum-ja manages to dispatch the killers but it is after she is overpowered, and this in itself is linked to the next issue.

Geum-ja is the only protagonist of the *Vengeance Trilogy* to use a gun. While the others use bats, knives, and hammers, Geum-ja is the only protagonist who does not use a melee weapon. Her use of firearm could be a play on the long-standing consideration of the gun as a phallic symbol, but it seems more to be a testament to the film's bias towards her femininity. Geum-ja is simply physically weaker, and able to kill only with a weapon that compensates for that weakness.

Geum-ja is also the only protagonist to commit the perfect crime. While the film ends with an ambiguous smile (not unlike *Oldboy*), the context of the smile undermines the ambiguity. Geum-ja has vanquished her foe, she is with her daughter, and she has planted her face in a cake shaped like tofu. This gesture contrasts to when she is initially

released from prison and offered tofu. The offering of tofu to a released convict is a motion that represents redemption, and one that is an oath to lead a “clean, white” life. While Geum-ja turns down the tofu near the beginning of the film, she fully commits to it at the end, signaling a happy ending. The fact that she does not meet a gruesome fate has two issues: first is that the film does not present a thesis of dashed hope and futility that the other two films had. The second is that the film offers hope that is unrealistic in the narrative logic of the films. Furthermore, the film also denies Geum-ja bodily mutilation like Dong-jin, Ryu, and Dae-su. It is interpretable that Geum-ja is spared a similar fate *because* she is a woman, and the mutilation of a woman is the one line that the films refuse to cross.

Finally, the last issue that *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* has is Geum-ja’s capacity as a mother. While the film denounces the woman’s role in patriarchal Korea, it still upholds the ideal that a woman should be a mother. Geum-ja is ruthless and unrelenting as an independent woman and as a lover but she yields when her daughter Jenny is involved. Geum-ja is a dedicated mother, concerned with what is best for her daughter – she decides that Jenny should go back to her foster parents in Australia – and unable to exhibit the same coldness that is shown to everyone else. *Lady Vengeance* offers an alternative femininity, but one where motherhood is still sacred, and in effect, one that is not completely free of the bounds of Confucius patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this thesis I have analyzed *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, *Oldboy*, and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* and argued that the films are critiques on South Korean society with a focus on the last thirty years of history. Through textual and formal analyses I have identified that the films explicitly reference this history and then express this criticism through the main motif of violence and with it they explore a number of issues. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and *Oldboy* are mainly concerned with class issues yet approaches them in a different manner.

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance groups the working-class and the upper class alike, and conceives of a Korea where its citizens are all possible victims in the quest for economic growth. *Oldboy* does not share this view. While the main characters are still class-stratified the film presents the upper class character as the sole benefactor of the carnage. Both films are also concerned with issues of masculinity in relation to class positions. The protagonists of the film are able to transcend their class positions and in some cases attain another class position through acts of cruelty. But like the hope that was promised the Korean people throughout the 80's and 90's, this mobility is false, and dashed hope and ruin awaits them. *Lady Vengeance* is also preoccupied with gender issues, but with a focus on femininity. The conception of femininity is more complex than the trilogy's handling of masculinity and the film makes a pointed critique on the place of women in contemporary Korea. The protagonist of *Lady Vengeance* is imprisoned because she is a woman, and therefore automatically situated beneath a man. Through the acquisition of violence, she is able to surpass her marginalized role of a

woman in Confucius Korea, and take her place as a mother. *Lady Vengeance* also introduces a new issue, one that is related to class and gender: education. Considered to be a tool that will lead to a better class position, education has become a social problem in Korea and *Lady Vengeance* considers this predicament.

This study is far from over and the results are not entirely conclusive. One matter that I have set aside for this thesis is historical reception. It is my assertion that the varying degrees of domestic success of Park's films are connected to the extent to which spectators were engaging with the commentary. In other words, in a mainstream film culture where romantic comedies and melodramas are by far the norm, I believe that the biting social commentary is a large reason why some of Park's films have been neglected. In order to prove or disprove this, I plan on looking at historical mainstream South Korean reviews as well as responses on popular Korean internet forums. The *Vengeance Trilogy* had its share of proponents and critics and I intend to look at what audiences responded to and what they found deplorable. I refuse to assume that most of the criticism is simply about the films' ultraviolence and taboo themes; underneath the criticism, and tied to the film's stylistic violence, are political ideas and social positions.

Reversely, I also keep in mind the fact that historical Korean audiences did enjoy the films. Subsequently, it is important to research the films' core audiences and what aspects of the film those audiences engaged with. This can in turn give some insight as to whether the alternative nationalism constructed in the *Vengeance Trilogy* explicitly or implicitly connected with audiences.

The Vengeance Trilogy fits in this schema of violence as social commentary, but they are not Park's only films. Park has six more feature-length films, including the aforementioned *J.S.A.* and his recent *Thirst (Bakjwi)*(2009). On first glance, not all of Park's films seem to be social critiques, and not all of them feature graphic violence. However, I do believe that to varying degrees, Park's other works also share a number of affinities with the films of the Vengeance Trilogy. Of particular interest is *Thirst*, the story of a Catholic priest who is transformed into a vampire. Not only does *Thirst* feature copious amounts of blood, it also shares striking similarities to *Sympathy* and *Oldboy* on a reception level. This is because *Thirst* was domestically unsuccessful, but was awarded the Jury Prize at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival (Shin "For Better"). Was the film's bloodshed and excessive sexuality too excessive for Korean audiences? Or was it that the social commentary was again too pointed, too close to home? Or perhaps it was a combination of both?

While I intend to continue work on Park Chan-wook's films, I do not limit the work to Park nor do I identify this strategy only in his work. Instead, this thesis serves as an entry point to a larger phenomenon and a larger study. Kim Ki-duk and Kim Ji-woon are two other mainstream Korean filmmakers who began work in the late 90's, and like Park they too produce films centered on atrocity. In many aspects Kim Ki-duk is even more severe than either director, as his films play a large role in the conceptions of extremities in Korean cinema. *The Isle (Seom)*(2000), *Address Unknown (Suchwin bulmyeong)*(2001), *Bad Guy (Nabbeun namja)*(2001), and *The Coast Guard (Hae anseon)*(2002) are just a number of Kim's films that fit the same criteria as Park's films.

Likewise, Kim has *The Quiet Family* (*Choyonghan kajok*)(1998), *A Tale of Two Sisters* (*Janghwa, Hongryeon*)(2003), and *A Bittersweet Life* (*Dalkomhan Insaeng*)(2005).

Incidentally, several of these films have been released through Tartan Asian Extreme or similar DVD distributors.

What I am essentially beginning here is situating Park (and these other filmmakers) within the context of national cinema. In order to expound on this premise, I must first identify the national cinema that Park fits into. I must inspect the state of Korean cinema during the production of these films and categorize the defining characteristics. Then I will be able to designate how Park fits into this national cinema, whether his films are a main proponent, or part of a sub-movement.

According to Stephen Crofts, national cinemas should be analyzed in terms of “production”, “audiences”, “discourses”, “textuality”, “national-cultural specificity”, “the cultural specificity of genres and nation-state cinema movements”, “the role of the state” and “the global range of nation-state cinemas” in order to identify what type of films constitute national cinemas and how national cinemas lean towards certain tendencies (qtd. in Hjort 3-4). I have begun situating these films within discourses of nationalism but even that work is far from complete. I begin with an inspection of three films in hopes that they will give me an entry to the larger context, and I hope that the larger context will then give me more insight to the individual films.

Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie contend that national cinema is a multifaceted and complex issue, and that any study on the subject will be the same. However, they do argue that national cinema is best understood “in terms of conflict” and that “films do not

simply represent or express the stable features of a national culture, but are themselves one of the loci of debates about a nation's governing principles, goals, heritage and history" (4). This thesis has found that this is certainly the case with the Vengeance Trilogy. These films are part of a national cinema and do not simply reflect the values and ideas of South Korea. Instead they serve as a site where discussion and debate can be held.

One starting point for this study and my assessment of the film's imagining of nation is Benedict Anderson's work. In relation to Anderson's notions of the "imagined community" Andrew Higson notes the transnational implications of the world today, and that the diasporic nature of some communities prevents from a complete imagined community and a national identity shared through a geographical space (65-66). Higson continues along these lines, positing that national cinema are the "product of a tension between 'home' and 'away'" and that national cinema "seems to look inward, reflecting on the nation itself" or "look out across its borders, asserting its difference from other national cinemas" (67). As far as the Vengeance Trilogy is concerned, these films are certainly looking inwards, reflecting on the society, culture, and history that they came from. At the same time, it is undeniable that the transnational imagination plays a significant role and these implications must also be considered.

In his search for a more fluid use of national cinema, Andrew Higson questions the validity of national cinema in the current world. He asks if it is legitimate and/or useful to consider national cinema. However, he does look to Stephen Croft's contentions that "in some contexts it may be necessary to challenge the homogenizing myths of

national cinema discourse; in others, it may be necessary to support them (qtd. in Higgson 73). In the context of British national cinema, Higgson's questioning of a homogenous national cinema may be valid, but in the context of South Korea, I believe it is necessary to support a reading of a consistent national cinema. While films produced in South Korea may not be completely uniform, there are strong affinities in a good number of them that must be addressed.

Finally, in order to accurately work out these films' positions in Korean national cinema, I must further develop my use of ultraviolence. The most pressing task that I have is to first decide whether I am going to pick up the undertaking that Prince has left unfinished (and that I have left neglected): a working definition of the term ultraviolence. I must decide whether or not ultraviolence needs actual definition, whether it is a mode that is substantial enough to be specifically differentiated from general cinema violence. The alternative is that the current use in mainstream culture, that of anything that is higher in degree than what is considered to be "normal" media violence. However this is a precarious issue when one considers the historical increase in media violence. What was once considered gratuitous barely incites a reaction in a contemporary viewer.

These films and this thesis are about Korea. South Korea is a nation that has gone through incredibly rapid change in the 20th century. Once a war-ravaged nation rife with poverty, it is now one of the 30 nations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and classified as a "High-income OECD member" ("Data"). In their book *Korea's Economic Miracle* Charles Harvie and Lee Hyun-hoon note:

Few countries have attained such a high level of development so rapidly. In a single generation this poor nation, which had consisted primarily of subsistence farmers in the 1950s and early 1960s, had become the world's largest producer of home appliances, the second largest producer of semi-conductors, the second largest shipbuilder, the fifth largest car maker, the eleventh largest economy and the twelfth largest trading nation. ... The country's attainment of OECD membership in December 1996 reflected 35 years of extraordinary growth and marked the economy's coming of age. For many developing countries Korea's economic development model – state-directed capitalism – appeared to offer a viable framework for their own development programmes (2).

It is undeniable that South Korea has come a long way. However, while Harvie and Lee give an accurate account of the nation's economic development, they fail to represent what cannot be seen in the statistics: the high cost. Internationally and domestically, many may see Korea as a booming economy and a model for economic development. But despite those substantial advances, there are just as many who do not share that same view. They perceive not the progress, but the lack of progress and the inequity that persists in the nation. Contrary to popular nationalism that only tout how far the country has come, the films of the Vengeance Trilogy gives representation to those that have been neglected. South Korea has come a long way, but it has just as much a long way to go.

This thesis originally began with my observation of the substantial amount of violence in Park Chan-wook's Vengeance Trilogy and the high degree of intensity of that violence. As I progressed in my analysis of the violence and began recognizing the dominant themes to the films, I discovered that the films had prominent themes that were reaching to contemporary social issues. These issues were inseparably connected to the brutality and seemed to fuel it. These films are just three works amidst a booming industry. However, they are also three films that represent a growing trend within that industry that specifically point out to a larger context, and also have a considerable role in transnational flow; they are simultaneously about Korea and reaching beyond Korea. By looking at these films and beyond them, we are offered valuable insight as to how the medium of cinema plays a role in discourses revolving around the nation. Through these films, we are able to observe one way in how a nation sees itself. It is not an ideal image, nor is it the prevalently accepted image, but it is no longer a hidden image. It is there to be viewed, neglected, championed, attacked, and analyzed.

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