South Korean Cinema 2000 – 2010:

A Masculinity In Crisis?

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Table of Contents

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any other tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

This thesis provides a cohesive account of the changing face of masculine representations in the cinema of South Korea between 2000 – 2010. During this period, the presentation of male characters in South Korean films went through a period of substantial change. Due to several external factors, including the decline of the Hong Kong film industry following the British hand over to China, the South Korean industry was able to rise to prominence from the compromised position created by the division of the peninsula.

Traditionally South Korean masculinity – as analysed in the work of such theorists as Lee Hyangjin and Kim Kyung-hyun – has been considered to be in a state of recession. This condition was thought to reflect the peninsula's inferior position in 20th century world politics. However, in the 21st Century South Korea's image – both on screen and off – has experienced both repair and prosperity. This has been very much reflected in the industry's dramatic shift in masculine iconography. Gone are the traditionally wounded and pathetic masculine characters and in their place are sleek suited male representations portrayed by such internationally acclaimed stars as Song Kang-ho, Choi Min-sik and Lee Byung-hun.

Through insight into the trends and dynamics of gender featured in the works of Gender Studies theorists including RW Connell, combined with analysis of numerous films, this thesis provides a fully comprehensive critical analysis of South Korean

screen masculinity. The thesis shows how this masculinity has been transformed from a wounded, recessive gender model to one of the most dominant and thriving models on the world stage. It also attempts to provide a global perspective on many of the theories tied to issues of South Korean masculinity through comparison to similar examples in both East-Asian cinema and beyond.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go the staff at Macquarie University Faculty of Arts, with special credit given to my Principal Supervisor for this candidature, Professor John Potts; for agreeing to mentor me during my candidature.

Special thanks also goes to Doctors Goldie Osuri and Renata Murawska, whose respective third year courses inspired me to pursue this field of cinema study; David Sander for encouraging me to diversify my reading beyond my chosen fields – without which my thesis would not be the same; the Korean Cultural Centre in Sydney for providing access and screenings to their material; the staff at the Macquarie University Library for tolerating my protracted book/publication loans; and to my family and friends for never giving up on me throughout my nine years of study.

I hope this thesis does justice to the time, effort and dedication that you have all shown in support of my research.

<u>Introduction</u>

This thesis concerns gender as much as it concerns cinema, more specifically South Korean masculinity and how it was portrayed in films between 2000 and 2010. Gender issues are apparent in every area of life and constitute a prominent position in the lives of every person in a society, acting as social constructs which are crucial to the concept of civilization. Hegemonic gender models, however, are seldom satisfactory reflections of a society's gender politics. These codes are frequently designed to suit a specific agenda which often overlooks the multiplicity of different ethnicities, creeds, philosophies, sexualities and faiths apparent within even a single society at any given time.

The constant bombardment of cinema and television imagery, and the subsequent gender iconography presented therein, plays a key role in constructing and maintaining the self-image and indeed the gender image of every culture. As Tony Schirato and Jen Webb point out in their book *Reading The Visual*:

> Every perception and meaning is the product of psychological, physiological and, above all, cultural contexts…it is this situation of a culture more or less seeing through or for us, combined with the inflection or influence of different psychological and physiological states, and of-the-moment contexts, that produces what we see.
>
> (Schirato and Webb, 2004: 15)

It is also important to note that historical and social factors can have dramatic effects on how gender identities are constructed visually, and can be equally as damaging to the identities of nations and individuals as they can be productive. A potent example of this principle is South Korea, a nation whose history, and indeed film industry, was riddled with social and political strife throughout much of the 20th Century and which thus developed a dramatically shifting sense of gender imagery.

The South Korean film industry may also be considered the best example of how a nation's creative industries can reflect the state of the nation as a whole. In his book *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves*, Darcy Paquet describes how the situation experienced by Oh Dae-Su - the protagonist of Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003) - is in many respects a microcosmic representation of how the South Korean film industry - and South Korean society at large - was frequently powerless in its inability to influence the factors that restricted its freedoms throughout much of the 20th Century. Paquet writes:

> Like *Oldboy*'s Dae-su sitting his cell watching his television, Korean film makers could observe the broader changes that were sweeping through society, but could not comment on them.
>
> (Paquet, 2012: 22)

In this context, Paquet refers chiefly to the Motion Picture Law of the Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan military dictatorships, which forbade film makers from presenting social commentary about the blatant socio-political upheavals and tribulations which afflicted the peninsula during these periods. This censorship was

only a small part of a century's worth of events which proved both tumultuous and ultimately damaging for the South Korean people. As Paquet explains:

> Life under successive authoritarian regimes involved major infringements of freedom at every turn, particularly in the realm of political and artistic expression.
>
> (Paquet, 2012: 17)

These infringements proved especially damaging for South Korea's national self-image. They further forced South Korean masculinity into the state of recession into which it had fallen since the country's separation from North Korea, and drove South Korean femininity into a state of borderline invisibility.[1] Both of these degenerations of gender primacy are given strict analysis in the pages of this thesis, as are their respective gradual returns to their former positions of prominence.[2]

Methodology

In this thesis I employ an interdisciplinary research method that incorporates film studies, gender theory, sociology, psychology and political theory. It also incorporates reception studies of several popular Korean films and features several documented film maker interviews. Reception studies findings are featured in Chapter 5, while chapters 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7 feature film maker interviews with directors Bong Joon-ho, Kim Ji-woon, Park Chan-wook and Kim Ki-duk. Chapter 6 also features an

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[1] See Cho Eunsun, part of McHugh and Abelmann (2004).
[2] Whilst this thesis is chiefly concerned with masculinity in South Korean film, the seventh chapter moderately attempts to discuss the many trials of South Korean screen femininity which, like its masculine counter-part, has gradually been repairing its gendered national self-image.

interview with noted South Korean actor Choi Min-sik about what attracts him to the work of Park Chan-wook.

The goal of this thesis is to identify that the changes evident in South Korean screen masculinity may be microcosmically reflective of how masculinity itself evolves as a whole. Beyond the peninsula, a society's perceptions of manhood and the representations of what constitutes the dominant masculinity of a nation have always changed in accordance with the way male gender roles change to accommodate social, economic and cultural shifts. In 17th and 18th Century Europe, it was considered quite acceptable for upper-class men to wear excessive amounts of lead based make-up equal to that of their feminine counterparts, and was deemed fashionable to behave in a manner contrary to what was traditionally considered to be manly (mincing, for example). As Michel Foucault famously describes at the beginning of *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, throughout much of Europe in the early part of the 17th Century especially, "a certain frankness was common, it would seem". To quote Foucault:

> It was a time of direct gestures, shameless discourse and open transgressions…it was a period when bodies "made a display of themselves".
>
> (Foucault, 1976:3)

Whilst the 19th Century witnessed a return of masculine norms to their traditional austerity, from the latter part of the Twentieth Century onwards, the attitude towards the role of men in First World society has shifted toward roles that have been traditionally considered feminine, in concurrence with the cultural shift of women

gravitating toward more physical roles like construction and the military that were traditionally reserved for men. The most common of these roles is child rearing, evidenced by the increasing prevalence of 'house husbands'. Normative roles and ideals of gender – like the normative roles and ideals of sexuality - are always subject to the fashions, tastes and attitudes of the period even though, as Foucault points out, the "speaker's benefit" often drives and regulates gender norms in accordance with specific agendas within the spectrum of Power-Knowledge (Foucault, 1972: 6). This is particularly true in the age of commerce where Foucault and many of his contemporaries, such as Jean Baudrillard, argue that our attitudes towards gender and sexuality can be heavily motivated by capitalist dogma.[3] He attests that:

> …to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervour of knowledge, the determination to change the laws…This is perhaps what also explains the market value attributed not only to what is said about…repression, but also the mere fact of lending an ear to those who would eliminate the effects of repression.

> (Foucault, 1972: 7)

While it is indeed true that gender and sexuality are not mutually exclusive entities, the hypothesis holds weight in both contexts. In the same way that Foucault argues how an overt surface repression of sexuality and its discussion has also led to a plethora of contrary discourses in the private sphere, so does relegating concepts of gender to a single hegemonic vision of masculine and feminine inadvertently provoke

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[3] See Baudrillard – *The Evil Demon of Images*.

the creation of opposition groups and sub-cultures to undermine this model.[4]
Considering the often cyclical nature of popular attitudes to gender and sexuality,
these so-called radical changes could inevitably regress over time only to resurge at a
later date. However, with each resurgence, new aspects of gender are enabled as new
generations of people view them with fresh eyes and newer perspectives. The same
can be said of South Korean masculinity.

The latter part of the 20th Century also witnessed a dramatic change in the way
society regarded male behaviour. While for much of the 20th Century, the wounded,
impaired and somewhat effeminate image of South Korean manhood was considered
recessive in relation to the Post-World War II and Cold War ideological gender
models, in the late 20th Century and early 21st Century - thanks in part to the rise of
metro-sexual masculinity, the success of the LGBT community and the continuing
strides toward gender parity made by feminism – it has now become a strong
masculine model, with many of its gender attitudes now becoming more a reflection
of modern man. Most prevalent is the way in which men in the developed world are
more readily encouraged to openly express their feelings, especially when taking into
account the developed world's increasing abhorrence to male violence. Michael
O'Shaughnessy and Jane Stadler argue that:

> …men's feelings are repressed in many ways as they grow
> up…However, this does not mean that they do not feel. It
> just makes the realization and expression of feeling more
> difficult…The socialization of boys teaches them that anger

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[4] On occasion, this rebellion can be provoked deliberately.

and aggression are legitimate feelings for men: it is OK to

be angry: indeed, it can confirm masculinity.

(O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2004: 248-249)

While this statement is for the most part true, the latter sentence which identifies negative and destructive emotions like anger to be socially normalized in male society has in the modern world been found to be increasingly spurious. In particular, it fails to take into account a number of important social factors.

The first is that there has been an increasing shift, in the media especially, where the forms of *protest masculinity* and exhibition tied to violence have become largely defunct.[5] O'Shaughnessy and Stadler do briefly acknowledge this distinction, arguing that since the 1990s in particular there have been as much a prevalence of films like *Dead Poet's Society and Strictly Ballroom* (1992) which "present softer, more supportive versions of masculinity" in the same way that more aggressive film representations such as *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Fight Club* (1998) are "both celebrations and critiques of masculinity" (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2004: 248).

More importantly, however, these representations of a softer, more emotionally generous male gender model have increasingly taken centre stage. As gender attitudes change through social and political trends (the rise of male cosmetic culture, the outing of social injustices like domestic violence, the rise of the Metro-sexual/LGBT communities etc.), 'butch' masculine representations such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Ray Winstone are now taking a back seat to the likes of Hugh Jackman and Joseph Gordon Levitt; supplanting aggression and physicality for intelligence and grooming. Even in those instances where traditional representations

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[5] The term *Protest Masculinity* was pioneered by R.W. Connell and shall be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 6.

of physical masculinity are apparent, they exist mainly as either an unfortunate memento of post-World War II masculinity or as a negative reflection of certain masculine strata, most prevalently steroid culture and the increase in male steroid abuse in first world society which has in recent years proven detrimental to society as a whole.[6]

Today, it would appear that the only area of manhood portrayed through the media where traditional representations of masculinity remain dominant are in military institutions, where aggression and sadism are cultivated and softer, more compassionate masculine ideals are either bred out or excluded. However, even in this instance there has been, since the mid-1990s especially, a shift toward portraying the image of the soldier more with critical cynicism than with blind admiration. Films like Stephen Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), John Irvin's *When Trumpets Fade* (1998) and Sam Mendes' *Jarhead* (2005) have all contributed to altering Western perceptions of war through representations of armed conflict which focus more on camaraderie as shared suffering than it does nationalist propaganda. The interesting thing about this shift is that South Korea has always focused more on this concept of war story as melodrama, pursuing a concept referred to as "*hanguk* heroism" which has been exhibited in a range of Korean films such as *The Marines Who Never Returned* (1968) and Kang Woo-suk's *Silmido* (2009) but has only recently been displayed in Euro-American cinema with films like George Clooney's *The Monuments Men* (2014) and David Ayer's violent and harrowing World War II tank drama *Fury* (2014). These films focus less on the idea of painting soldiers as 'super-heroes' and more as regular people thrust into situations where they are forced

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[6] The steroid abuse epidemic has proven to be particularly troublesome in the United Kingdom. On June 19th 2015, *The Guardian* newspaper reported fears that it will become the next major medical crisis facing the National Health Service (Walker, 2015).

to rely on each other to survive. O'Shaughnessy and Stadler identify that struggle and friendship are common threads in phallocentric narratives. They write:

> Depicting male characters fighting alongside one another allows them to be physically close and provides a situation in which each can earn or win respect of the other leading to friendship.
>
> (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2004: 247)

Whilst the prevalence of camaraderie in genre war films can not be denied, it has until recently been seldom to the level of homo-social intimacy found in the *han-guk* films of South Korea and has more commonly been the subject of police buddy movies. A common theme in both South Korean *han-guk* war films and these modern American war films is the concept of male bonding, with two or more characters developing deep homo-social relationships over the film's duration. Through this melodramatic intimacy, audiences develop an emotional connection with the soldiers. Thus the image of the soldier becomes de-mystified, breaking the iconography of its character signature and creating a representation that is far truer to life.[7]

The gender issues of even a single country are far too complex and expansive to be covered in a single thesis, given that all humans are individuals, with their own idiosyncratic memories, opinions and experiences. To paraphrase Connell there is an infinite number of gender identities, each with their own unique nuances, be they ever so slight, which separate them from every other identity. The limitations of human comprehension and the medium of this thesis require these possibilities to be corralled

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[7] *Han-guk Heroism* shall be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 3.

into a small handful of meta-categories so that they can be studied anthropologically. However, these idiosyncratic differences are still prevalent beneath the surface and should never be taken for granted. Whilst in the earlier chapters it was established that there is always a hegemonic masculinity and a hegemonic femininity, the failure to repeat means that even within the boundaries of the hegemonic gender models there still remains the possibility for uniqueness.

<u>The scope of the thesis: 2000-2010</u>

The scope of this thesis has been narrowed around the period of 2000 to 2010 because it marked a crucial period of change in masculine iconography from a wounded and recessive model to a stronger more globalized image. This period also marks several key historical points in the rise and eventual recession of what is known as *Hallyu* or "The Korean Wave". In his 2009 book, *South Korean Cinema: Breaking The Waves,* Darcy Paquet references Cho Hae-jeong's 2005 essay in indentifying the three main categories of *hallyu*:

> Cho Hae-jeong (2005) divides the various responses and arguments surrounding the Korean Wave into three broad groups. The first she terms the 'cultural nationalist perspective', which proposed various reasons for the spread of Korean pop culture vis-à-vis American or Japanese cultural products…The 'neo-liberal perspective' focused on the mass market appeal of Korean pop culture and the development of new markets and distribution networks in

the Asia region…the 'post-colonialist perspective'…taken

up primarily by cultural researchers interested in

modernisation…and…among other issues the building of

an Asian 'cultural bloc'.

(Paquet, 2009: 398-399)

The New Korean Cinema movement played a crucial role of the success of the

Korean Wave and indeed in the continued spread of Korean popular culture

throughout Asia. Thanks to films like *Shiri* (1999), *JSA* (2000) and *Silmido* (2005),

South Korean films quickly became one of the dominant film markets in Asia.

However, my second reason for choosing this decade for my thesis stems from the

fact that by the end of the 2000s, the success of the *Korean Wave* had began to wane.

This is particularly potent for New Korean Cinema as the movement suffered great

financial and commercial losses when the bubble burst in 2009. Paquet attributes this

event to a self-indulgent obsession with celebrity and a rejection of artistic integrity in

favour of commercial viability provoked by a mixture of Cho's second and third

groups. He writes:

A growing belief that casting, rather than original content

or a well-written screenplay, was the surest route to

profitability discouraged a focus on quality. In 2005 and

2006 critics were deriding the trend for quickly developed,

star-centred projects such as *Now And Forever* (*Yeolliji*,

2006), about not one but two protagonists with fatal

illnesses or the Korea-Hong Kong production *Daisy* (*Deiji*,

2006), starring Jun Ji-hyun, that was obviously trying to replicate the star's past successes. Ultimately the majority of such films performed poorly in both Korea and other Asian markets, setting the stage for the later waning of the Korean Wave.

(Paquet, 2009: 400-401)

While *hallyu* managed to survive complete dissolution during this decline in 2009/2010, the New Korean Cinema movement suffered heavily and was thus forced into a period of retrenchment, though certain small gains were still made during this period as well. In short, 2000 and 2010 were chosen for this thesis chiefly because they bookend the rise and the fall of the industry's period of prosperity in vivid and easily recognisable terms.

Additionally, the choice of films for this thesis are deliberately concerned with only a select number of well-known directors. While the initial reason for this choice was that the films listed herein were some of the most easily accessible films outside of East Asia, a more crucial and contemporary reason is that three of the more prominent directors – Kim Ji-woon, Bong Joon-ho and Park Chan-wook – have all since made the jump to Hollywood due to their growing acclaim with international audiences. Park in particular is highly notable in this regard because his canon of exceptional, off-beat films has cemented his reputation as one of the few great auteur directors of the early 21st century both in Asia and in the West, shaping and re-envisioning the cinematic landscape for the next generation of global film maker.

<u>The Structure of the Thesis</u>

The seven chapters of this thesis analyse many of the more dominant issues concerning South Korean screen masculinity and are described below. It includes extensive research into the production and reception of the films featured, achieved through not only theoretical information from prominent film academics and gender theorists but also accounts of interviews with the film makers themselves and through research into audience reception of the films.

The first chapter presents an extensive look into Kim Kyung-hyun's *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, including its content, critical reviews of Kim's book by other theorists on the subject of South Korean Cinema, several similar accounts of the cultural significance of South Korean Cinema, and opinions from several Masculinity Studies theorists from outside the Peninsula. For much of the 2000s, Kim's writing was perhaps the most comprehensive discourse on how codes of South Korean masculinity are portrayed and received on screen. It stands alongside the work of many other theorists, such as Lee Hyangjin, as a reflection of how screen masculinity was regarded in South Korean cinema up until the mid 2000s. The main through-line presented by Kim's book is that up until the late 1990s, screen masculinity was flawed and seen as recessive but in the early twenty-first century has shifted to being dominant and stylish.

Most of the films covered in this thesis were not analysed in Kim's book and only a portion of those that were analysed were covered to any extensive degree. Through this chapter it is also argued that each of the critical accounts discussed by Kim, Lee, Cho et al. all adhere to very specific contexts, omitting in most cases the changes and conflicts that occur among men from different cultures, generations,

sexualities and social strata. Relating to the work of R.W. Connell, Judith Butler and Chris Blazina, I discern through this chapter the purpose of my thesis: to build upon the theories featured in Kim Kyun-hyun's *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* and explore them in a wider context with regard to a wide array of cultural, social, economic, anthropological and philosophical perspectives.

Additionally, a small portion of this chapter has also been devoted toward investigating how South Korean masculinity is portrayed on screen today. Kim's book and the theories contained therein concerning 2000s South Korean masculinity contrast heavily with much of the research concerning South Korean Masculinity in the 2010s. In particular, Kim's theories greatly differ from the findings of Dr. Sun Jung who in her 2011 book identified that in the post-New Korean Cinema era, the sleek suited masculine model that was once dominant has now been usurped by a new form of 'soft' masculinity that trades the boisterousness and pride for a more reserved and feminine approach. What's important to note about 'soft' masculinity is that it rejects the concept of patriarchy, adopting a stance that is now far closer to gender parity and which is closely aligned to feminism. This has led to South Korean masculinity becoming a dominant masculine model within Asia in the 2010s, while many of the patriarchal masculinities of the former colonial powers have slipped into turmoil.

The second chapter provides a brief outline of the history of the Korean Peninsula and the historical and cultural influences surrounding South Korean masculinity. It chiefly documents how the Korean Peninsula (both North and South) was subject to a tumultuous series of events over the course of the Twentieth Century, many of which were due to circumstances beyond the control of the Korean people. In particular, this chapter describes how in the early 20th Century the U.S. made several

executive decisions about the fate of Korea that dramatically altered the course of history on the peninsula e.g. offering Korea to the Japanese at the end of the Russo-Japanese War (which inevitably led to Korea's annexation), and more crucially the hasty bi-section of Korea from a single unified nation into two polarizing independent states. This chapter draws on a variety of sources and accounts from political analysts including Gordon G. Chang. Though Chang only really devotes one chapter of his 2004 book, *Nuclear Showdown*, to South Korean history, his insight into the South's relationship to the North and the domestic implications of that relationship provides a fundamental back bone to the crux of my earlier chapters.

Chapter Three is an exploration into how South Korean Cinema discusses masculinity in relation to nationhood. This chapter focuses heavily on the role of film as a tool for propaganda before, during, and after the Korean War under South Korea's first President, Syngman Rhee; and argues for the ongoing dilemma facing the nationalism of a country and people divided by ideology. The central argument of this chapter is that the pseudo-envy argued by the likes of Kim Kyung-hyun and Lee Hyang-jin is in fact spurious in nature because, while successfully presenting a strong image of masculinity, North Korea lacks so many of the other privileges and benefits enjoyed by South Korea (economic stability, high living standards, global connections etc). The DPRK's highly militarised and patriarchal politcal system stems from the fact that the North is, after all, a paranoid rogue state living in self-imposed isolation, fighting a "war" that no longer exists with a constant annual string of defectors fleeing over its Southern border. Why therefore should the gender identity of the South appear inadequate in comparison to a nation with myriad other problems? This chapter also contains in-depth reviews of three films; *JSA* by Park Chan-wook (2000), *Silmido* by Kang Woo-suk and *Brotherhood of War* by Kang Je-gyu (2009), war films

which directly discuss the ethical and diplomatic problems facing South Korea's relationship to the North; the effects that the division of the peninsula have had on both cultural identity and gender identity; and which discuss such issues as cultural unity, the often destructive influence of political rhetoric and (in the case of *Silmido*) the presence of *han-guk* heroism as a polarising masculine force.

Focusing heavily on life under the military dictatorships of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan during the 1970s and 80s, and continuing to explore several issues from the previous chapter, the fourth chapter discusses the rise of student movement cinema, the events leading up to the liberation riots of 1987 and how film-makers during this movement used recessive masculinity as a mobilizing force for this purpose. It outlines the restrictions placed upon the South Korean film industry by both the Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan military dictatorships through the Motion Picture Law and how films of this period have been used as both polemic and as a means for remembering historical trauma. This chapter also discusses three films by director Bong Joon-ho, who continues to champion the defiant spirit of the student movement through his films. Through the use of multi-layered political allegory, underdog narratives and drawing upon many of his own experiences as a student activist during the Liberation Riots of 1986-87 which were conducted against the military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan, Bong Joon-ho's cinema draws upon and thus maintains the opinion that even an afflicted male can have a productive masculinity given the correct context and perspective.

Chapter Five discusses how the effects of market forces and commercial interests have provoked a dramatic change in how South Korean masculine representations are portrayed on screen, especially the switch from wounded and recessive masculine models to dominant and attractive ones. I discuss how such

shallow and materialistic attitudes have raised fears surrounding the loss of New

Korean Cinema's artistic credibility and how the industry has regressed since the

South Korean film bubble burst in the late 2000s. Finally, this chapter reviews three

films by Kim Ji-woon, a film maker whose canon of work best juxtaposes traditional

Korean narratives with Hollywood screen aesthetics. In particular, Kim discusses the

concept of themes like nationhood and revenge as subjects of male fantasy and how

these fantasies may ultimately prove destructive because they are seldom accurate

reflections of the themes that they supposedly represent. This applies not only to

fiction film narratives but also to performance art forms like professional wrestling,

which Kim extensively covers in his film *The Foul King* (2000). During her journal

article for *Sex Roles*, Danielle Soulliere makes the observation that:

> Although there have been few scholarly investigations
> into gender roles or masculinity in professional
> wrestling…some noteworthy commentaries suggest that
> professional wrestling presents masculinity in its
> culturally ideal form.
>
> (*Sex Roles*, 07/2006)

It can be argued that the guilty pleasures afforded by the medium of professional

wrestling have very much the same effect on the development of young boys as the

modelling industry does for young girls. The masculine iconography of the

professional wrestler, much like the romantic character signature of the Hollywood

action star, plays to both the anxieties and the inner-most personal desires of the male

viewer's gender identity by promoting feelings of admiration or aspiration. However,

the problem with these character models is that they may in many cases be little more than simulacra and not an accurate reflection of either the performers themselves or of the type of manhood they are attempting to promote. Therefore, the hegemonic masculinity portrayed within these representations may be nothing more than a visually pleasing hegemonic veneer emphasising a new form of patriarchy that demands conformity to a model that is recognizably 'Asian' or 'Modern' but is not a reflection of South Korea as an independent nation.

In Chapter Six, I discuss the opinion that there is always more than one type of masculinity; a belief that whilst discussed extensively in the field of Masculinity Studies, is only touched upon briefly in Kim Kyung-hyun's book. I explore how in many prominent examples of New Korean Cinema these multiple (and often polarizing) representations of masculinity are frequently forced into direct conflict with one another in dispute of exactly what the dominant masculine model should be. For this purpose, Chapter Six discusses several of the films by Park Chan-wook, a director whose body of work centres specifically on the discord and contestation that occurs between these differing representations.

This chapter particularly explores how conflicts can arise when two dramatically different forms of hegemonic masculinity interact in an antagonistic fashion. For example, as Connell points out, in many cases the "exaggerated claim to the potency that…culture attaches to" protest masculinity - such as sub-cultural rebellion and violence - and which is common in working class society often directly conflicts with grooming and metro-sexual sophistication that is often prevalent in males from higher social strata (Connell, 1995: 300). This is due to the fact that men and women from differing social strata have different cultural experiences. Most noticeable is the likelihood that working class males are more prone to experiences of

violence than men from the middle class. In many cases, this provokes protest masculinity to present itself as "a response to powerlessness, a claim to the gendered position of power, a pressured exaggeration…of masculine conventions" that often verge on the fantastical and the burlesque (Connell, 1995: 300). This particular masculine convention is especially prevalent in Korean gangster films like *A Dirty Carnival* (2006) which deal with groups that operate within society's subversive underbelly. As in this film however, the characters who indulge in this particular form of masculinity often find that it offers more detriments than benefits because it does not translate well, or even present well, to other gender models. In saying this, the alternative is no better since a person's dress and grooming does not dictate their character and often well groomed characters in many Korean films possess highly evident character flaws.

Chapter Six also discusses a convention known as the patriarchal dividend, a topic that continues into Chapter Seven. This topic concerns the gender inequalities traditionally afforded to men and how these dividends have frequently been used by men (and indeed male characters) to unfairly claim dominion over their female counter-parts. While only extensively covered in the latter two chapters, the patriarchal dividend applies to nearly all the topics covered in this thesis due to its position as one of the primary causes for masculine recession. The patriarchal dividend is ultimately punitive to both genders because it creates a paradox where in attempting to exert forced dominance over women, men as a gender inadvertently weaken themselves. It is therefore only when the patriarchal dividend is abandoned and gender parity is achieved that a nation's masculinity can ever truly claim to be strong.

Finally, the seventh chapter discusses an issue of the masculine debate which until recently was largely over-looked by South Korean film theorists: the portrayal of women in South Korean screen narratives and more specifically how they are treated by their male counterparts. Traditionally, the focus on the damaged state of South Korean screen masculinity has been so all-consuming that women have often been all but excluded from all but the most condemnatory of positions on screen: either as Mother or Whore. It has also led to the enforcement of many of the extremely negative and misogynistic cultural codes which have been prevalent throughout South Korean society since the beginning of the Joseon period of Korean history.

However, as South Korea has become ever more exposed to cultural modernity and its position as a member of the global community becomes ever more relevant, there has been since the late 1990s an increasing prevalence in pro-feminist South Korean cinema, spearheaded by the performance of actresses such as Bae Du-na, Lee Yeong-ae and, especially, Mun So-ri. Mun is a prominent figure with regard to feminism in South Korean cinema, not least because of her bold command of extreme physical characters. Mun's most credited performance was as a victim of cerebral palsy in *Oasis*. The presence of such a debilitating ailment casts a dramatic slant on the idea of traditional femininity, and as such it is a common motivating factor for violent rebellion against such norms. As RW Connell mentions in *Gender*:

> Women who are shocked by a major operation, and terrified by discovering that they have a deadly disease, are likely to revolt against sexist stereotyping…especially when it is presented to them in the form of care by other women.

(Connell, 2002: 137)

Connell's account suggests, in a dramatic contrast to the reactions of men in similar circumstances (e.g. war wounds), that biological impairments inspire women to position their femininity in opposition to such norms primarily because such codes dictate that these afflictions force them to the absolute bottom rungs of the ladder of gender primacy. Therefore physical perfection is prized above all things for the promotion of societal norms, especially by the media which thrives from marketing the commodity of images which are considered pleasing to the eye. For both sexes, the presence of gender models which fall outside that of the established norm are largely ignored, or in some extreme cases denigrated, by the media leading to exclusion from what it considered to be socially acceptable (even though this affliction may afford little to no detriment in a person's capability to perform tasks). For *Oasis*, Mun's performance received critical acclaim specifically because it directly challenged the myth that a person without a fully functioning body would not be considered beautiful and therefore would not be able to find love, in much the same way that Christina Ricci does for disfigurement in *Penelope* (2006) or Gwyneth Paltrow for obesity in *Shallow Hal* (2001).

The majority of female-centred films produced during the New Korean Cinema movement, however, followed narratives that were chiefly concerned with how women in South Korean society are mistreated by men. This chapter discusses this latter issue further through contextual analysis of three films by director Kim Ki-duk: one of the few directors featured in this thesis who is directly referenced by Kim Kyung-hyun in his book, and whom Kim credits as being the most important film maker in modern Korean history. Kim's films exist as biting pieces of sociological

commentary about many of the injustices of South Korean society, a large proportion of which are directed toward women. As these films point out, just as the male characters apparent in Kim Ki-duk's films emphasise their own personal failings through the abusive treatment of female characters, so does South Korean masculinity in general increasingly weaken itself by neglecting and denigrating it's national femininity. I wish to argue that, if anything, to have a strong masculinity one must encourage an equally strong femininity, as was the case in Korea prior to the Joseon era where gender parity was more realised.

The purpose of this thesis is not only to build on the critical material which was produced prior to its commencement but also magnify the resource material that was released during its creation and to argue that it was never screen masculinity that was in crisis but rather screen patriarchy, much as it is right now in many Euro-American nations. More importantly, it is hoped that this thesis shall offer analysis of South Korean screen masculinity not only from the perspective of a non-Korean but also from that of a film maker: one who has knowledge of how the industries operate and one who exercises a working experience of the creative industries.

Chapter 1 – Theoretical Reflections on South Korean Screen Masculinity

This thesis aims to offer a comprehensive, analytical account of Korean twentieth century history; to investigate the political messages hidden within the cinema of this intriguingly enigmatic nation; to question whether there is a common trend regarding the numerous political issues which have dogged the peninsula throughout the tumultuous course of the twentieth century and to query how these events have been portrayed on film, both directly and indirectly. My goal therefore is to offer a broader alternative to these theories by relating them to developments in gender outside the peninsula, not just with regard to the changing nature of iconography and masculine representation, but also the developments in the field of masculinity studies and the changing opinions regarding what it actually means to be called 'a man' in the world today through extensive cross-cultural spectatorship.

Perhaps the greatest challenge I have encountered when writing this thesis is that I am writing as a third-party observer: an outsider discussing the gender politics of a foreign culture by proxy, as opposed to analysing it from an internal standpoint. Another challenge was that a large proportion of critical writing about New Korean Cinema was still in development during the creation of this thesis. Prior to 2010, the majority of critical thinking about South Korean cinema had either not been translated from the Korean language or originated from the source of only a select number of film schools (most famously UCLA) and thus offered perspectives which in comparison are almost identical. Additionally, a significant proportion of critical writing into the nature of South Korean cinema focuses purely on the industry and the history of the peninsula, offering little to no room for open dialogue or in depth

analysis of masculinity as an ever-evolving gender model. When such personal topics

are called into question these can be attributed to the insular top-down policies

traditionally adopted by Korean people, which in the past has resulted in a unique if

somewhat blinkered perspective.[8]

A Critical Analysis of Kim Kyung-hyun's *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*

For many years, the most extensive exploration of masculinity in South

Korean cinema was the work of Kim Kyung-hyun. His 2004 book *The*

Remasculinization of Korean Cinema takes the gender dilemma and confronts it

directly, documenting the changing attitudes to male sexuality in light of Korea's

division, McCarthyism and the problem of inadequacy compared to its more dominant

colonial influences and in light of the numerous calamities which have befallen the

peninsula over the twentieth century. Kim is therefore a key source of information for

this thesis.

Through his book, Kim assumes, as the title suggests, a masculinity studies

approach to cinema between the 1980s and 2003, attempting to re-establish the link

between the traumatic history of the peninsula and how "the weight of intense history

and its attendant violence has loomed so excessively large that it ended up

traumatising, marginalising and demoralising men" (Kim, 2004: 11-12). Kim

approaches his subject matter from the perspective of Freudian/Lacanian

psychoanalysis, littering his earlier chapters with frequent references to Sigmund

Freud's *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* (1920). Kim explains that a large proportion

of South Korean films made during this period concerned "self-loathing and pathetic

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[8] Reference to Korea's traditionally insular world view can be found in both Chung Kyung-cho's *New Korea: The New Land of Morning Calm* (1962) and in *The Two Koreas* by Don Oberdorfer (2002).

male characters" who underwent "violent, introspective journeys" to reclaim their lost masculine pride (Kim, 2004: 5). He makes a particularly detailed contextual analysis of *Whale Hunting* (1984), the story of a sexually inept student who rescues a fallen woman and makes a pilgrimage back to his hometown in a metaphoric quest to return to the womb. Kim observes that in films like *Whale Hunting* manhood is attained through catharsis rather than physicality, alluding to the opinion that being a man is about qualities which cannot be measured empirically. Whilst I agree to a point with Kim's opinion of catharsis, I would also contest the archaic dichotomous nature of his argument in that he assumes that there is a universal consensus agreeing that masculinity is always constituted by responsibility, which may only be the case for a proportion of all men.

Following his textual analysis of *Whale Hunting*, Kim investigates the transformation in Korean masculinity which occurred during the late Twentieth century and early 2000s, where the traditional image of South Korean masculinity was made to adapt thanks to a new, market driven approach to film. Using the examples of Kang Je-gyu's ground-breaking espionage thriller *Shiri* (1999) and Park Chan-wook's acclaimed political drama *JSA: Joint Security Area* (2000), Kim explains in vivid detail how the image of South Korean masculinity changed over the course of a few short years in accordance to the nation's newly realised prosperity and economic superiority over the North. Through the increasing prevalence of high fashion and the iconography of handsome male leads, Kim asserts that "many screen males emerged as objects of desire" (Kim, 2004:10). The most successful of these was *JSA* star Lee Byung-hun, who has since become renowned throughout East Asia as 'the James Dean of the Orient' and could easily match Hollywood talents such as Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise. However, Kim argues that while there was a crucial outward

change in the representation of South Korean masculinity, male characters retain their gender weaknesses because they carry what he refers to as "symbolic lack" and are dogged by personality problems borne from a history of violence (Kim, 2004:11-12). A common character flaw in South Korean film is that male characters are inherently tied to violence, be it through their actions or memories, so that they run the constant risk of unintentionally hurting either themselves or others even when trying to do the right thing.[9]   I am inclined to agree with Kim in this rather Lacanian idea because, especially in a culture as heavily dependent on visual images as ours, appearance seldom equates to truth. Since humanity places so much of its identity on the past and constructs nationhood through heritage, histories of violence can weigh heavily on a person's conscience. To quote Kim:

> So scarred is the castrated subjectivity that the male lack
> in Korean films is almost a normative function of personal
> relations, men often find themselves to be incompatible
> with individualism and its values that define the world.
>
> (Kim, 2004: 14)

Alternatively, it could also be said that the past also exists as a learning experience and by learning from past mistakes one can avoid repercussions. Germany and Japan are shining examples of how, though dogged by past histories of violence and cruelty, countries can overcome flaws and progress into strong, successful nations with sturdy masculine representations. Furthermore, this statement also disregards the prospect that 'individualism' as a concept runs in opposition to doctrines of social conformity.

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[9] This principle is reflected in such films as *Oldboy* (2003), *A Dirty Carnival* (2009), *Breath* (2006) and especially *A Bittersweet Life* (2005).

Whilst the official attitude toward democratic politics is that it favours the individual, it must not be forgotten that all societies, democratic or otherwise, function under systems of governance which centre on the restriction of certain freedoms, be these restrictions imposed by law or social culture. Consequently, certain 'normative' failures to truly embrace individualism may be as much imposed by a society as by the individual's own personal inequities. One must remember that prior to the 1980s, homosexuality was considered socially unacceptable throughout the first world, even though it had not been illegal for almost thirty years. Kim Kyung-hyun's analogy therefore assumes that all events happen in isolation rather than being tied to the society that spawned them. To view masculine subjectivity in such a manner would require complete unfettered ignorance of the social contract and of the numerous unspoken codes by which modern civil societies live.

What is particularly interesting about Kim's fondness for psychoanalysis is that he seems fixated on the idea of the death drive, with its self-destructive nature, and Freud's theoretical division of instincts of sexual desire and instincts of ego.[10] These instincts, which Kim argues are used in the example of Lee Chang-dong's 1993 film *Peppermint Candy*, can often lead to the suicide of male characters when faced with the possibility of humiliation or dishonour: a trait which ironically positions Korean male representation closely with their Japanese counterparts. Other such examples can be found in such films as Park Chanwook's *JSA* where Kim Hyun-seouk's North Korean private throws himself out of a window when forced with having to testify about fraternisation with the enemy and the mass suicide of a whole squad in the climax of Kang Woo-suk's *Silmido* (2005).

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[10] Sigmund Freud (1920)

Also of importance is Kim's recognition of how South Korean males would traditionally attempt to reclaim their masculine primacy through the act of rape. Whilst beset on all sides by more dominant masculinities – the American Marine, the Japanese Samurai etc – the Korean man is able to find solace in the belief that he is still able to maintain dominance over the Korean woman. Through his contextual analyses into the works of Im Kwon-taek, Kim identifies how the film maker argues that acts of rape allow sexuality to be "translated into discourses of power, primarily enacted and inscribed on a woman's body" (Kim, 2004: 100). As a student of psychoanalysis, Kim adapts this theory from Freud's belief that the exertion of physical dominance may be used to overcome personal trauma. The belief is that, having been dominated for so long by the oppressive masculinity of other nations, a sense of catharsis arises in the heart of the Korean male in that he is at least able to dominate his woman. In accordance with the Freudian model, the Oedipal triangles which occur within the family unit dictate the desire of young males to compete with both their siblings and father for the affections of the mother. For Kim, therefore, a crucial point to consider regarding sadistically violent acts directed on screen from male to female characters is that they can be read as a means of "dominating and controlling the father's law" by assuming that the son has usurped the father's primacy over the mother and in so doing reclaimed his masculinity by unravelling the patriarchal tyranny and emasculating the father.[11] When this situation becomes further complicated by incest, common not only in Korean cinema but indeed in many national cinemas, a whole new dimension is adopted. In this respect, Kim compares his Freudian model to the teachings of Gilles Deleuze, stating that even though Freud

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[11] This idea is also discussed at length by Freud through his review of morality and sexual desire in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), referring to the classical idea of male siblings uniting within the family units of primitive man to reclaim a sense of dominance through the murder of a cruel or tyrannical father.

argues the power of deterrence created through the male psyche's fear of castration, Deleuze offers a counter-argument that this fear becomes nullified through the self-effacement of such masochistic practices (Kim, 2004: 73).

Kim is quick to note, however, that the effect of incest and other such potentially hazardous behaviours is fundamentally dependent on the mother's position within the triangle. When a female character, who is traditionally expected to conform to the role of 'mother' within a love/sexual triangle, begins exhibiting the initiative to influence, or further still to control, her situation; she is revealed as a 'whore' capable of only further weakening the male subject's masculine recession (Kim, 2004: 37).With this in mind I feel that Kim and others should also consider that since 2000 there has been a steadying reversal of gender roles regarding the power relations which occur during the act of rape and that the rise in feminism has also increased the amount of on-screen instances where head-strong, sexually dominant females can be seen expressing sexual violence against a passive male e.g., *A Good Lawyer's Wife* (2004), *Thirst* (2009).[12] Both of these examples exhibit female characters that commit such violations of male primacy in their respective narratives, attempt to manipulate the men in their lives (albeit not always consciously) and reducing these masculine counterparts to the role of pawns for reasons of personal gain.

Also of note is Kim's critical analysis into the films of director Kim Ki-duk, whom Kim Kyung-hyun refers to as perhaps being the most relevant director featured in his book but only grants a trio of mentions on a sparse handful of pages. Kim Ki-duk's body of work has gained infamy in South Korea due to its blatant exposure of

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[12] Other theorists who share Kim Kyung-hyun's opinions on South Korean screen masculinity include Lee Hyang-jin and Cho Eunsun, both of whom shall be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Korean societal problems but continues to captivate audiences outside the peninsula.

Kim Kyung-hyun focuses largely on the graphic nature of Kim Ki-duk's earlier films:

> Perhaps nowhere are the violent melodramatic forms of
> narrative more prevalently featured than in the films of
> Kim Ki-duk…So explicit is the violence…and so dramatic
> are the characters…that the male subjectivity constructed
> by Kim gravitates toward performativity and deviancy.
>
> (Kim, 2004: 8)

In earlier works, such as *Samaritan Girl* (2002) and *Crocodile* (1998) – the latter of which is directly referenced by Kim – Kim Ki-duk centres his narratives on pathetic men with enormous physical presences who resort to violence for the affections of women. The stark thing about Kim Ki-duk's use of cinematic violence is that he grounds his films in a state of heightened artistic naturalism where colour, drama and even soundtrack are kept to a bare minimum. Thus the events are shot with an almost documentary eye, making the acts of violence feel a little too real. The conclusion to the second act of *Samaritan Girl* is a vivid example of how discomforting this style can be, with the audience bearing witness to the scene's surprisingly bloody murder as an objective onlooker, never viewing the violent acts from either character's perspective but left presented with the unsettling aftermath.

What is the purpose of this violence? For Kim Ki-duk, the context is to identify that a specific proportion of contemporary Korean men often only serve their own selfish desires and disregard the prospect that the women they abuse are thinking, feeling human beings and not just utilities to be exploited. Overlooking the

transmission of Kim Ki-duk's moral messages severely weakens Kim Kyung-hyun's argument by exhibiting his failure to appreciate that such imagery is specifically designed to be upsetting. To quote Steve Choe's journal article on the works of Kim Ki-duk:

> By foreclosing access into the diagesis of the film, the viewer is left to observe from a place exterior to it. But rather than performing some kind of Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt and alienating the viewer from the cinematic illusion to create a space for thought, Kim's film creates an exteriority that problematizes the moral fibre underpinning the typical position of the spectator.
>
> (Choe, 2007: 82)

Choe asserts that through Kim Ki-duk's films the audience, unable to disengage with the events on screen, becomes the subject of their own gaze. Cinema as a medium operates under the voyeuristic binary of slave/master where the audience adopts the dominant position to the submissive image and observes free from the fear of being objectified themselves. As with the similarly graphic works of Japanese directors like Takashi Miike and Takeshi Kitano, Kim Ki-duk's films act as tools of moral judgement regarding problems within Korean society by including the audience in every sordid detail of the drama and shifting the focus from the objectivity of the image to the subjectivity of the viewer (Choe, 2007: 82). Seeing these problems in their selves, audiences are therefore encouraged through the subtext of the film to

question concepts of morality and social interaction which are often considered to be far too rigid.

Whilst maintaining a greater focus on men, Kim Kyung-hyun's study of Kim Ki-duk's earlier films also inadvertently alludes to, though never truly discusses - the sociological problem of how women are treated as side issues – a common problem in countries like South Korea where masculinity is considered recessive. It relates to a common opinion amongst cultural theorists that when a culture suffers from a recessive masculinity, the femininity of that culture becomes almost non-existent (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005). My grievance is that Kim Kyung-hyun neglects the truism that Kim Ki-duk's more recent films hold a deeper focus on the presentation of South Korean women and their ill treatment at the hands of oppressive male characters. He takes exception to "the explicit way in which violence is depicted and the portrayal of women who remain uniformly masochistic" and appear only as hollow shells devoid of individual subjectivity (Kim, 2004: 135). In 2003, with the release of Kim Ki-duk's most critically acclaimed film *3-Iron*, the director's works began to shift focus toward female characters, reversing the gender situation in order to consider events from the perspective of female protagonists. More importantly, the female protagonists of these later films, many of whom start as victims, frequently take charge of their lives, punishing their oppressive male counterparts for subjecting them to abuse and neglect. In brief recognition of this fact, Kim ultimately admits that:

> Kim Ki-duk's films are no more misogynistic than the
> Korean society itself that has adopted its masculine
> hegemonic values by fusing neo-Confucian ethics and

military rule and structure that stem from decades – if not

centuries – of foreign occupation and martial violence.

(Kim, 2004: 135)

Furthermore, whilst he does not directly discuss the role of women in South Korean

cinema beyond that of the stereotypical victim/femme fatale, Kim openly admits that

the exclusion of women from South Korean cinema up until 2003 is unacceptable and

remains hopeful for the crucial change which has now thankfully arrived. Two of

these latter films by Kim Ki-duk shall be reviewed in far greater detail and depth later

in this thesis when discussing screen masculinity in its relation to its female

counterparts.

Lastly, Kim Kyung-hyun denies the insight and opinions of female directors

with regard to how a woman would interpret masculinity issues from an external

perspective (Kim, 2004). This is an important point to consider when one regards

female director Park Chan-ok, who exhibits a surprisingly revised level of insight into

male relationships despite her notable difference in gender. Through her debut film

Jealousy Is My Middle Name (2002), Park displays a deep understanding of male

culture and the alienation felt by men during their twenties, forties and sixties.

Through her protagonist: student and struggling journalist Won-sang (Park Hae-il)

and his ongoing game of one-upmanship with his womanising Editor, Park concludes

that despite how they may feel or treat women all men really desire is commonality.

This opinion is so confidently conveyed by Park that she even fills the third act with

homo-social dialogue between protagonist and antagonist in the vein of Harold

Pinter.[13] That Kim did not consider including any female directors places him in a position of weakness since it implies a closed mindedness toward the prospect that some female directors may understand masculinity better than certain males due to the objective position of their gender.

<u>Critical responses to *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema.*</u>

Of the precious few critical accounts of Kim's book currently in circulation, two critics stand out most prominently: Min Hyun-jun and Park Chong-dae. In the September 2006 volume of *The Communication Review*, Park Chong-dae made an observation when reviewing Kim's book about the detriment it suffers by excluding a feminine influence:

> My concern is that Kim's admirable efforts in tracing the redefinition of masculinities in Korean cinema could be given a deeper substance if they were contrasted with changes in feminine identities of Korean cinema There are examples such as *Just Because You Are A Woman* (1991) and *A Hot Roof* (1995) that present women's self-awareness as an approach to changing female identities and gender roles.
>
> (Park, 2006: 85-87)

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[13] Homo-social: a form of interpersonal intimacy between two people of the same sex suggesting a deep emotional connection without the prevalence of sexuality. Homo-social bonding is a common element in the plays and scripts of late 20th century British playwright Harold Pinter, where it is traditionally associated with males and is often mistaken by chauvinists to be homo-sexuality.

Park's argument gains even more weight when one considers that since 2000 the cinema has become an even more prevalent site of investigation into the position of women in South Korean society, especially in its portrayal of the female as the outsider. Due to the all-consuming neglect of the feminine in a male-fixated society, there has been, since 2000 especially, a clearly defined rift between male and female characters in Korean film. Due to this rift, the displacement experienced by female characters becomes stifling, as each time they find themselves shut out of male affairs, much like the female characters of Elizabethan stage plays. And like these characters, any attempt by these feminine representations at engagement with the world of their male counterparts results in them or others suffering some kind of misfortune. Such issues of gender alienation have been explored not only by Kim Ki-duk but by several other influential contemporary film makers, particularly Park Chan-wook, who expresses feminine otherness as a key theme of his work through a variety of creative and engaging scenarios.

Park concludes the critique by arguing that Kim's book would have been better constructed had he considered the opinion of feminist thinkers rather than sticking so rigidly to psychoanalysis (Park, 2006: 87). Whilst this argument goes no further than a solitary closing statement, it is definitely thought-provoking. A feminist interpretation of phallocentric events, and more importantly the displacement of women from those events, would certainly prove useful in understanding not only feminine reactions toward the treatment and interactions of female characters and their relationships with male characters, but would also provide a feminine insight into the legitimacy of these characters, given that they are being envisaged by a traditionally male director within a male dominated industry.

Park's argument on this issue is connected to the theories of Min Hyun-jun in that both theorists argue the same grievance but from different angles. While Park's complaints lie with Kim's physical exclusion of female protagonists and film makers from the book, Min identifies the absence of well-rounded female representations but both connect these problems to Kim's overdependence on psychoanalysis. In 2004, Min wrote a review of Kim's book for the fourth issue of *The Journal of Asian Studies*, stating that:

> While the female gender has been subject to more severe social, economic and political oppressions on top of that of patriarchy, the new Korean cinema finds only the psychologically and physically traumatised males and pushes female characters into one-dimensional characters and further invisibility; females oscillate between the dichotomy of 'mother' and 'whore', either finding solace by giving themselves in patriarchy or punished for disrupting the order.
>
> (Min, 2004:1157)

This draconian attitude to the feminine position in New Korean cinema holds the same problems for South Korean feminists as passive representations of Euro-American femininity over the course of the twentieth century. Just as it took 100 years for women to shake off the polarising image of 'the angel of the house' versus 'the fallen woman' common in British Victorian society, the transition of the Korean woman from these unsubstantial screen representations is proving to be an arduous

process. However; whilst the number of feminist films available in South Korea is relatively low, some progress is nonetheless being achieved to this end, thanks to the recent emergence of actresses like Bae Du-na (*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, *The Host*) and Moon So-ri (*A Good Lawyer's Wife*).

Min offers the most thorough scrutiny of the book, problematising Kim's rigid devotion to psychoanalysis in that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy:

> There is no doubt that those psychoanalytic tropes enhance the close reading of individual texts. However, like Mulveyan psychoanalysis, which uncovers the gendered perspective structured in the medium itself often ends up making the patriarchal structure…all the more potent, Kim's approach, heavily influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis finds everywhere it goes a phallus, a lack, a fetish.
>
> (Min, 2004, 1157)

Min's perspective is one which I had not considered until now. The suggestion is that like Laura Mulvey, who desires to identify a world governed by a patriarchal hierarchy, Kim in fact is seeing what he wishes to see from the films he critiques. Though I do not completely agree with this opinion, it nonetheless remains a cause for investigation. When one sticks rigidly to the pursuit of a certain rationale in order to generate such meaning the corralling of certain parties becomes inevitable. This is certainly the case from Min's perspective regarding the absence of meaningful female characters from the New Korean cinema:

> When the theoretical framework only allows females the
>
> castrated position, it becomes impossible to find a female
>
> out of the triad of father-mother-me.
>
> (Min, 2004, 1157)

Considering the dependence of New Korean cinema on the family model, and

particularly the maternal element, the prevalence of the damaged male's 'mother

complex' becomes self-evident. My response to Min, however, is that – given the

broken national unity of the peninsula and the Mulveyan model's focus on the female

as a symbol of national solidarity – the male desire for the womb in New Korean

cinema could also be viewed as a devotion to the self and a longing for the lost

motherland which was taken from the Korean people in the aftermath of WWII.

Whilst the female character may not be a three dimensional model, she may still hold

relevance in her reflection both of the nation (mother), and national loss (whore).

This is an issue which Kim argues at length through his review of *Silver Stallion*

(1991), where the main character, Oll-ye, is cast out of her village after she is raped

by an American soldier and goes to live in exile with the *yangongjus* (Korean born

whores for American servicemen) before succumbing to the moral judgement of her

own son. Kim explains that the film exemplifies "the nightmarish fantasy where the

'mother' is a 'whore'", not only from a literal standpoint but also from a cultural one,

since Oll-ye is exiled primarily because she has become 'contaminated' by the lechery

of a foreign usurper (Kim, 2004: 81). In representing the nation's corruption through

her own loss of purity, Kim therefore protests that Oll-ye serves an allegorical

purpose and thus gains the extra dimensions which go some way to redeeming the

loss of dramatic characterisation. This use of allegory is particularly prevalent in portraying the Korean domestic sphere. More recent examples can be found in the earlier films of Kim Ji-woon, *The Quiet Family* (1998) and especially *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2004).

Min also complains that the majority of films covered by Kim's book are not readily available outside East Asia, observing that "His lengthy and intelligent close readings of fascinating recent Korean films will, without a doubt, be better appreciated when the readers have already watched the film" (Min, 4/63/2004: 1157). Herein lies my biggest criticism of Kim's discourse. Prior to 2003, non-Koreans were largely unable to view South Korean films outside of festival circuits. Even today the majority of South Korean films remain relegated to art house and 'world cinema' audiences. The influence of Kim's book therefore diminishes in that it discusses a glut of texts which would, at best, need to be hunted down by audiences in order to view – particularly those films made prior to the release of *Shiri* (1999) or *JSA* (2000).

Among the few films mentioned in Kim's book which are available in Eurocentric countries is Kim Sang-jin's "comedy" *Attack the Gas Station* (1999), the story of four societal drop-outs who take over a Seoul gas station and run rough-shot over it; holding the staff hostage, destroying property and abusing customers. According to Kim, *Attack the Gas Station* shares similar themes with several other 1990s Korean films, especially *Out to the world* (1994). He states that the purpose of both films is "to reclaim masculinity and emancipate it from the social oppression created by man's appendage to modern technology" (Kim, 2004:70-71). Both films involve the central characters (each relegated to society's bottom rungs) rising up against money grabbing middle management and reversing the balance of power through a violent disruption of the traditional social hierarchy. For *Attack the Gas*

Station, the social allegory exists on the surface layer with the director attempting to completely abolish these systems of power by inverting the pecking order so that the weakest characters assume the dominant position and by ridiculing any attempt to embrace American capital. Perhaps the most snivelling character is the gas station manager, refusing to surrender his horded revenue even in the face of more important issues like the absence of his wife - that leaves his child home alone. For this character; the idea of money, material prosperity and financial success has become such an intrinsic part of his identity that it has even displaced the lives of loved ones, calling into question the issue of how man has surrendered his humanity through his affiliation with such items. This issue is heavily tied to Chris Blazina's attitudes to modern middle-class masculinity which will be addressed later in this chapter.

Attack the Gas Station and *Out to the World* are also relevant in Kim's eyes for identifying a very common technophobic subtext where characters forsake machines in favour of traditional values. In *Attack the Gas Station* especially, the modern work-a-day lifestyle suffers a heavy assault similar to the variety offered by Jean Baudrillard in *The Evil Demon of Images*.[14] Having taken the Gas Station staff hostage, the four hoodlums continually demean and abuse their captives; forcing them to perform needless busy work, and smashing office equipment with all the ferocity of luddites rebelling against the Industrial Revolution. For Kim Kyung-hyun, *Attack the Gas Station* holds a deeper relevance beyond its poorly conceived, nonsensical premise. Rather it also represents a self-effacing statement about the Korean film industry because it "deliberately talks back to both the Korean film industry's emasculating tendencies before its turn to blockbuster type films in the late 1990s and Hollywood's techno-masculinising impulses" (Kim, 2004:70-71).

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[14] Baudrillard, 1987

Cho Eunsun – A Mulveyan approach to Masculinity

As an alternative to Kim Kyung-hyun, feminist opinions can be attained through the critical writing of Cho Eunsun, who holds similar opinions to Kim Kyung-hyun on the issue of masculinity but offers a greater amount of background information. Cho draws heavily on the much celebrated essay of feminist critic Laura Mulvey which protests that males are traditionally the subjects or instigators of the gaze whilst women are objects or victims of it.[15] In accordance to this severe binary, Cho adapts Mulvey's theories to a nationalist perspective where men signify the nation's might and women represent solidarity. She argues that this binary takes on yet another dimension with regard to countries like South Korea, where the indigenous masculinity becomes relegated to the objective position. Cho explains that:

> The power and authority assigned to Korean men by the patriarchal social order are seriously undermined by social traumas, and, as a result, their masculinity is brought into crisis.
>
> (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005:99)

If the nation's welfare is inherently tied to its masculine representations, as Mulvey's binary so readily suggests, then it is Cho's opinion that South Korea is a nation with a failing masculinity. Failing through its inability to function as a cohesive nation and its dependency on other nations for its defence, Cho argues, South Korea has become

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[15] As featured prominently in Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".

the subject of the world's gaze. That gaze acts as what she describes as "a castrating force" which inherently brands the nation as effeminate and weak (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005). It is a nation, and masculinity, in crisis. Cho then postulates that this wounded state of masculinity leads to mimicry of other more dominant masculinities, representative of colonial authority where, through such emulation, the wounded male seeks to become empowered by the iconography of the patriarchal representation and conformity to a homogenous interpretation of the male gender. Cho's argument is a common complaint shared by such other thinkers as UCLA professor Lee Hyang-jin who also writes at length about "the colonizer's male image" and its detrimental effects on South Korea's national identity (Lee, 2000).[16]

The opinion expressed by Cho in this instance holds some degree of relevance for my field of study (South Korean cinema 2000 – 2010) in that the market-driven approach to cinema has added external genres and post-modern influences to South Korean cinema e.g. Yakuza/Hong Kong inspired gangster films, and provides theoretical grounding to the opinion among cinema purists that South Korean cinema is losing its artistic soul. However, in basing her analysis on the work of Laura Mulvey, Cho should also understand that in her book *Death 24x a Second*, Mulvey talks about the destruction of male iconography through performance by revealing the true wretchedness or grotesquery of characters (Mulvey 2006: 173). Colonized masculinity exists as a sequence of behavioural codes which are dictated to subjects under the pretence of mandatory conformity. Artistic performance is able to break that illusion and thus forgo those codes by revealing their fabrication. Therefore, be it Choi Min-sik begging for forgiveness in *Oldboy* (2003) or Lee Byung-hun screaming in terror as he gets buried alive in *A Bittersweet Life* (2005), the hero imagery which

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[16] Since Cho studies at UCLA, it is possible to assume that she and Lee share some form of academic connection.

audiences tie to such characters becomes thrown out of joint as the viewer is once more introduced to a character's human frailty and the truth that they are not the Nietzchean supermen portrayed through their imagery.

Additionally, Cho claims that the cinema is only weakening these masculine representations further by acting as a "vision machine which exploits wounded masculinity" (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005: 107). This statement brings Cho's research into conflict with that of Kim Kyung-hyun, since both theorists offer opposing opinions on a similar issue. The fairest analysis that can be made about this conflict is that, since both Kim and Cho discuss cinema from two different periods of the mid to late twentieth century, then both opinions are correct to a degree. Although cinema in the years following the Korean War frequently exposed the weakness of the South Korean male through disfigurement as a memento of human frailty, not too dissimilar to the European representations apparent in the years following World War I, the same cannot be said of the post 1980 student movement cinema of Kim nor the market-driven period I am studying for this thesis. Rather, I find it interesting that neither Cho nor Kim have realised through historical analysis that the cinema has shown South Korean masculinity to be in a slow though steady state of repair, particularly since the abandonment of Cold War ideologies.

Furthermore, one may argue that whilst the state of South Korean masculinity has been through a crisis period since the division of the peninsula, the problem is not so prominent today because the isolationist scope of both thinkers does not accommodate the possibility that masculinity as a discourse has changed throughout the world over the past few decades. As Michael O'Shaughnessy and Jane Stadler identify, "the ideal version of dominant masculinity presents a problem for real men because the ideal is so difficult to attain" and is in some respects impossible to attain

because it does not exist as a universal constant. (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2004:

239). In so doing, Kim and Cho both fail to appreciate the rising possibility of

multiple masculinities which differ between ethnic groups and that many of the

masculinities to which South Korean masculinities are compared relate to Caucasian

ethnicities which offer physically dominant though emotionally recessive

representations of manhood. At no point does either Cho nor Kim question the media

related reasons for this masculine problem or consider that all South Koreans need do

to improve their representations of masculinity is to cease comparison with the

representations of other nations because these nations are also undergoing

development. Regarding 'symbolic lack', from the perspective of someone who is not

of South Korean ethnicity, the recognition and admission of one's imperfections gives

South Korean masculinity its own form of primacy, one that need not conform to the

whims of other nations but instead rejoice in its own richness and diversity.

  As a final observation into the critical works of Kim Kyung-hyun and Cho

Eunsun, I would like to point out that whilst both thinkers are of crucial importance to

my research into masculinity in South Korean cinema, neither of them achieves what

is truly needed from an analytical point of view: a semiotic film studies approach to

the way issues are conveyed through cinema. Coming from respective backgrounds of

literature studies and film/television, I found it surprising how both thinkers keep their

research deeply rooted in the realm of what is being said through the film, neglecting

the equally relevant issue of how it is said, particularly Cho who I would assume

gained some form of insight into the visual language of film through her chosen

discipline. It would seem that modern South Korean films hold a powerful emphasis

on visual language, particularly directors like Park Chan-wook and Kim Ji-woon who

through films like *Oldboy* (2003), *Lady Vengeance* (2005), and *A Tale of Two Sisters*

(2004) respectively have metaphorically used colour to almost sinaesthetic proportions by tying them to key themes. Whilst Kim and Cho's analyses of their chosen films display a significant degree of inference and a wide understanding of their native culture, I feel that they only go halfway in helping non-Koreans like me to truly understand these films on a broader scale and to consider them both as art and a window into South Korean culture.

Contemporary South Korean Masculinity – Elizabeth Tunstall and Dr. Sun Jung.

Before proceeding further, it should be stated that the end position featured in Kim's book no longer represents modern South Korean masculinity. Since 2010, South Korean masculinity has undergone yet another dramatic transition. Following the retrenchment that the South Korean film industry experienced in 2010 after the bursting of the New Korean Cinema bubble the year before, the prestigious sleek-suited masculine model was replaced with what is now more commonly referred to as 'soft masculinity'. In her 2011 book, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*, Dr. Sun Jung explains that 'soft' masculinity is a fusion of traditional South Korean *seonobi* masculinity and Chinese *wen* masculinity which is also heavily inspired by Japan's *bishonen* (pretty boy) masculine ideal and the metrosexual model that South Korean culture appropriated from Euro-American cultures (Jung, 2011). The image of South Korean 'soft' male is one of a gentleman/scholar; quiet, restrained and pro-authoritarian – a far cry from the rebellious Euro-American or Japanese contemporary models or the previous prestige model that dominated much of the previous decade.

The rise of this new form of masculinity is due largely to the rise of K-Pop as a music phenomenon in East Asia. Following the decline of the New Korean Cinema

movement, South Korea's emerging music industry has since become the dominant force in the 'Korean Wave' media movement. Through its obsession with sugary tunes, Japanese-style promotional decals and pretty faces, K-Pop has done much to shape not only the media landscape on the continent but also the gender politics as well. Similar to the Irish boy bands who dominated the European popular music scene in the mid-late 1990s, effeminate and underwhelming masculine South Korean artists like Rain (real name Jung Ji-Hoon) create an image of the South Korean male as humble and strong without being harsh (Tunstall, 2014). Dr. Jung largely considers the rise of K-Pop to correlate with a general rise in affluence, not only in South Korea but throughout Asia in general:

> The regional pop-consumerism can be connected to the consumerist lifestyle of the 'new rich' in Asia. The new rich in Asia can be characterised as a new middle-class in some Asian countries, based on their economic power as a new consumer group.
>
> (Jung, 2011: 31)

As was the case with many Western countries in popular music from the 1960s onwards, an increase in economic growth in Asia has led to a similar shift in masculine representations to a softer model that is more appealing to feminine audiences. When describing the ethos behind Rain's stage presence, Jung writes:

> …his masculinity becomes non-nationalized due to the hybridization of Confucian traditional masculinity with the

> hype of global masculinity that is mainly exemplified by
>
> the figure of the 'cute' (Japanese Kawaii) boy and by such
>
> American stars as Justin Timberlake and Usher.
>
> (Jung, 2011: 31)

In the same way that Justin Timberlake and Usher contrast heavily with harder American masculine musicians like Metallica's James Hetfield or Ice Cube, K-Pop's soft masculinity stands in stark contrast to the unashamed brashness of other First World contemporary music iconographies: the explosive raw energy and anti-authoritarian sentiments of the Japanese Trance-Core rocker, the technical revisionist hipster-chic of Australian and American Djent artists and especially the ferocity of African-American Gangster Rap[17]. Contrarily, however, it should also be noted that K-Pop, much like its predecessor J-Pop, has also given rise to the other dominant North-East Asian popular music genre of the 2010s: the Japanese phenomenon of Kawaii Metal[18]. Created in part as a reactionary response to the success of K-Pop, Kawaii Metal mixes the technical wizardry of Japanese Metal with the cutesy saccharine sweet adorability and kooky cartoon styling of J-Pop. The global success that the genre's most popular band, Baby Metal, has garnered in only a few short years has also led to several Korean clones of Baby Metal finding their way into the

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[17] It is worth noting that of these three comparative genres, only Gangster Rap portrays what is considered to be a hegemonic form of masculinity. Both Trance-Core and Djent are very much fringe sub-cultures tied to alternative music styles.

[18] The purpose of Kawai Metal is as much to self-consciously mock Metal as a music genre as it is to un-demonise it. Baby Metal were quoted as saying that like their inspirations, Metallica, they see it as their goal to make Metal seem less threatening to mainstream audiences. Their success has also given rise to similar band called Lady Baby, fronted by a transvestite former-professional wrestler from Australia, and has inspired an underground movement of Comedy-Metal bands in the West.

industry; no easy feat given that staunchly Presbyterian South Korea did not appropriate the influence of Metal music as readily as Japan or Indonesia.[19]

'Soft masculinity' also benefits from coinciding more fluidly with Feminism in the sense that like Feminism, it contradicts the ideal of universal hierarchy through a negation of 'specificity'. As Judith Butler identifies in *Gender Trouble*:

> The masculine/feminine binary constitutes not only the exclusive framework in which that specificity can be recognised, but in every other way the 'specificity'…is once again fully decontextualized and separated off analytically and politically from the constitution of class, race, ethnicity and other axes of power relations that constitute "identity" and make the singular notion of identity a misnomer.
>
> (Butler, 1990: 107-108)

 The Feminist movement, now into its fourth wave, has long focused on the idea of challenging the rigidity of gender norms, and in so doing also reshaped how the male gender is regarded as well. Over the past ten years feminist ideals have gained a substantial proportion of ground, globally expediting the decline of more traditional forms of masculine gender model. The permeation of feminism into South Korean cinema has also given rise to plot lines where all of the male characters are wounded and ineffectual in the presence of more dominant feminine counter-parts. This is true for many of the more feminist films mentioned in this thesis, for example *Samaritan*

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[19] Whilst Japan happily adopted 80s Hair and Thrash Metal influences from the USA and Indonesia took inspiration from the Scandinavian Metal movement of the 1990s, South Korea has never really accepted Metal as a genre.

Girl (2002), *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2004), *Lady Vengeance* (2005) or *Thirst* (2007). This is especially true of the latter of these examples. From 2005 onwards, director Park Chan-wook – the most discussed of all the directors featured in this thesis – has made a conscious effort to progressively increase the prominence of female characters in his films while concurrently toning down the level of testosterone. In his 2012 interview with Alison Hoffman-Han, Park elaborates on exactly why he chose this new direction for his art:

> I thought about how my female characters weren't as significant as the male characters, and also, how my female characters weren't very complex or sophisticated even when they deserved to be. So, when it came to *Lady Vengeance* (2005), I wanted to make up for all of that. That's my first film with a female protagonist, and ever since then, I've tried to depict female characters in as rich a way as possible. And my efforts have continued with *I'm A Cyborg, but That's Okay* (2006), *Thirst* and *Stoker* (2012), my most recent film which I'm finishing up at the moment here in Los Angeles. The female characters in *Stoker* are at the film's centre, and they're incredibly important.
>
> (Hoffman-Han, 2012:189-190)

The centrality of the female characters featured in *Stoker* (2012) was then realised further in Park's *The Handmaiden* (2016). In both films, as with *Lady Vengeance*, male authority is portrayed not only as oppressive but as a primary source of villainy, seeking to coerce female characters into lowering themselves morally and spiritually.

Consequently, pathetic and wounded masculine representations still exist in South Korean cinema today. Many of the films featured in this thesis involve prominent examples of how, in spite of Kim's central argument of a fundamental shift from wounded males to objects of desire, this recessive character type is still very much alive and well in South Korean cinema, even if like in *3-Iron* (2004), *A Good Lawyer's Wife* (2004) or *I Saw The Devil* (2010) it's purpose is solely for denigration. In films like *A Dirty Carnival* (2009) and *Breathless* (2010) the respective protagonists are very much of this vein, outwardly aspiring to conform to the new model with their impressive suits but just as quickly resorting to self-destructive behaviours like domestic violence and social misanthropy, thus sabotaging these attempts to rise above their desperate socio-cultural circumstances.

Gender Studies – Chris Blazina, R.W. Connell and Judith Butler

In the field of masculinity studies, a main source on traditional masculine beliefs is Chris Blazina, whose 2003 book *The Cultural Myth of Masculinity* provides great inspiration for the third, fifth and sixth chapters of this thesis. Blazina identifies two key theoretical areas regarding the traditional masculine ethos. The first concerns heroism and the legends which promote it. These legends are often used as a means of forcing heroic codes of conduct upon young men via the promotion of such qualities as courage, strength and virtue. These codes are not only common to Indo-European

stories like *Beowulf* or *Hercules* but also in East Asian stories such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Chinese) and *Genji* (Japanese). Blazina then adapts the romantic imagery of these legends towards the chivalric codes of medieval nobility; distinctly referring to the knight errant though similar comparisons could be made with both the Japanese Samurai and with Korea's own Hwarang. What makes this aspect of Blazina's research so important to my thesis is that once he has identified these heroic traits, Blazina wastes little time in discrediting these myths by contrasting the sanitized ideologies of heroism with the sobering imperfections of the hero's real-life counter parts in that many so-called heroes desire glory or wealth over virtue and altruism.

The second key issue covered by Blazina is the difference between masculinities of differing classes. In his fourth chapter, Blazina discusses the introduction of capitalism and the growth of middle-class society and how masculine primacy within them is linked not to physical power or aggression but to physical attractiveness and financial success. In light of the rapid economic growth of South Korea over the course of the late twentieth century, a similar argument can be made about the change in masculine representations because an increase in societal affluence naturally leads to a larger middle-class. In this regard, it could be said that South Korean masculinity has an edge over its peers because these aesthetic definitions complement the type of masculinity South Korean cinema assumes. This attitude is set in direct opposition to the research featured in R.W. Connell's Masculinities with Blazina even legitimising his insightful though abstract observations by verifying that his work is primarily concerned with the cultural aspects of masculinity rather than a sociological one.

R.W. Connell acts as the counter-balance for Blazina's theories on class based masculinity in my thesis. Whereas Blazina provides antiquated cultural theories that lie at the heart of class-based masculinity, Connell confronts the issue as a social scientist. In *Masculinities*, Connell explains that the dominant masculinities of every historical period originate in different places and at different times:

> To understand the current pattern of masculinities we need to look back over the period in which it came into being. Since masculinity exists only in the context of a whole structure of gender relations, we need to locate it in the formation of the modern gender order as a whole – a process that has taken about four centuries.
>
> (Connell, 2005: 185)

This argument holds great importance to my thesis and therefore shall act as the primary sociological theory for my thesis. It supports the assertion that masculinity is multi-faceted and that there is no right or wrong expression of manhood, despite what dominant societies may argue. Complementing Blazina's findings on the Nietzchean attitudes toward athleticism in society, Connell's research gives reason to my own theory that real men do not have to emulate Nietzsche's ubermench. Blazina identifies that under these competitive masculine codes, effeminate males become subject to ridicule and cruelty from peers because the gender traits they exhibit are not socially acceptable. From an East Asian perspective this is particularly true of Japan, where the traditional masculine codes particularly condemn androgyny as a form of inherent evil, in much the same regard to which Euro-Americans consider deformity.

Regarding the Freudian psychoanalysis that Kim Kyung-hyun uses in his analysis of the films covered in his book, it is Connell's opinion that despite providing "an essential tool" in the investigation of both masculinity and gender at large, psychoanalysis "is radically incomplete" (Connell, 1995: 20). Indeed, one of the biggest detriments to psychoanalysis has always been that Freud limited his study to the sexual realm, largely disregarding that the idea that the gender of individuals extends far beyond this arena. Connell writes:

> Ultimately the worth of psychoanalysis in understanding masculinity will depend on our ability to grasp the structuring of personality and of the complexities of desire at the same time as the structuring of social relations, with their contradictions and dynamisms.
>
> (Connell, 1995:20-21)

Of particular importance to my research is Connell's definition of gender as a means of ordering social practices. Connell goes on to write that:

> In gendered practices, the everyday conduct of life is organised in relation to the reproductive arena, defined by bodily structures and processes of reproductions. This definition excludes sexual arousal, intercourse, child birth and infant care, bodily sex difference and similarity.
>
> (Connell, 2005: 71)

It is therefore Connell's opinion that gender is no longer defined solely by biological factors but by issues of reputation and I agree with this theory. It holds theoretical and practical ties to both Jean Baudrillard's hypothesis that capitalism seeks to codify and mutate it from a source of bodily pleasure and into a voyeuristic procession of signifying images; and to Judith Butler's canonical theory of performativity i.e. how individuals adopt pretence in their attempts to emulate gender norms.[20] Butler's argument in particular is almost reflected by Kim through his statements regarding the psycho-sexual defect of living with a castrated masculine ethos. In the opening chapter of his book, Kim states that:

> The male's pursuit of the mastery of his world (his family, home, work, etc.) and knowledge is repeated ceaselessly, and with it the phallus emerges as a signifier of both desire and destruction, precisely because it is a fetishistic object which lures the castrated male subject as the 'it'.
>
> (Kim, 2004: 14)

As Judith Butler most famously recognised through the revelation of what she dubbed 'the failure to repeat', so too does Kim explain that despite dramatic political change and changing attitudes toward the on-screen definition of South Korean manhood, the model to which South Korean masculinity strives: the position of 'king' within the masculine domain, remains beyond the reach of the male subject because it is nothing more than an ideal which men aspire toward even though it does not truly exist. To quote:

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[20] See respectively Jean Baudrillard's *The Evil Demon of Images* (1987); and Judith Bulter's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

> The loss of sense of 'the normal', however, can be its own
>
> occasion for laughter, especially when the 'normal', 'the
>
> original' is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed
>
> one, an ideal that no one can embody.
>
> (Butler, 1990: 139)

Butler's argument, along with the views of Connell, also reinforces my own argument against the image of the 'real man' in that a real man does not imitate the masculinity of other males but rather creates his own. This belief gains even greater value if recessive screen masculinity is viewed outside of its own context. It is easy to forget when focusing so intensely on problems within an individual society that when concepts and ideologies change on a global scale, dilemmas are presented at the same level. The gender crisis afflicting 'Old School Masculinity' (for lack of a better description) was a common problem for males the world over throughout the twentieth century, particularly since the 1980s where the Anglo-American male found himself besieged by third wave feminism, economic displacement from old German and Japanese rivals and the emergence of gay rights. It was a masculinity which, in some areas, was still coming to terms with its concession to black power.[21] What Kim Kyung-hyun fails to realise is that the so-called superior masculinities to which South Korean males fail to emulate are themselves tragically flawed (Rambo, for example, suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder when he first appeared in the original *First Blood* movie). Considering that these supposed screen supermen carry

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[21] This is evidenced through clear allegory in John McTiernan's iconic *Die Hard* (1987) and was later reflected again in Japan's economic outsourcing to China, documented in Kyoshi Kurosawa's sociological family drama *Tokyo Sonata* (2008).

the same anxieties as their Korean counterparts; it seems apparent that, iconography aside, these characters are not intended to be role models.

Furthermore, in her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler also identifies that primary genders are "often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the cultural stylization of butch/femme identities" (Butler, 1990: 137). In screen culture, where image does not always reflect reality, this dilemma is a common occurrence because actors often inhabit spaces which transcend conventional gender mores e.g. Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes (known for their respective action roles in *Point Break* and *Blade*) dressing as drag queens in *To Wong Foo…*, or *Natural Born Killers* star Woody Harrelson posing as a transvestite in *Anger Management*. Even Arnold Schwarzenegger – to many the ultimate masculine hero – has a long history of ridiculing his own iconography through roles in such films as *Junior* (which saw him become pregnant). When discussing drag, Butler states that in each instance, the purpose "is to establish that 'reality' is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be" and dramatic performance has always operated by this principle (Butler, 1990: 65). The problem with gender may therefore be more a question of peoples' inability to recognise the fact that the cinematic iconography of so-called 'Masculine Icons' are not even respected by the actors who play them. The importance of this observation stems from the fact that many of the more recent, market-driven South Korean films draw very heavily on such iconography – particularly the Korean gangster genre in its reference to both Hong Kong and Japanese cinema. The iconography of the protagonists in films like *Oldboy*, *A Bittersweet Life* and *A Dirty Carnival* all carry a deep reference to Hollywood-style iconography. Butler identifies that these references are multi-layered and go far beyond simple colonial imitation. To her, the masculinity apparent in the kind of performativity displayed on screen provides "a clue to the way

in which the relationship between primary identification…and subsequent gender experience might be framed" (Butler, 1990: 137). In cinema, like all creative industries, there is always the prevailing concern that the audience will misinterpret the unspoken visual message being displayed. Iconography in action intensive genres of film frequently turn this concern into a self-fulfilling prophesy where characterisation is lost in favour of the cool veneer of the Hero. Incidentally, in each of the aforementioned films, the directors attempt to build their respective protagonists in accordance with this appealing external illusion, only to completely demolish them in the eyes of audiences by revealing them to be either cowardly or sadistically cruel.

However, Kim Kyung-hyun manages to identify at least one example of the iconographic dilemma in his critique of the comedies of Park Kwang-su, especially through the director's relationship to his lead actor Pak Chung-hun. Kim writes how Pak was in some respects a creative innovator in that he rose to fame by carving a career out of unusual masculine roles which held no pretensions of macho imitation. Kim observes:

> That a star persona had been carved without either charisma or romantic prowess but through his patented comic excesses which yield only pitiful laughter even in the decade of the 1990s is significant.
>
> (Kim, 2004: 43)

The 1990s were a time of great flux for film industries in general. However, even Hollywood actors like Nicolas Cage and Tom Hanks, who had previously broken into

the established film industry through 1980s comedy films, could not achieve notoriety without starring in action films like *The Rock* and *Saving Private Ryan*. This fact makes the case of Pak Chung-hun even more remarkable in that an actor who outside the borders of the peninsula was totally unknown, would manage to achieve fame without "selling out" to commercial opinion and instead act as a forerunner for the model currently adopted by Hollywood by attempting to question the supposedly concrete nature of masculinity and the codes under which this nature operates.

These codes are closely analysed by Connell who identifies that gender models involve a three-tiered structure of relations; power, production and cathexis i.e. emotional attachments. In power relations, the dominant system of gender politics discovered in Connell's research of most Euro-American nations is the system which was labelled by the Women's Liberation movement as patriarchy: a fundamental reliance on the dominance of the male and the complicity of the female (Connell, 2005: 74). Patriarchy resulted in the enforcement of physically dominant traits in young men, such as aggression and pride, and a physical discouragement of more recessive qualities, such as emotion and passivity, which societies considered wholly effeminate. The dominance of Washington's colonial influence and the harsh masculine codes forced upon Koreans during WWII have conspired to create a similar state of affairs for the peninsula as those listed above and that under the rules of patriarchy, a non violent and peaceful nation like South Korea would be considered weak or effeminate in the eyes of more dominant masculinities. Production carries a similar model, with relations seeking to divide jobs and professions in accordance with the genders which define them. Traditionally, jobs like construction and working as doctors were by their nature considered 'un-lady-like' in female society whilst other jobs like nursing and cooking would be branded "woman's work" by men. My

particular interest with regard to this point is that I directly confront this issue as part of my chapter on the military, which for all its increasing liberalisation still remains synonymous with masculinity.

Finally, Connell addresses the often overlooked issue of cathexis. Whilst sexuality is commonly disregarded in gender studies, she writes:

> …when we desire, in Freudian terms, as emotional energy being attached to an object, its gendered character becomes clear.
>
> (Connell, 2005: 75)

To reiterate this theory in more general terms, cathexis is the gendered significations of societal objects and stimulae. There is no intrinsic, absolute law which states that boys should be dressed in blue and play with toy guns nor is there one which dictates that girls should dress in pink and play with dolls. These representations are cultural constructions formulated in conjunction with the social codes that have developed in a certain place at a certain time. Therefore, simply because one culture's social codes dictate that it is 'normal' for a person to conform to certain specific behaviours; it does not mean that in another culture these codes would be adhered to in the same way or even at all. Many anthropologists have documented the normality of adolescents in Thailand indulging in cross-dressing practices for the purpose of better understanding their own sexuality. Korea has a similar trend in that it is perfectly acceptable for straight men to wear hot pink (something which would be dubbed a sign of homosexuality in many Euro-American countries).

This fact also leads me to agree with Connell's belief that gender, race and class play inter-connective roles with one another. Connell explains that white males not only compare themselves to other white men, and to white women, but also to black men, drawing on the myth of the White Man's Burden and the animalistic colonial image of black males to identify white male fears of having their primacy usurped by another ethnic group (Connell, 2007: 75). South Korean screen representations of masculinity follow a similar path in that they are constantly comparing their masculine imagery to representations from Hollywood, Moscow, Hong Kong and most recently Tokyo.[22] This hypothesis is also tied to Blazina's work in that it argues the stark difference in masculine codes between classes. A common example of this is the working-class man's inability to match the middle-class man's level of grooming or sophistication, which shall be discussed in far greater detail in my sixth chapter which directly investigates the conflicts between masculinities from different social strata within South Korean society.

The most crucial part of Connell's research, however, is its definition of what Connell calls *Hegemonic Masculinity*, which is defined as:

> …the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.
>
> (Cornell, 2005: 77)

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[22] Japanese films were banned in South Korea prior to 1999 on the grounds that they contained too much cinematic violence (an irony considering the graphic violence apparent in much of South Korea's contemporary cinema).

Through this hegemonic form of masculinity, societal leaders (or in case of South

Korea, colonising powers) are able to permanently cement a fixed sense of cathexis in

the minds of its people using various tools such as religion and the media. The latter

method for imprinting hegemonic masculine codes onto the national psyche is better

known as image training, which has aided South Korea's recessive masculine

representations by encouraging audiences to compare themselves to representations

which are more accustomed to the hegemonic masculine model. From this analogy, I

would like to express the opinion that in order to fully reclaim their masculine

representations, South Korea as a nation first needs to abandon all comparison to

other nations. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault argued that gender and

sexuality was in fact nothing more than a product of power relations which dictate

human behaviour (Foucault, 1980). Beyond the academic sphere this truism has still

yet to come into circulation in society. No matter what the context, the fact always

remains that for cultural codes like gender to apply on a universal level, one must first

consider whether these codes are universally homogenous, which is clearly not

possible in a world rife with multiple histories, faiths and lifestyles. As Michael O'

Shaughnessy and Jane Stadler identify, "the ideal version of dominant masculinity

presents a problem for real men because the ideal is so difficult to attain" and this is

most likely because there is no universal masculinity to attain (O'Shaughnessy and

Stadler, 2004: 239). In his 1994 book, *Masculinities and Identities*, David Buchbinder

re-inforces this belief by explaining that in spite of the truism that there is no concrete

model for what defines an individual as masculine or feminine, those with power will

always attempt create the illusion of a universal model for their own personal gain:

> These terms and their associated contempts attempt to normalise and control through ideology what is by its very normalise various and not easily amenable to uniformity, namely humanity itself…these are norms, standards or models of to which men and women in a culture are expected to conform if they wish to interact appropriately and acceptably with others.
>
> (Buchbinder, 1994: 3-4)

Consequently; these gender models, hegemonic masculinity especially, can be attributed to a multitude of violent or unlawful acts committed by individuals who justify their actions through the belief that they are upholding society's codes e.g. 'queer bashing' and other such atrocious behaviours which may be indirectly condoned by the media and other institutions of power. A crucial factor in this argument is that many of these atrocities and hatreds merely stem from a difference in interpretation. Buchbinder continues by mentioning that even though these differing interpretations are far from wrong, the behaviours they motivate may still be considered socially unacceptable because "meaning is always mediated through and influenced by cultural and historical circumstances" (Buchbinder, 1994: 4). Hegemonic masculinity has been largely defunct since 2000, although certain conventions remain, and the opinion of a multi-sided masculinity is now considered to be the current norm. Ironically, South Korea, which has always held this form of masculinity as a cultural norm, could therefore be said to have undergone a dramatic reversal of fortune in that it has gone from being a nation with a failing masculinity to

a leading nation to which many of its former colonial nations are trying to emulate.

As Judith Butler observed:

> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follows; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts.
>
> (Butler, 1990: 139)

Connell and Butler's research, coupled with Blazina's theoretical input, is important to this thesis in that they allow for a contrast in the conflicting ethos of working-class and middle-class masculinity in modern society. Though none of them hold any specific research on Korea, the three manage to identify a clear rift between them within the same society. Contemporary South Korean cinema expresses this class division very clearly and has done since 2002. The most vivid examples of this difference in mindsets include Kim Ki-duk's *3-Iron* (2003), where a drifter with traditional values finds himself competing with a wealthy middle-class businessman for the affections of a woman, and Park Chan-wook's *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002) where a working-class foundry worker and his girlfriend kidnap his boss' daughter after being laid off by the company which employs him.

Ultimately, Kim Kyung-hyun left a worthy starting point for investigation into South Korean screen portrayals of masculinity but never fully pursued it, with theorists like Brian Yecies, Julian Stringer and Sun Jung continuing that research to a substantial degree. Through the remaining chapters of this thesis I hope to finally

present a cohesive look at how South Korean masculinity has been presented through the peninsula's national cinema, provide an accurate contemporary alternative to the dated revisionism of its previous cultural thinkers.

Chapter 2 – The Hermit Nation

The History of the Peninsula

Korea has been referred to by political analysts like Chung Kyung-cho as the

Hermit Nation. While its people have always been more receptive to the circulation of

new philosophies and concepts than many of its neighbours, very little has ever been

written of the country's achievements outside of its own borders. Considering its

political and geographical position this proves highly perplexing. As political

historian Kyung Cho Chung points out:

> Korea lies in the centre of the Far East Triangle. As a
>
> peninsula, Korea has served as a buffer state between powers
>
> in the Pacific and powers on the continent of Asia.
>
> (Chung, 1962: 2)

Situated in the unfortunate position between China and Japan, two rival empires

responsible for a continuous string of bloody conflicts throughout the history of Asia,

Korea has often become one of the most common battle grounds for these conflicts

and has, as such, earned a reputation for being the "Balkans of the Orient" (Chung,

1962: 2). Like Palestine and Poland, the geographical situation of the Korean

peninsula has meant that conflict, death and colonial oppression have become part of

everyday life.

In spite of these numerous conflicts and repeated occupations by other

dominant colonial powers, foreign influence has also been a major cause of growth in

Korea. Whilst never officially surrendering itself to the empire, Korea has a long history of openly trading resources with China, enabling the peninsula to adopt many of China's philosophical, religious, and artistic practices into its own culture. This marked the extent to which Korea took the initiative in attempting to encourage outside trade and the peninsula remains an insular nation to this very day, preferring to focus more on its own domestic affairs than on international policy. Advancement as a nation would have been expedient under such a top-down mindset had it not been for the intimidating pressures of its neighbours to the North and East.

Through its trade agreements with China, Korea unofficially positioned itself against Japan, a nation which would in recent times hold one of the biggest influences on the peninsula. Although a peaceful, enlightened nation by nature Korea has had to engage in undesirable warfare (usually against Japan) for reasons of self defence. Japan's main obsession with Korea was that it provided easy access to mainland Asia. Sharing a border with Manchuria and with a South Coast which is separated from Southern Honshu by a strait of only 120 miles, Japanese colonial powers considered Korea a prime position to establish supply lines to the mainland and as a neutral passage toward their traditional enemy. The strait would become the site of repeatedly violent naval battles between invading samurai and the costal divisions of Korea's own Hwarang[23]. Worse still, to the North lay the Russian empire: a massive sovereign empire stretching from Prussia to the Baring Strait which had not suffered the same radical political and cultural changes over the previous 500 years as its peers in Western Europe, and as such also sought to expand its borders through military dominance.

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[23] Hwarang – Flowering Knights: Unifiers/Defenders of Korea who exercised honour codes similar to a mixture of Japanese Bushido and European fealty.

This problem became increasingly worse when the United States began to force colonial will on the peninsula. Political analyst Gordon G. Chang notes that the first encounter between Korea and the USA came in 1866 with the rather unfortunate case of the *General Sherman*, whose crew paid a dear price for defiantly chugging up the Taedong River toward Pyongyang:

> After ignoring warnings to turn back from the locals, who were not interested in either American trade or the Christian religion, the ship was torched and the crew killed and dismembered.
>
> (Chang, 2007: 4)

Later, however, Chang explains that Korean hostility toward American advances started to wane with the signing of Washington's Treaty of Amnesty and Commerce in 1882. However, this measure was more to ensure Korea's position as an American protectorate from the growing Japanese and Russian empires. It has been chronicled that when the first US envoy arrived on Korean shores the King 'danced with joy' (Chang, 2007:5). Had he known what the future would hold for the peninsula, he may have re-thought this course of action.

With Korea as the only neutral ground between the Japanese and Russian empires, both countries developed ambitions of conquest for the peninsula. Attempting to resolve this dispute without further bloodshed the Japanese Emperor proposed that Korea be halved along the 38th parallel – Russia taking the North and Japan claiming the South. This proposal was answered by a blatant refusal from the Tsar and resulted in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905: a war between two hostile

colonial empires fought on Korean soil. The war ended with the Russians suffering a

humiliating defeat at the hands of the Japanese (the first occasion in recent history

where an Asian power had successfully gained victory over a Euro-centric one). As

part of a covert agreement that Japan would not interfere with America's occupation

of the Philippines, President Theodore Roosevelt practically threw Korea to the

wolves by declaring Japan's sole ownership of the peninsula. For this Roosevelt was

awarded the Nobel Prize.

     With that singular act, Korea was officially Japanese property and one of the

longest monarchical reigns in world history (30 generations) was abruptly put to an

end. The first five years of the occupation were particularly turbulent. The most

notable event of these years came in 1909 when then Japanese governor Ito Hirobumi

was assassinated by An Chun-gun.[24] The assassination gained mass acclaim from both

Koreans and Chinese alike and in 1910 An's cousin Myung-guen would attempt a

similar course of action but with less success. From the perspective of many Japanese

scholars such as Ito Yukio however, An's actions were no different to a plethora of

militant resistance actions which occurred during these years and that it was this

behaviour which inadvertently provided the rationale for Korea's eventual annexation.

     In 1910, the Japanese began an annexation to assimilate the Korean people

into the Japanese national identity. This included the forced changing of Korean

names to Japanese ones, the eradication of the Korean language and to ban the

teaching of Korean culture in schools. Worse still, legions of young Korean adults

were forced into the Japanese Imperial Army and made to fight for their sworn enemy

during WWII. However, the Japanese also introduced many new ideas and

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[24] An Chun-gun is heralded as a symbol of Korean independence to this very day. Since his execution by Japanese authorities in Liu-shung prison in 1910, he has become the subject of one of North Korea's only screen dramas, had a pattern named after him in Tae Kwon do and has a memorial statue is Seoul. On March 6th 2010, the South Korean people also held a national day of tribute to him.

innovations into the peninsula including aeronautic technologies and the equipment needed to make films.

Following the defeat of the Japanese at the end of World War II, Korea entered a period of major political flux. With the pro-Japanese propaganda laws eradicated, Korean film makers were at last granted absolute creative freedom. Strangely, very few of them took advantage of this freedom and only a handful of notable films were released during this period. These films carried a strong sense of national pride and acted as a final confession of popular attitudes towards Japanese oppression. What makes the miniscule number of these noteworthy inter-war films all the more tragic is that they would soon pale in comparison to what was about to happen.

When the time came in 1946 to divide the spoils of the Second World War, the United States government committed what a large proportion of Koreans still consider to be an act of treason. The United States, wanting to prevent a Communist endemic throughout Asia, blatantly refused to let the Soviet Union claim rights to Japan. They did, however, grant them a proportion of the Korean peninsula (claiming to at last honour an old promise made to Tsar Nicholas II at the end of the Russo-Japanese War). On August 9th 1945, the Red Army marched into Korea's Northern provinces. Gordon G. Chang not only attributes a large portion of blame to the United States for allowing the Soviet occupation of North Korea, but also asserts that the most Earth-shattering event in the peninsula's blood soaked history was originally intended to be little more than a quick fix:

> Washington had given no thought in the closing days of the
> war about what to do with Korea. There were no American

troops there and, to avoid a Soviet takeover of the whole

peninsula the United States hastily proposed its division.

(Chang, 2007:6)

Thus in one fell swoop, Korea, having spent over a thousand years and thirty

monarchical generations of perfect national unity, was split in two thanks to the

interference of one outside nation for the appeasement of another.[25]

In an almost microcosmic mirroring of Continental Europe, the Americans

even managed to create Korea's own miniature Iron Curtain. In Washington, two

junior officers marked a division at the 38th parallel which bisected Korea into cultural

polar opposites. South Korea would evolve into a capitalist democracy which, thanks

to American aid and Japanese economics, now stands as the eleventh strongest

economy in the world and rising.[26] Alternatively, North Korea would become the

ultimate totalitarian dystopia. It is now a regressive feudal dictatorship which

continues to masquerade as Communism and has for decades survived purely on

either handouts from China and the USSR, or on aid supplements offered by the

South.

Towards the end of 1949, the fires of war began to spark as the Red Army

began making, to quote Chung Kyung Cho, "armed incursions…along the 38th

parallel" (Chung, 1962:103-104). He documents:

These were designed to test our defences and stir up unrest

in the Republic. About four hundred Red Troops, on May

---

[25] See Chang, Oberdorfer et al. The separation of the two Koreas is documented at length in both *Nuclear Showdown* by Chang (2007), and in Oberdorfer's *The Two Koreas* (1997).
[26] This is according to the account of the history of Korea featured in Gordon G. Chang's *Nuclear Showdown* (2007). South Korea's economic position may have changed since that time.

3, 1949, deployed in the Kaesung area across the line, and
seized Mount Sangsakan by force. The 1st ROK Division,
garrisoned in the area, promptly rolled into action and
repelled the Red Troops.

(Chung, 1962: 103-104)

These skirmishes would continue throughout the war and also long after the Armistice was signed in 1953. In early 1950, the ever-present trickle of militant Communist incursions into South Korea eventually erupted into full scale war when the North, funded at the time by both Moscow and Beijing (whose national rivalry had both nations vying for North Korea's political affection) and at the behest of Kim Il Sung, launched an invasion force over the 38th parallel and occupied much of the South. Kim Il Sung's rationale for this aggression was that he was attempting to re-unify Korea under the Red Flag and through his master economic plan of *Juche* (self-reliance). Away from the peninsula, historical accounts of how the South reacted to the Korean War have not been kind. Historian Adrian Buzo draws attention to the fact that the South was unable to contend with such an attack from their Communist counterpart because the region was rife with its own political turmoils and "discordant sets of ideas" so that by 1948 the hope birthed during the aftermath of WWII had become usurped by fear and faction (Buzo 2002: 71-72). The South Korean capitalist government, fuelled by a hyper-accentuated form of McCarthyism, did not share the unity of Kim Il Sung's North because many did not consider there to be a common goal or benefit in killing their kin for the sake of outside interest. The United States government was quick to react, with Allied peacekeeping forces succeeding not only

in driving the Red Army back over the 38th parallel but even forcing them all the way to the Chinese border.

When the Armistice was signed in 1953, which formally declared a stalemate between North and South, the 38th parallel was transformed into a DMZ (De-Militarized Zone). As with the Berlin Wall, the DMZ was intended to be a hostile barrier which enclosed each world in a cultural cocoon by excluding its other. Former Northeast Asia correspondent for *The Washington Post* Don Oberdorfer describes the current state of the DMZ as laid out in the terms of the Armistice thus:

> Under the terms of the armistice that ended the Korean War in 1953, all civilian activity is banned in the zone except for one tightly controlled farming village on each side. Due to the densely planted underground garden of landmines…military patrols stick closely to well-worn paths…The demilitarized zone or, DMZ…is bordered by high fences of barbed and razor wire on the North and South and guarded on the two sides by more than a thousand guard posts, watch towers and reinforced bunkers across the width of the peninsula.
>
> (Oberdorfer, 1997: 2)

On either side of the DMZ is quite possibly the largest selection of military garrisons one is likely to find stationed anywhere (with the possible exception of Gaza or the West Bank). On the North side are just over a million Kimist commissars and to the South are an alliance of 660,000 South Korean troops and 37,000 permanently

stationed United States GIs. Each and every one of these soldiers is on constant hair-trigger alert and the slightest spark could provoke an eruption of violent conflict. It is, as former President Bill Clinton poignantly described following his diplomatic visit in 1993, "the scariest place on Earth" (Oberdorfer, 1997: 2). The only area which may be deemed an exception to this rule is the JSA (Joint Security Area) although the situation there is no less hostile.

With Kim Il Sung officially appointed as the leader of the newly Communist North Korea, Syngman Rhee (pronounced Yi Song-mon), meanwhile, became the leader of South Korea. During WWII and indeed much of the Korean War, Rhee had lived safely in the United States and was Washington-approved because of his Ivy League education. While Rhee's government in the South and Kim's government in the North both sought the same goal of uniting the Peninsula, neither was willing to make concessions for the other. To quote Gordon G. Chang, Syngman Rhee was every bit the "repressive and particularly intolerant leader" as his Northern counterpart and initially was strictly against signing the Armistice – even though it benefited South Korean interests – because he wanted to continue pushing North (Chang, 2007: 90). Just as Kim attempted to paint the South Korean people as helpless, dependent slaves to global capitalism, Rhee likewise attempted to indoctrinate his people into believing that the North Koreans were mindless automatons who followed their leader blindly to their graves without question or choice. During his time in office, Rhee became extremely unpopular and in the run-up to his death in 1960 found himself once again exiled to the United States in order to escape the widespread political unrest caused by his regime.

Rhee, and his successor Park Chung Hee, both used the ever-present threat of the "Red Menace" to pass a swathe of laws which sought no other end than to restrict

human rights. The most important of these was the pedantic National Security Law (NSL) of 1948 which, following the Korean War, authorised the police to arrest members of the public for holding a specific political view on the grounds that said individual or group, to quote Shin and Stringer, sought "the object of disturbing the peace of the nation in collusion with enemies of the state" (Shin and Stringer, 2007: 218). Despite the constitutional rights to free speech and assembly, Rhee's militaristic culture of arresting political opponents as Communist sympathisers went largely unchecked for the better part of the late 20th century and became an issue during the regimes of both Park Chung Hee and his successor Chun Doo Hwan.

Following Syngman Rhee's death, there was a period of brief political limbo before a new military dictator named Park Chung Hee seized power and established what he referred to as his Second Republic government. Every bad idea created by Syngman Rhee, Park Chung Hee simply made worse. He was a Communist sympathiser who had not only led a failed Communist revolt against Syngman Rhee some years earlier but was a former Japanese-collaborator and Lieutenant during WWII under the assumed name of Takagi Masao. Park shared a great number of traits with Kim Il Sung, not least of which was his tendency to use nationalism as a primary tool of societal reform. However, Gordon G. Chang is quick to identify that when Kim Il Sung sent an emissary to Seoul for diplomatic negotiations, Park "quickly ended Pyongyang's hopes of peaceful reconciliation: he ordered the detention and execution of Kim's representative." (Chang, 2007: 92). Park also shared with the elder Kim a passion for economic development. He fanned the flames of South Korea's rapid economic growth through what he called "guided capitalism" which centred on Japanese-inspired business models and Communist-style organisation to the *chaebols* (the country's largest companies). Unfortunately he was

every bit the autocrat that Syngman Rhee had been (Chang, 2007:92). He demanded

his involvement in everything and often clashed with Washington.

Although his meddlesome ways were often restrictive, and his economic

methods wasteful, they none-the-less succeeded in achieving an almost tenfold

growth in economic wealth, but it came at the price of democracy. Washington did

not approve of Park's autocratic methods toward enterprise but usually succumbed to

Park's whims when the two governments clashed. As Chang explains:

> After the 1961 coup the Kennedy administration leaned on
> General Park to return the country to civilian rule. The
> former collaborator and Communist sympathiser
> successfully ran for President in 1963 and 1967. After
> sponsoring a change to the constitution to permit a third
> term, he beat Kim Dae-Jung in a close race in 1971, but
> only after promising not to ask South Koreans to vote for
> him again.
>
> (Chang, 2007:93)

Unfortunately, the General's meaning by this was soon revealed when Park formally

abolished democratic elections in 1972 and replaced them with a policy called *yushin*

(roughly translated as "revitalising reforms") which made it impossible for him to

leave power unless it was of his own choosing and permitted him to do whatever he

liked with the country. However much the *yushin* policy infringed on people's

democratic freedoms, the Nixon administration in 1972 seemed quite happy to turn a

blind eye to Park's tyrannical ways because they thought it better to 'disassociate' the

USA from the affair (Chang, 2007:93). Unabated Park ran rough-shod over Korean society; scrapping the constitution, declaring martial law, frivolously resorting to torture and getting rid of National Assembly. Ignorance of these injustices did not sit well with the Korean people and had a dramatic effect on how they viewed their American benefactors.

Jimmy Carter, on the other hand, was prepared to take a far firmer hand towards the Second Republic's human rights violations. He re-emphasised Washington's Korea policy which resulted in a Congressional rebuke of Park. Chang also identifies that during his 1979 diplomatic visit to Seoul Carter also managed to get many political prisoners freed from custody and encouraged opposition leaders to aggressively push against Park's tyranny (Chang, 2007: 93-94). Sadly, these good deeds were tainted by an ill-advised decision to withdraw American troops from Korea which the common Korean people read as further desertion by their one-time ally. Mere months after the visit, President Park was eventually assassinated at the hands of Kim Jae-kyu, the head of Korea's Central Intelligence Agency. Though the Carter administration hesitated to act, the South Korean government immediately began to undo the *yushin* system and return the country to its previous democratic position.

That is until December of 1979 when General Chun Doo Hwan came to power in yet another bloodless coup. General Chun had no trouble dismissing American government complaints but found the grievances of the Korean people to be a troublesome matter. Martial Law was declared in 1980 in order to suppress student riots, universities were closed, National Assemblies were once more terminated and many people were imprisoned, including former opposition leader Kim Young-sam and civil rights activist Kim Dae-jung. The imprisonment of the

latter Kim would eventually prove to be Chun's undoing. News of his incarceration provoked mass rioting at Kim's home city of Kwangju, to which Chun's administration assigned the army to control the situation with what Chang rather liberally describes as "indiscriminate force" which intensified hostilities further and pushed the problem toward Civil War (Chang, 2007:95). The more common (and appropriate) name for the event is the Massacre of Kwangju and marked the first of many rising political struggles throughout the 1980s. The tipping point came in 1987 when Chun's government announced that Kim Dae-jung was to be sentenced to death. This declaration provoked mass street rioting, not just from students and political acitivists, but by people from all echelons of South Korean society. Unable to resort to the same vulgar display of power he had initiated at Kwangju, because the riots had this time attracted the attention of the world's media, Chun was left with no other option than to step down as President and re-instate democratic elections, only to be eventually imprisoned for war crimes against the Korean people.

The political climate in South Korea remained fairly mundane for the next decade – under democratically elected conservative governments that promoted very little change - until Kim Dae Jung was elected to office 1998. Once in office, he began to instigate his patented *Sunshine Policy* which sought to improve relations between the ROK and the DPRK, declaring at his inaugural address that his administration would "actively push reconciliation and cooperation between the South and North beginning with those areas which can be most easily agreed upon" (Chang, 2007:102). More shocking still, the majority of common South Koreans did not become aware of the sheer plight of their Northern brethren until 2000 when Kim Dae Jung made a diplomatic visit to Pyongyang for the first ever person-to-person meeting with Kim Jong-Il, revealing that the North Koreans were not the only people living in

a bubble state. Until that moment, the majority of South Korean society was oblivious to the fact that Kim Jong-Il was even a real person and not some absurd Orwellian media concoction fabricated for the purpose of social control. For the first time since the start of the Cold War, South Korea began drawing closer to the North and further away from the United States. This led to an increase in growing anti-American sentiments among the South Korean population and a fear amongst American political analysts that the South would concede to the North in order to achieve unification.

The Sunshine Policy was later continued by Kim Dae-jung's successor, Roh Moo-hyun, though according to Gordon G. Chang, Roh deserves the lion's share of the credit. Whilst Kim made the initial declaration, it was Roh who actively sort to implement the Sunshine Policy into practice as "a union of two equals" (Chang, 2005: 106). In an active bid to harmonize with the DPRK, Roh sought to abolish the National Security Law and permit the creation of communist political groups in South Korea. To his detriment, however, Roh also took steps in 2005 to stifle the country's three most popular newspapers, all of which had conservative readerships and all of which had scrutinized his backing of the DPRK (Chang, 2005: 106-107). To this end, the laws that Roh sought to establish would have essentially given him the right to access personal information on the nation's press and even use public funding to bolster favourable press campaigns for himself. These laws would have directly violated freedom of the press and would have been considered unconstitutional. In 2005, Roh also publicly expressed support for Song Du-yul, a former Kimist and suspected Northern spy. For Gordon G. Chang, all of these factors were serious cause for concern at the time:

> Taking everything together, there is a basis for assuming the worst about the president's plans. His recent steps indicate that, whatever his motives, he is not attempting to democratize South Korea but move it left instead. As Roh has said, "Permitting a communist party will complete democracy in Korea." Yet it is also true that such a step could help extinguish it.
>
> (Chang, 2005: 107)

It was well documented that the middle of the 2000s saw considerable support for the unification of the peninsula, with a large proportion of that support being for reunification at whatever cost. Thankfully, these fears proved to be unsubstantiated. Roh's pseudo-complicity toward the DPRK predictably did not sit well with conservative elements in the South Korean parliament. In 2004, Roh faced impeachment by his own party and was eventually voted out in 2008 to be replaced by Lee Myung-bak: a conservative who sought to push for stronger relations with both the Bush and Obama administrations – a move which tested the patience of Kim Jong-il and provoked a considerable bout of sabre-rattling from his successor Kim Jong-un.

Following the concession of Lee Myung-bak from politics, and his tragic suicide, the conservative politics resumed under the nation's first female president, Park Geun-hye (the daughter of Park Chung-hee). When in opposition against Roh Moo-hyun, Park had been a popular candidate not least for her commitment to wiping out corruption, which had "plagued politics in South Korea since her father's day" and because she is descended from the man who many considered to be the father of

their nation (Chang, 2005: 109). However, in an ironic mockery of this election pledge, Park Geun-hye was later removed from office on March 10th 2017 amidst her own allegations of corruption. Under South Korea's current democratically elected President, Mun Jae-in, it was initially predicted that sentiment in Seoul would swing sharply Left again, though how that will effect relations between the ever-present dilemma of the two Koreas remains to be seen, especially given the rising tensions between the Trump administration and the DPRK and an escalating number of unsanctioned missile tests by the North. It is a nation which looks toward an uncertain future. A future in which its people are convinced will see unification, though it still remains uncertain as to what terms this unification will be under or how long the wait must yet be. As Chang asserts:

> Democracies, like other governments, can tear themselves apart when the strain becomes too great – especially when they are also being undermined from the outside…Confederation, as contemplated by the June 2000 declaration, will result in the meddling of the two rival states in a synthesis. Yet as they exist today, the societies in the South and in the North are antithetical. In all likelihood, any blending won't work and one system will eventually prevail.

> (Chang, 2005: 110)

<u>Korean Cinema</u>

Since the Japanese introduction of cinema technologies at the beginning of the twentieth century as part of the annexation, Korea has harboured a long and distinguished cinematic legacy. However, like many of the peninsula's achievements, Korean – or more specifically South Korean - cinema has only just come to the world's attention due to the country's insular and reclusive national psyche. This slow rise in international acclaim is also partially due to the fact that, despite having been a liberal democracy since the ousting of military rule in 1987, South Korean national cinema didn't truly come into it own until the 2000s. The previous two decades had seen Korean film go from little more than a beauraucratic necessity to a rapid growth industry which, along with the usual backwash of cheap, commercial genre films, has spawned some of the most passionate, touching and artistically brilliant film makers in the history of Asian cinema, producing entertaining artistic films which continue to captivate critics and audiences.

Since 2000, a number of non-Korean film academics have written accounts about the changing economic and political climates of the South Korean film industry. These non-Korean accounts, however, tend to mostly exist as individual academic essays which provide (at best) only a brief glimpse into South Korean cinema as part of far more generalised texts about East-Asian cinema as a whole. Even rarer are those who provide insight into the industry, with almost no real detail presented about the state of the South Korean film industry prior to the early 1990s. I therefore draw my background information on the South Korean film industry from two contrasting sources: Professor Lee Hyangjin and Darcy Paquet. Both Lee and Paquet make heavy reference to the ominous presence of the Motion Picture Law (MPL), a set of legislative codes designed for little more than to ensure a crippling

government stranglehold over film makers and to extend the military dictatorship's antiquated National Security Law (NSL) to the film industry.

During Syngman Rhee's regime, the film industry of the newly formed South Korea fell victim to faction and splintered into two main opposing groups. As Lee Hyangjin describes:

> One group was composed of those who supported the anti-communist American military government and Syngman Rhee…and those who tended to refuse to take sides, defending 'humanism' or 'pure art'. The other group consisted of those who leaned toward the communist North and opposed Rhee's government as well as the American occupation forces, and those who were not sympathisers of the North but strongly advocated radical reforms for the newly liberated Korea.
>
> (Lee, 2000:47)

Both sides formed their own committees, which came into repeated confrontations due to the incompatibility of their respective political allegiances until the leading figures in the left-wing committees were compelled to defect north to the DPRK. Despite the division within its cultural ranks, the Korean film industry following the Korean War had not been feted by legislative politics since the American military government abolished the 1939 Japanese colonial censorship laws. The MPL was therefore the first truly restrictive form of film legislation in South Korea.

The Motion Picture Law was first introduced in 1962 by President Park Chung Hee as part of President Park's *yushin* policy and underwent four revisions between 1963 and 1973, each time increasing the level of domestic censorship and limiting the number of foreign imports into Korean film markets. As a consequence of these crippling censorship laws many of the smaller film companies became bankrupt because strict guidelines required companies to own their own equipment, studio lots and produce at least fifteen films every year. Furthermore, each film company had to register this information in order to receive government approval before being allowed to trade. Naturally, independent film making was therefore banned in order to guarantee the eradication of any attempt to question the government on-screen or to promote any opinions which were sympathetic to Communism. Darcy Paquet even explains that in its most extreme cases a censorship committee would censor and modify films before they went to air and even call for the arrest of cast and crew members (Shin and Stringer, 2007: 34). The Motion Picture Law would suffer two more amendments following Park's death, diluting many of its stringent policies, but remained in effect until after the liberation riots in 1987.

Aside from the Motion Picture Law, Lee and Paquet offer two polarising insights into the state of the South Korean film industry by representing differing parts of the industry's political and economic history. Lee represents the earlier side of the industry's history and argues that in its infancy, the biggest influence of the film industry was Japanese colonialism. She identifies that were it not for Japanese propaganda campaigns during the annexation of Korea, there might cease to be any film industry at all today. When the technologies were first introduced, Lee notes, they were considered "an object of curiosity and rarities, rather than a scientific or

artistic invention from the west" and were therefore intended by colonial powers to be a sign of prosperity and advancement (Lee, 2000:18).

More importantly, Lee identifies the rift which formed between film makers in South Korea following its division form the North in the late 1940s to late 1950s. The politics of the Cold War became such an intrusive factor that strong factions occurred, splitting the industrial landscape into two polarised blocks; the supporters of Syngman Rhee and the neutral parties on one side, and a mixture of radical reformists and pro-Communists on the other (Lee, 2000:47).Thankfully, there was very little effect on the quality of South Korean film making until 1962 with the advent of *yushin* and the introduction of the Motion Picture Law. The importance of this information from my perspective is that the context of this situation provides clarification as to exactly why South Korean masculine representations remained ambivalent for so long. I argue that the constant division by South Korean film makers at this time and their inability to agree on a single, uniform set of policies for their medium therefore makes it far more understandable that these people would give a conflicting view of representations which would from an outside perspective seem imperfect.

Regarding the period following the liberation riots, Lee touches briefly on the 1990s with a concise paragraph describing how the industry's momentum sky rocketed after the liberation riots:

> A group of young directors have sought to establish more effective and specialised film production and distribution system to compete with the vigorous attack foreign (American) companies on the domestic market. Due to

these efforts, the South Korean cinema has slowly

recovered its confidence in the competition with foreign

films since the mid 1990s.

(Lee, 2000: 45)

Beyond this point, however, there is no more word of the economic industry which gave rise to South Korean cinema's new found commercial dominance. At no point does he mention the presence of the *chaebol* in cinema, the emergence of planned films or, most importantly, the new wave of young and ambitious film producers who were willing to experiment with techniques designed to challenge Hollywood's asphyxiating dominance of the Korean film market.

Where Lee's research is perhaps most crucial is that he then discusses gender representations through classical Korean cinema from the post Korean War years through particular analysis of five films based around the traditional Korean folk tale of *Chunhangjon*. She adopts a pseudo-sociological approach to the films, drawing on Norman Denzin's parameters of selfhood i.e. gender, ethnicity, race, religion, class and national identity; she argues that gender, class and national identity are the chief concerns from a Korean perspective (Lee, 2000: 67). In this regard I am inclined to agree with Lee's argument. The majority of sociologists I have encountered as part of my research for this thesis do not factor in the cultural uniqueness of the Korean ethno-demographic and as such I feel that without such inside knowledge I will be largely unable to gain a proper understanding of exactly *why* masculinity in South Korea has evolved as it has.

This point also holds relevance considering that unlike the majority of other film and cultural theorists, Lee also offers a considerable level of insight into what

precious little cinema has been produced in North Korea. In a country which has predominantly produced documentaries and newsreels for propaganda, it is interesting that Lee recognises how even between the two Koreas there lies a stark difference in masculine representations (Lee, 2000). She draws upon rigid North Korean representations of historical figures like An Chun-gun, who took a stand against the Japanese oppressors during Korea's annexation by assassinating then Japanese Governor Ito Hirobumi.

The writer whose work chiefly concerns the key changes in the South Korean film industry during the 1990s is Darcy Paquet, whose essay about the changing face of the South Korean film industry, The Korean Film Industry – 1992 to the Present, is featured as part of Shin Chi-yun and Julian Stringer's 2007 compilation *Contemporary Korean Cinema*. Through his essay, Paquet explains that following the collapse of Chun Doo-hwan's military government and the repeal of the Motion Picture Law, the South Korean film industry spiralled uncontrollably toward major financial lows. This was a direct result of the fact that the removal of the Motion Picture Law provided Hollywood studios with the opportunity to finally build branch offices on Korean soil (UIP had already done this in 1985, but following the liberation riots all the major studios had a stake in the South Korean market) and very quickly these branch offices dominated the Korean film market thanks to their trademark combination of strong cinematic content, ruthless marketing strategies and the introduction of nationwide marketing strategies into an industrial landscape which had for decades remained dependent on regional distribution. As Paquet explains:

> Ever since the early 1960s, the Korean distribution sector
> had been divided into six regional markets, centred around

Seoul, Greater Seoul, Pusan, Taegu, Kwangju and Taejon.

Before making the films, Seoul-based production companies would obtain financing by pre-selling release rights to regional distributors. Once the film was completed, the production company would book the film directly into a major Seoul theatre, while the regional distributors would release the film in their own territories, taking whatever profit was for themselves.

(Shin and Stringer, 2007: 36)

Using national marketing strategies, Hollywood studios during the 1980s bypassed these regional markets altogether and in so doing robbed local film makers of a key source of revenue.

The remedy to this problem, Paquet writes, was to integrate the financial investments of the *chaebol*. The first film to make use of these measures was *Marriage Story* in 1992, 25% percent of which was funded by Samsung. Other *chaebol* soon followed this example and it was not long before they played a significant role in the film industry. These companies each had their own interests at heart, since the larger *chaebol* already held stakes in the production of the newly emerging VCR and video rental markets and therefore wished to secure a source of material for use with their products. With the provision of outside investments, there also came the need for stars, so as to lower the film's risk factors, as well as the *chaebol* gaining increasing involvement in films at the production phase, the most crucial being the structured systematic adjustments made to production schedules (Shin and Stringer, 2007).

Paquet then explains that the influence of the *chaebol* eventually waned before extinguishing entirely. This allowed the other contributing factor to the Korean Cinema industry's prosperity – a new wave of young, ambitious film producers who had previously helped to negotiate the influence of the *chaebol* – to take control of the situation and reconfigure the whole structure of the film making process. The consequence of this new wave of business-driven film producer was what came to be known as 'planned films': films which were meticulously thought out down to the smallest detail with stringent production budgets, shooting schedules and outside revenue. Paquet explains that the purpose of planned films was to reconnect with a more mainstream fan base than that of the polemic student era films:

> Many of the films of the 1970s and 1980s were made with different audiences in mind…The films of the New Korean Wave were ostensibly made for the minjung, but their formal experimentation and political orientation served to alienate many viewers. In this sense, not only the method but the mindset behind planned films…was something new.
>
> (Paquet, 2009: 234)

Combined with the star power of the high-level actors which had been incorporated into the industry by the *chaebol*, these new producers marked the final decisive step in bringing South Korean cinema to a position of primacy within East Asia (Shin and Stringer, 2007).

This primacy would be maintained throughout the 2000s but would not last forever. Almost prophetically, the exponential rate of success affecting the New Korean cinema movement came to a halt in the late 2000s when the bubble finally burst. Daniel Tudor outlines this disaster in great detail:

> By 2005, the increasing popularity of Korean films around Asia, particularly in Japan, had led to inflated actor salaries and focus on simply securing the most famous stars, rather than making good films…This phenomenon resulted in an overall decline in quality and an eventual backlash from the countries that had begun to look to Korea as a cultural innovator.
>
> (Tudor, 2012: 234)

What Tudor has explained is that the fears predicted by the film industry's purists became a self-fulfilling prophecy. My fifth chapter, discussing the multiple masculinities which have been embraced through the presence of global capital, makes clear observation of the fact that the *chaebol*'s insistence on stars has, as a direct result, led to the same change in masculine representations argued by Kim Kyung-hyun. What should also be noted, however, is the resistance that this stylistic change has received from cinema purists who argue that the commercialisation of South Korean film is simply another form of censorship e.g. LG's large financial investment in *Oldboy* (2003) which resulted in blatant product placements for their mobile phones; or Ji-Woo from Kim Ki-duk's *Time* (2005), sitting on his designer leather couch dressed in designer clothes. Lee Hyangjin in particular identifies that

such representations could merely be yet another attempt to emulate "the coloniser's male image", this time using prosperity and capitalism in place of the chivalry and valour promoted through the films of the Cold War (Lee, 2000). Lee's fears are a common concern shared by many Korean Cinema theorists and has become a particularly serious one since 2000. Benedict Anderson previously complained about how 1980s and 90s Hollywood action films subliminally promoted the AK-47 assault rifle by prostituting it to the rest of the world. Since that time, it would appear that much of the "gun-porn" previously circulating in Hong Kong cinema has spread to South Korea, the most blatant example being Kim Ji-woon's *A Bittersweet Life* where halfway through, the film degenerates into a bloody bullet ballet.

The commercial homogeneity of this period has also given rise to easily marketable commercial genres which have helped the industry to flourish. Today, Korean film falls into essentially six key genres: comedy, horror, fantasy, visceral Gangster films, War films and traditional Korean melodramas. The first four of these genres are essentially commercial exercises for film companies to break even; however, they have also received credit in recent years for acknowledging the influence of other industries within Asia, particularly Japan and Hong Kong. The intriguing thing is that very few theorists, almost none of whom operate outside Asia, have been able to accurately identify exactly what makes these films so appealing, though many have come close. In his 2000 publication *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture, and Politics*, Lee Hyangjin touches on Korean film and the way it can be used to convey socio-historical information:

> When a film presents historio-cultural material in a
> concrete and realistic manner, the distinction between

cinematic images and reality often becomes blurred, and

the audience is disposed to see the fictional world on the

screen as mirroring the actual conditions of the existing

society.

(Lee, 2000: 1)

If asked to compare Korean cinema to that of any other culture, perhaps the

closest in form and content – despite adopting elements from Hollywood, Japan,

Thailand and Hong Kong – is the cinema of Iran. This is because like Iranian cinema,

South Korean films operate not on one level but many, and these days at least one of

these levels is political. To truly understand and appreciate Korean film, a viewer

must therefore have a strong knowledge of the culture on display. The only reason

that Western audiences have such a lucid comprehension of Hollywood, British and

French films is that they have an established understanding through their socio-

cultural interactions with the world, hence for a nation like Korea – whose cultural

exports are not commercially viable to mass markets – it can be extremely difficult to

gain that understanding without a strong desire to do so. Lee herself attests:

A cultural text cannot be properly understood without

looking at the power contestation among individuals or

between individuals and their community, which is not

always observable from the surface of their social

interactions.

(Lee, 2000: 9)

Power contestations are a central concern in South Korean cinema, as they are in Iranian cinema and films from former Soviet Nations. These nations are/were forced into improvisational positions by oppressive political regimes and therefore have hidden their meanings and cultural messages through veiled symbolism which is sometimes difficult to detect. It is often easy to forget that, whilst the majority of film-goers live in areas which have enjoyed prolonged political stability, there are others who either do not have this privilege or, in case of South Korea, have only just been granted it. It is often the case that the national cinemas of this second group of nations offer an insight into their histories, their plight, their suffering and ultimately the stories of those to whom freedoms of speech, assembly, choice and fair trial have come at a price. New Korean cinema could therefore be said to share many elements common in Third Cinema. The deepest commonality is that both cinemas, to quote Mike Wayne, are the "cinema of emancipation…and such emancipations can not be achieved merely in the political realm of the state" (Wayne, 2001:1). Both New Korean cinema and Third Cinema heavily protest that to be truly liberated from oppression, change must enter every crevice of a society from the head of state to beggars on the street. It must occur in homes, at schools, at workplaces and occur among peoples regardless of age, gender or ethnicity. Change must therefore be able to transcend all boundaries if it is to work effectively.

Chapter 3: Masculinity and the Nation in *JSA*, *Silmido* and *Brotherhood of War*

We are all hostages of media intoxication, induced to believe in the war just as we were once led to believe in the revolution in Romania, and confined to the simulacrum of war as though confined to quarters. We are already all strategic hostages in situ; our site is the screen on which we are virtually bombarded day by day even while serving as exchange value.

Jean Baudrillard

(Baudrillard, 1995: 25)

The most direct example of masculinity in a society is its relationship with the nation and with the military. In many cases visions of the military and of warfare provide many of the hallmarks to which traditional masculinity is defined. As *VICE* journalist Jack Urwin states in his 2017 book *Man Up*:

Regardless of where in the world you are, there's seemingly a handful of timeless traits that humans consider to be desirable in men…changing the subject from men to soldiers, there's a high probability many of those answers will be the same…For as long as countries and borders and wars have existed, military and masculinity have been tied at the hip.

(Urwin, 2017: 87)

As Urwin describes, almost every culture prides its nation's masculinity it on its military and on the strength on its military muscle. Thus it is commonly assumed that in order to have a strong nation (and therefore a strong masculinity) one must have a strong military presence as well which media institutions like cinema can help to bolster.

For South Korea, this area has represented the primary source of material by theorist like Kim Kyung-hyun to argue that South Korean masculinity was in crisis.[27] The catalyst for this assumption was the Korean War: an event which continues to shape the course of Korean politics to this day. This correlation between military and masculinity is also indelibly tied to the concept of nationhood. In chapter four of his book, Kim relates to Susan Hayward's concept of cinema's relationship with nationhood as "a narcissistic process whereby the individual watching the national cinema undergoes an identification" between their subjectivity within a society but a rejection of the self (Kim, 2004: 108). No element of national cinema more effectively constitutes this opinion than war films and representations of historical conflict. As the world becomes ever more dependent on visual culture as a means of identification with the world, the effectiveness of visual propaganda in the creation of nationalist sentiments becomes increasingly more prevalent in the re-shaping and reframing of what is perceived to be historical fact. This proves particularly problematic when one considers representations of conflicts like the Korean War, where national image is in dispute.

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[27] In the 2010s, this school of thought is now being widely investigated throughout the first world by masculinity theorists like Urwin for the detrimental effect that glorifying military masculinity can have on young men and societies at large. American males are a particularly strong case study given their country's heavily militarised culture and the upheavals that culture provokes (Urwin, 2017: 79-108).

With the coming of the Korean War and the subsequent division of the peninsula, a new image of South Korean masculinity was created. Although North Korea's Kim Il Sung was more verbal in his approval of cinema as "an excellent textbook" for winning the hearts and minds of his people, Rhee took a similar approach to the medium (Lee, 2000: 35). However, whereas his Northern counterpart had adopted the Soviet trait of resorting to documentaries of 'social truth', Rhee's government took the more Hollywood approach of devoting much of their propaganda to fictional dramas. In his book *The Power of Film Propaganda*, Nicholas Reeves explains how the effectiveness of the cinema as a working man's medium could be traced as far back to the early days of cinema in the late 1800s:

> Cinema was an enormously successful form of commercial entertainment, but the very basis of that success was its ability to attracted unprecedented audiences from the millions of working-class men, women and children who made up the rapidly growing urban populations of the early twentieth century.
>
> (Reeves, 1999: 2)

This popularity extended as much to Korea as it did everywhere else. When film technologies were first introduced to the peninsula during the early days of Japanese occupation, the medium was a source of public curiosity. In kind, the occupying forces then attempted to use cinematic propaganda as a means by which they could strengthen their grip on Korean society and thus, assure the complicity of the Korean people, much in the way the Soviets and Nazis would attempt to do respectively in

Russia and Germany. As Reeves notes in his analysis into the success of the Soviets in implementing film as propaganda:

> They understood the nature of the twentieth-century world; they understood the particular potential of the mass medium of the cinema to deliver just that transformation in the hearts and minds of ordinary Soviet citizens that was at the very centre of their revolutionary project.
>
> (Reeves, 1999: 4)

Armed conflicts aside, the Soviet, Nazi and Japanese Imperial success of propaganda came from the singular recognition that cinema was able to transcend boundaries of class and intellect. The power of a visual image not only comes from its ability to succinctly present a copious amount of information but also from its independence of education. During the early twentieth century, the majority of Russian and Korean people remained illiterate and as such traditional forms of propaganda (e.g. pamphleteering) would prove useless against a population unable to read. Film media eradicated that problem by allowing messages to be conveyed verbally and visually, providing wall-to-wall assurance of public complicity.

Following the division of the peninsula, this tactic was once again employed to incorporate Cold War aesthetics. The war was fought on two levels: the physical conflict between North and South and the ephemeral level between the South Korean people and the media. In a bid to match the USSR, US funded media institutions have force-fed the South Korean people wave after endless wave of Cold War ideology since the division of the peninsula in a bid to turn brother against brother. The

ludicrous thing about these propaganda campaigns is that they promoted

representations of masculinity which maintained a colonial subtext and propagated

Euro-American values of heroism and chivalry. Regarding notions of heroism,

masculinity studies theorist Chris Blazina explains that:

> There is great praise for the hero who can expand the
>
> wealth, property, boundaries and survival of the community
>
> at the risk of his own life.
>
> (Blazina, 2003: 23-24)

If this definition of the rationale behind the seductive qualities of heroism is accurate,

then they would have little to no relevance in the context of the Korean War because

the war sought no other purpose than to further the breakdown of community in Korea

whilst expanding the wealth and property of the Cold War superpowers. Chivalry

goes a step further still, as Blazina describes:

> In the strictest sense, it is a code of conduct associated with
>
> the arms-bearing aristocracy of the Middle-Ages. It is an
>
> oftentimes romanticized notion of saving damsels in
>
> distress, righting wrongs, and acting to serve one's king, all
>
> the while following the ways of the Christian God.
>
> (Blazina, 2003: 29)

Viewed through this context, the connotative colonialism of the United States propaganda campaigns becomes blatant. Whilst Koreans have been more accommodating toward Christian ideals than their Chinese and Japanese neighbours and hold their own romantic myths through the legends of the Hwarang, their ethos has mostly been that of non-aggression and contemplative passivity, favouring philosophy over violence. Certainly, with the exception of Korea's involvement in the Mongol Invasions of Japan, historical records claim that the Korean people have never invaded another nation. In their isolated state, the peninsula has not been privy to much of the conquest which has dominated Eurasian history. Clearly, therefore, a problem exists in the notion that Korean gender politics would be so deeply focused on codes of gender conduct influenced by a people with whom they hold no direct cultural connection.

From the perspective of gender politics, much of the critical thinking on Korean cinema relates its theories to the work of feminist sociologist Laura Mulvey and her canonical essay on the gendered gaze where masculinity is symbolic of a nation's strength and femininity represents solidarity. Under this analogy it is theorized that through its dependence on external powers for its defence, South Korea has been labelled by the rest of the world as a weak nation which is incapable of protecting the security of its people. This opinion was stated none more clearly than through the critical research of UCLA doctoral candidate Cho Eunsun, who specialises in the field of post-Korean War melodramas. In her critical account of *The Stray Bullet*, Cho claims:

> The impossibility of a belief in the nation as a place of
> collective belonging is thus interconnected with the broken

imaginary comradeship of brotherhood and a disabled
patriarchal function that no longer promises unconditional
male dominance. In such a compromised fraternal nation,
the discursive violence of a damaged male-centred
nationalism metaphorises the nation as feminine, thereby
rendering female subjectivity contingent and wholly
repressed.

(McHugh and Abelmann, 2005:101)

Whilst this opinion may be true regarding the context described by Cho, in light of the sixty years following the division she has clearly overlooked several key points which I argue give reason to the exemption of South Korea from traditional gender analysis.

The first point is that the Korean War was first and foremost a Civil War. Civil Wars pose an ethical problem in that they deviate from the rules of engagement commonly used to justify violent conflict. These rules state that war between nations becomes a necessary evil if a nation is required to defend the security of its people from a militant external threat. Civil wars create a dislocation of these rules in that the conflict is not between two opposing nations but between one nation's people fighting for opposing ideologies and, in the case of South Korea, an ideology propagated by an external source for its own selfish reasons. Morag Raya's *Defeated Masculinity* argues that the Vietnam War was equally instrumental in creating a similarly damaged masculine image through the same profound "loss of self, incoherence at the gendered core of masculine identity, the failure to conform to the heteronormative mythical model, loss of traditional affiliations (representability of the social order, fatherhood, brotherhood), tortured body, and shattering of sexuality" in both South Vietnamese

males and the defeated American troops (Raya, 2006: 189 – 219). Additionally, I would like to argue a fundamental flaw in Cho's interpretation of Mulvey's essay that the strength of the nation is constituted by its masculinity. In this context, it is my belief that Cho has confused the presence of strong masculinity with a strong patriarchal military, evidenced by her failure to make a distinction between the two. In a problem as chronic as the hostilities plaguing the Korean peninsula since its division, the coupling of masculinity and the military is made even more erroneous with the increasing global integration of female soldiers into military institutions.

Furthermore, the accepted opinion expressed by scholars like Kim also assumes that the Korean War operates under the same straight-forward rules of engagement as World Wars I and II. Unlike a traditional war where one nation unites to face an external enemy which threatens the security and liberties of the nation and its people, civil wars like the Korean War force the moral ethos for legitimising conflict into a grey area. Civil wars are firstly wars of ideology (hence the overwhelming dependence on propaganda), where those in conflict fight not for an absolute freedom but for a perceived interpretation of that freedom, even though some of the participants may not consider said theories as warranting bloodshed. As Patricia Lee Masters states in her essay "Warring Bodies":

> In war, where ideology overshadows life and there emerges
> a hostile imagination which allows for the killing of those
> designated, for the moment, as enemy, nationalism
> becomes the focus and the reason.
>
> (Dissanayake, 1994:1)[28]

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[28] See Dissanyake, Winmal: *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema* (1994).

This problem is further accentuated by the dilemma that in times of civil war there is no Other with which a country's government can set in opposition to its nationalism. When fighting against the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II, the national identity and purpose of the Korean people was never in doubt: the nation was threatened with subjugation and complete cultural extinction by a hostile foreign empire which could not be allowed to succeed. In a civil war, the enemy is the nation's self, creating conflict that is nought but a self-destructive process through which ideology and propaganda engulf the more virtuous beliefs of sovereignty, society and family.

Adding additional fuel to these flames is the startling revelation that a large proportion of South Korean nationals, particularly those featured in (and after) the 386 generation, are directly descended from refugees and defectors from the North[29]. Political historian Adrian Buzo's research into the two Koreas dictates that there were an estimated three million people displaced by the conflict and as such has the potential for over a million refugee families, so that the proportion of descendants of Northern heritage accounts for a significant part of the population as a whole (Buzo, 2002: 73). This news is in itself a difficult national issue concerning the masculine propaganda of South Korea's war image. In a world where the nation has for decades been strangled by its own accelerated form of McCarthyism, to live with the ignoble knowledge that a South Korean man would be the off-spring of the country's great enemy has a detrimental effect on national identity to say the least. This is not an uncommon problem. The generation born during and after World War II shared a similar shameful legacy in that many were faced with the prospect of being half-

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[29] 386 Generation – The generation of South Koreans who were born in the 1960s and took part in the student liberation riots of the late 1980s.

Japanese. However, once South Korea was formed as a nation, trade and cultural agreements were made with the islands which have helped to dilute many of the political tensions between the nations. No such leniency was granted with North Korea until the latter part of the 1990s with the initiation of Kim Dae-jung's *sunshine* policy.

Cinematic representations of the Korean War underwent a fundamental shift in the 1990s. Wartime representations had since the division of the peninsula been dominated by Cold War propaganda until the end of the 1980s. With all films being screened by the Public Performance Ethics Committee prior to their theatrical releases, depictions of the Korean War which did not promote anti-communism were all but non-existent (Kim, 2004: 78 – 79). Kim Kyun-hyun recalls that one of the most extreme cases of censorship was all consuming. By the 1990s, attitudes toward the War and South Korea's relationship with the North were recognisably different. This change in attitudes gave rise to what Kim refers to as New Korean Cinema, which he describes thus:

> This directed attention away from the spectacular war images and introspectively toward the internal conflict within a community or family, allowing the gender question to resurface in cinema.
>
> (Kim, 2004:79)

More recent examples of this form of New Korean cinema can be found through such directors as Kim Ji-woon in his films *The Quiet Family* (1998) and *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2004). Both films represent the nation and its politics as a form of allegory

where the problems of the divided nation are presented from within a domestic setting. This is particularly true of *A Tale of Two Sisters* where the conflict between the protagonist Su-Mi and her step mother not only reflect the conflicts between the North and the South, but also suggest that much of the animosity between the two nations could in fact be the result of fabrication.

This highlights the final flaw in the argument about masculinity and South Korean national pride. Since the hostilities occurring between North and South are on-going on the peninsula, many South Koreans must continue to live with the knowledge that there are still family members living in North Korea. This creates a fundamental dislocation in the way in which a nation's cultural identity, and therefore its gender identity, is constructed. As Eunsun Cho mentions, referencing Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*:

> While a nation is defined as a cultural system that provides meanings for its people and their reality and thus…functions to "[transform] fatality to continuity, contingency to meaning," the nation…is not sufficiently coherent, not sufficiently free to foreign bodies and influences, to articulate a community "to turn chance to destiny".
>
> (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005: 101)

In layman's terms, the strength of a nation becomes progressively weakened over time when it is unable to consider itself a cohesive nation. South Korea's national identity in the years following the Korean War was fabricated largely from Cold War

propaganda, and Western cultural imperialism from Washington, and this propaganda was instructing South Korean people to hate, fight and kill their own brethren. In traditional wars, morality is a simple case of right versus wrong; black versus white; them versus us. Civil War muddies the waters (for all the reasons listed above) so that whilst official patriotism may stand, individuals may still feel like traitors. Cho then draws on Kaya Silverman's *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* to elaborate how the dominant fictions necessary to maintain the masculine emulation typified by Cold War propaganda can be undermined by the traumas of events like civil wars, and therefore weaken the association to the images and iconographies displayed therein:

> When a historical trauma threatens the dominant fiction, the male subject can no longer sustain his relationship to it, a phenomena that alters the basis of the power distribution informing gender identity. In this way the normative male subject can no longer fully identify with his socially sanctioned position – his patriarchal authority.
>
> (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005: 101-102)

As Cho explains, the disassociation experienced by many South Korean men regarding the Korean War and the propaganda of Cold War ideology leaves the subject in a state of moral and ethical limbo where he wants to engage actively with the romantic imagery protested through the propaganda but not at the price of betraying his own kin. The destruction of the 'Self' for the appeasement of the 'Other' so that the foreign 'Other' can become the new 'Self': such covert dogmas of cultural imperialism may inevitably seek more to cripple the subject nation than help it by

revealing the masculinity of that nation as wounded and therefore inferior to the propagated alien masculinity of the colonizer.

War films play a major role in the propaganda process and in the construction of nationhood, with their stark iconography and black/white morality. South Korean war films offer very little exception to this rule, but to their credit the ambivalence provided by the South's morally dubious attitude toward their Northern brethren has also inspired a unique perspective on how these films portray both wars and the practice of soldiering. When reviewing many of the state sanctioned war films released during and immediately after the Korean War, film theorist David Scott Diffrient argues that it is unfair to lump South Korean war films into the same category as war films from other nations, and at the very least should not be dismissed merely because of their propaganda elements:

> Owing to its historical links to anticommunist propaganda, the war film continues to be one of the most critically neglected genres of South Korea's Golden Age…the Golden Age war film exhibits far greater flexibility and fluidity than its Hollywood counterpart and…frequently adopts the exaggerated postures and emotional excess typically associated with melodrama…the radical intermixing of generic tropes undermines critical preconceptions usually brought to this most "conservative" of genres.
>
> (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005: 151)

Diffrient attests that contrary to the usual genre clichés more typically associated with war films, especially the emphasis on military superiority featured in American war films, the Golden Age Korean war film benefits from "the kind of genre mixing, textual interplay, and reflexivity rarely witnessed in Hollywood war films" (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005: 152). A contemporary example of films exhibiting such elements include *The Marines Who Never Returned* (1963), which centres on a platoon of ROK soldiers who discover a baby orphaned by the war and adopt it as a band of surrogate parents, and more recently in two of the films featured in this chapter: *Silmido* and *Brotherhood of War*. In each of the examples listed, the multiple drama elements contained in these films, to quote Diffrient, make them "conducive to the disentangling of various social and historical issues, such as class and gender; tradition and modernity" and discuss how outside influence shapes and conflicts with the South Korean national identity (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005: 151).

It has already been stated in chapter one of this thesis that since Kim Dae-jung's entry into office in 1998, there has been a conscious diplomatic effort by the South Korean government to improve relations with the DPRK. It was also during this period that two very important cinematic milestones appeared in Korean cinema: Kang Je-gyu's *Shiri* (1999) and Park Chan-Wook's *JSA: Joint Security Area* (2000). The relevance of these films was that they both not only openly discussed South Korea's diplomatic problems with the North but for the first time accurately portrayed North Koreans as human beings rather than blind automatons. Shin and Stringer note that *Shiri* succeeded in out grossing James Cameron's *Titanic* among local audiences and *JSA* won Park Chan-Wook a National Cultural Award for the sensitivity of his characters and storytelling (Shin and Stringer, 2005). Kang, in particular, would

continue his exploration into how the South Korean film industry represented the nation's unstable relationship with the North, particularly in *Brotherhood of War* which openly critiques the war film as a tool of nationalist propaganda. This newfound sense of political openness also allowed film makers to scrutinise the old militaristic regimes for the first time and in some cases, like Kang Woo-Suk's *Silmido* (2005), even go as far as to expose said governments of unethical conduct, both against North Korea and against their own people.

Considering the political situation in Korea and its previous history of civil war, it may be unfair to judge the peninsula by the same standards as the rest of the world. It is therefore my opinion that with regard to national masculinity the Korean peninsula be made exempt from the traditional binaries of gender because of the largely unfair moral grey area it inhabits. Further, South Korea's egalitarian stance toward North Korea and the concept of war provides it with a certain gendered strength in the 2010s. In *Man Up*, Urwin writes:

> …we must absolutely avoid a blind celebration of these men in uniform and a glorification of the weapons they hold, because the issue of the military reaches far beyond the institution itself.
>
> (Urwin, 2017: 108)

In seeking dialogue with their Northern brethren and rejecting the blatant hostility of the Cold War, South Korea now appears to be the more advanced and stronger society, especially in light of recent events on the peninsula where the South has largely resisted the North's hostile provocations. By contrast, while the DPRK's

image of the rigid, starch-shirted ultra-masculine soldier may appear stronger than the South's gender image, it is in fact a frail veneer beneath which lie a people who are driven by irrational fear, harbor directionless hatred to all who live beyond their borders and are ruled by a despotic military junta that seeks only to maintain its dominion.

The two Koreas still have a very long way to go before finally achieving unity, and continued incursions/acts of terrorism result in two steps back for every step forward. North Korea continues to pose a threat to global security as a nuclear rogue state and has proven to be a constant problem for Washington. Even the brief ray of optimism which swept the world following Kim Jong Il's death has now been fully extinguished, with his son Kim Jong-Un making every attempt to ensure that his family legacy continues to threaten the West with nuclear war if he is ignored by using the South as leverage: a situation which in 2018 has only been exacerbated by provocations made by the Trump administration. South Korea now once more finds itself in a difficult position, torn between its American allies and its belligerent brethren to the North. The election of the Left-leaning Mun Jae-in to South Korea's Presidency in May 2017 has done nothing to ease these escalating tensions. However, what is certain is that between 2000 and 2010, there was widespread public desire to reunify in South Korea, reflected heavily in the cinema of that period. To quote Shin and Stringer, there must be strangeness to this, "a strangeness borne from finally receiving permission to view the past without regret and banish its pain from the present" (Shin and Stringer, 2007: 29).

***JSA – Joint Security Area (Gongdong gyeongbi guyeok)* by Park Chan-Wook (2000)**

In natural progression from the politically unbiased opinions of North Koreans in *Shiri* (1999), Park Chan-Wook's third film Joint Security Area takes this analogy and expands it further still. Essentially, the film is set at two locations of great strategic and political importance along the 38th parallel. The first of these is the JSA – the only area of the DMZ devoid of landmines or razor wire but is still by no means a safe place – and the infamous Bridge of No Return which has been frequently used as a means of defection from North Korea to the South.

The *JSA* is located at a clearing in the province of Panmunjom. Don Oberdorfer explains that, in place of the mines and razor wire, "low slung conference buildings have been placed squarely atop the line of demarcation, and the negotiating tables within them are so arranged that the dividing line extends precisely down the middle" (Oberdorfer, 1997: 2). Outside these buildings, the situation is no different to the rest of the DMZ with the notable exception that the ROK soldiers, GIs, and Red Guards are in plain view of one another which results in the two sides constantly harassing one another through verbal obscenities, spitting and sometimes even violence. Since the division of the peninsula, the JSA has become a diplomatic centre for political relations between North and South Korea, where emissaries from both sides meet to discuss a number of issues from environmental planning, to the return of detainees to the passage of new legislation. As Oberdorfer quite rightly asserts, if diplomacy is any means toward ending the division between North and South, the JSA will most likely be where it happens (Oberdorfer, 1997: 2).

It is this scene that marks the biggest moment of JSA. In an unlikely twist, the South Korean side of the JSA has been opened as a tourist attraction, with a small troupe of beer gutted, camera toting American tourists silently making their way through the barracks. A small, blonde haired girl breaks from the procession, chasing her hat that has been blown off by the wind, and runs between the buildings toward the North Korean side only to be stopped dead in her tracks by the brooding, ice cold stare of a DPRK Sergeant Oh Kyeong-Pil (Song Kang-ho). Surprisingly, Kyeong-pil returns the girl's hat with a polite – if somewhat superficial – smile only for the sense of foreboding to be further exacerbated when a South Korean Sergeant Lee Su-Hyeok (Lee Byung-Hun) arrives to return the girl to the group, following a brief exchange where he spits on Kyeong-pil's boots.

From this backdrop, Park creates a multilayered drama which is part murder-mystery/part love story with a heavy emphasis on the same darkly comic psychology which Park would later use in his greatest achievement - Oldboy. By and large, *JSA* is a strange though appealing film which Kim Kyung-hyun describes in the final chapter of his book as:

> …a "male melodrama" that induces all the ingredients of
> pathos, sentimental music score and emotional experiences
> of war exercises and camps most Korean men have
> endured…in the military.
>
> (Kim, 2004: 266)

As with the majority of Park's work, the film's two central characters begin their relationship under unusual circumstances. Lee Su-Hyeok is performing a routine

exercise near the 38th parallel with his unit only for the commanding officer to discover that they have accidently crossed over into North Korean territory. Whilst crossing through the long grass of the DMZ Su-Hyeok, having stopped to urinate, becomes separated from his unit and does not hear the order to withdraw. In his confusion, Su-Hyeok accidently steps on a proximity mine, which leaves him both abandoned in enemy territory and a sitting duck for an approaching DPRK Patrol led by Sergeant Oh Kyeong-Pil. Not long afterwards, Su-Hyeok is discovered by Kyeong-Pil who, rather than taking Su-Hyeok into custody, helps him to escape back to the South. The tension of this incident is laden with double meanings. The minefield represents the Peninsula's current political climate and the incursion, if made public, would result in an eruption of violence which would end the 1953 Armistice. When Soo-Hyeok openly declares "I'm standing on a mine" he therefore refers not only to his immediate situation but to the fact that his unlawful presence in the North is itself a volatile act. He knows that if captured, he would promptly be executed (an action which the ROK government would certainly not tolerate). It is likely that Kyeong-Pil knows this too and it is probably the original reason why he decides not to place Su-Hyeok under arrest after disarming the mine.

This marks the beginning of a friendship between the two soldiers which they hope will be a decisive step in once more unifying the two nations. However, as tensions flair and the military brass become evermore suspicious, the grim reality of their situation slowly causes their hope to diminish. In the third act these events come to a head, by which time politics has been allowed to once more poison any sense of unity between Su-Hyeok and Kyeong-pil. In a text book clash of ideologies, it is revealed that whilst both sides want Korea to once again become a unified nation, neither is willing to compromise their own political beliefs for that cause. This

culminates in both the film's central murder, where Lee finds himself being investigated by Swiss Major Sophie E. Jean (Lee Yeong-ae) and then Su-Hyeok's own climatic suicide following a final confrontation with Kyeong-pil in the JSA conference room where Kyeong-pil maniacally bellows "Long live the Joson Labor Party! Long live Kim Jong-Il!" In these scenes, Park makes a bold statement about the futility of trying to reconcile a problem as chronic as the division between the two Koreas. Kim Kyung-hyun covers *JSA* in the final chapter of his book, where he writes:

> Because abnegation and abjegation are simply categories…the death of Su-hyeok is awkward for its timing, but appropriate in fulfilling generic conventions. This murderous apocalyptic finale is the only option left for Su-hyeok and his comrades, who had participated in the highly charged game that eventually disembodied everyone involved. Denied the peaceful process toward a salient post-traumatic identity even in the cinematic realm of fantasy.
>
> (Kim, 2004: 269)

Both Lee Su-Hyeok and Oh Kyeong-pil come from a generation of Korean men who have grown up accepting the Cold War propaganda with near religious devotion, and as such fear abandonment of this rhetoric as though it were a form of sacrilege. Although the bond between Su-Hyeok and Kyeong-pil remains strong long after the climax of JSA, several potential flash points occur which foreshadow the hostile

backdrop of the story. The most prominent of these concerns a moon pie. During one

of his frequent trips to the Northern watch tower, Su-hyeok brings a selection of

confectionary and pop culture novelties with him to share with Kyeong-pil. During

the resulting jubilance between them, Su-Hyeok suggests that on the next occasion

Kyeong-pil should visit him on the South side. This statement breaks the jovial

atmosphere. Regurgitating the half-eaten moon pie in an act of sheer outrage,

Kyeong-pil removes the treat from his mouth and offers it back to Su-Hyeok in

rejection of his generosity. This scene also underpins the attitude that despite

accepting handouts from the South with open arms, the North Korean people still

adamantly refuse active engagement with the outside world.

For Kim Kyung-hyun, this scene represents one of several instances which

underpins to aura of romantic mystique which makes Kyeong-pil's character so

appealing to both Su-hyeok and South Korean audiences. He writes:

He in many ways arouses desire because he has been

devalued by the South Korean state as non-existent beyond

the masses of faceless soldiers who…pledge their dogmatic

loyalty to their totalitarian leader. Yet this is the very place

where his aura…can be uncovered, once his veil is lifted

and he emerges as a demystified individual. He on one

hand is a human, with sentimental emotions…and a taste

for junk food…but on the other holds an exceptional

mastery over his corporeality, ideological loyalty, and self-

discipline.

(Kim, 2004: 269)

For Kim, this contrast of the extreme self-control of Kyeong-pil's North Korean masculinity set against the anarchic uncontrolled anxieties of Su-hyeok's South Korean masculinity shows blatant evidence of Kyeong-pil's gender primacy by suggesting that the years of ruthless military discipline instilled by the DPRK "produces a masculinity that is splendid and ideal" to South Koreans hailing from a culture which has long since surrendered any attempt to achieve such regimented perfection (Kim, 2004:269).

The most alienated character, however, is Sophie. A woman lost in a predominantly masculine world, she occupies the space between the two opposing Koreas and as such receives both suspicion from the North and disrespect from the patriarchal generals of the South. Born in Korea but raised in Switzerland, she represents the NNSC (Neutral Nations Supervisory Committee) and is charged with policing the potential powder keg surrounding the murder of two North Korean soldiers. Like most political detectives, Sophie finds herself lost in the mists of time since both sides give conflicting opinions and neither is willing to accept responsibility for what happened. In truth, Sophie wishes to use the investigation as a way of finding answers to her own problems. As such, she finds herself unable to depersonalise her own traumatic past from the events going on around her, and becomes increasingly consumed by her own emotions as the film progresses. The image of Sophie pacing back and forth along the division line in the rain, almost patrolling it, is a stark commentary about the legions of those born to Korean lineage outside the peninsula and as such find themselves dogged by a national history of violence which does not feel real to them. Kim Kyung-hyun views Sophie in more basic terms, arguing that her alienation is also partially due to her gender. He writes:

> Sophie's sexuality is framed outside the realm of desire both within the diagesis and outside of it because she has entered a space that is heavily characterised by homo-social activity…In this clandestine space emptied out and now only stained with blood stands Sophie, who must establish her power not by being invisible, but by pronouncing her presence that is defined by international law, biracial identity, and female body in a masculine form.
>
> (Kim, 2004: 267-268)

As mentioned previously, Sophie is still very much a woman in a man's world. Her inability to gain an accurate confession of the events surrounding the murder from either Lee or Oh initially stems from the patriarchal fear that her position as a woman would make her incapable of understanding the meaning behind their homo-social relationship and that the events will be written off as the result of a scandalous homosexual relationship. Furthermore, she poses a direct threat to masculine primacy in that she is a Colonel and outranks both Sergeants within the rigid military hierarchy. R.W. Connell very quickly noted in *Masculinities* that the military is just one of many societal institutions which are structured and organized according to gender bias, often without conscious public knowledge or acceptance:

> Many find it difficult to accept that institutions are substantively not just metaphorically gendered…To say this is not to imply that the personalities of top male office

holders seep through and stain the institution. It is to say something much stronger: that state organizational practices are structured in relation to the reproductive arena…masculinity, like femininity, is always liable to internal contradiction and historical disruption.

(Connell, 1995: 76)

Also taking into account Connell's system of production; with its three key elements of power, production and cathexis, it could be said that there is an audacity in the prospect of a woman surpassing men in a phallocentric occupation. The hierarchical and regimented military world remains very much a male orientated institution not just in Korea but indeed throughout the world and arguably remains one of the final antiquated global bastions of patriarchy. It relates back to primitive beliefs that since women possess the essential means to breed then they should be kept away from the violent theatres of warfare and national defence. Thus the concept of a high-ranking female officer presents a castrating sense of threat to the male soldier, immediately setting her against the previously established 'old boys club' of traditional military networks. In Kim's opinion, therefore, Sophie's position must be justified through legality and beauraucracy. She does not stand before Oh and Lee as a woman attempting to undermine their gendered sense of authority but merely as an impartial third party to an event which could have far-reaching consequences for both nations involved.

Upon its release, *Joint Security Area* won several national and cultural awards for Park's ability to accurately portray the common desire of Korea's people for re-unification but also the fears that arise when ideologies clash. Undoubtedly, *Joint*

Security Area shares its biggest selling point with *Shiri* in that it seeks to abandon the Cold War propaganda aesthetic of dehumanizing the North Korean populous. For the first time in Korean film, the Communist Northern element are no longer demons or soulless machines but living, breathing, feeling human beings who ultimately want the same things they do, even though it be via dramatically different means. The important thing to take from *JSA* is to understand that both North and South want to reunite and once more turn the peninsula into a single independent nation, though sadly, the course of the past fifty years have ensured that this dream of unity may forever remain unfulfilled.

Silmido by Kang Woo-Suk (2003)

With the censorship laws repelled and South Korean film makers given a largely free run in terms of creativity, it was only a matter of time before the sins of the South's former militant government came to public attention. *Silmido* is but one very prominent edition to the period's breed of historical cinema-as-political expose. Darcy Paquet mentions that in spite of its "bombastic, melodramatic style" and enormous budget, it was well received for the previously buried information it revealed:

> the film…received wide publicity when the local media
>
> began to look back on the almost-forgotten incident and
>
> interview family members of the deceased men involved.
>
> (Paquet, 2009: 377)

Historical and political relevance aside, *Silmido* is a clear contemporary example of New Korean Cinema which blatantly de-mystifies the dilemma of heroism and proves the folly of taking petty criminals and training them to become Pavlovian killing machines.

The film boasts numerous traditionalist themes such as patriotism, devotion, courage and camaraderie. Much to Kang's detriment these are the key themes of all genre war films and these elements are milked beyond the point of melodrama. Seasoned war film veterans will also notice the obvious nod to Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) or Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1978). Surprisingly the film only touches briefly on the division between North and South (although there is virtually no visual reference to North Korea through the entire course of the film). Like *First Blood* and *Full Metal Jacket* before it, *Silmido* prefers to focus less on history but to instead exemplify how the military is able to transform people into monsters. The chivalry more commonly associated with soldiering is rejected and in the second act even ridiculed when two of the soldiers quote dialogue from an old Korean War film before escaping to the mainland and raping a school teacher. This unpleasant sequence displays a common element in modern Korean War films. As Kim Kyung-hyun argues through his contextual analysis of Im Kwon-taek's *The Taebaek Mountains*, sex and violence go hand-in-hand when representing the horrors of war and the aggressive masculinities which go with them:

> …by focusing on abhorrent, illicit and transgressive sexual encounters, the film's crisis becomes the men's crisis, justifying the restoration of "tradition" and order under a recharged masculine ethos.

(Kim, 2004:78)

This in turn goes hand-in-hand with the dehumanising effects of military training. For the two soldiers who commit the rape, the act is more than just a cheap act of pleasure at the expense of a woman. It represents an aggressive affirmation of personal manhood. The moral issue of creating malevolent killing machines has been an issue which has reverberated throughout late twentieth century cinema and holds particular relevance in light of the Iraq War. The male desire for bloodlust has a habit of rearing its ugly head in times of war and, unchecked, can have catastrophic consequences because this animalistic urge displaces both reason and morality. To quote Kim, "As male authority dissipates, women too are victimised, brutalised and betrayed" (Kim, 2004: 80). This perhaps raises one of the main concerns which lie with integrating women into the military, since it is very much still a man's world in which women are always treated as the lowest common denominator. With this in mind, the masculine subjectivity of the soldier then withers further when the two offending privates are caught and the platoon is punished for their transgression. Even when charged with bringing cruel discipline upon their comrades, they are unrepentant, with one of them even boasting "At least I've had a woman" (Kang, 2005).

This being said, the traditionalism of *Silmido* might also be seen as a sort of virtue in that it encourages a revised viewing of local films about the Korean War. Not least of which they attempt to reclaim the gender primacy of Korean males by showing indigenous Korean representations besting their American counterparts – be it physically, morally or emotionally – in what has since come to be known as Han' guk heroism. In his essay "Han'guk Heroism: Cinematic Spectacle and Postwar Politics in *Red Muffler*", David Scott Diffrient uses a textual analysis of the Golden

Age War film *Red Muffler* to exemplify the importance of Han'guk in deconstructing

the colonizing cultural imperialism of traditional Korean War films:

> …when Korea's indigenous populace appears in
> Hollywood films, they are monolithically stereotyped as
> either faceless hordes from the North, war orphans in need
> of Western paternalism and charity, or hunchbacked
> geezers whose frailty casts in relief the physical prowess of
> their American saviors. South Korean films paint a more
> diverse cross-section of social life, and focus on doomed
> heroes whose masculinity, though troubled, is the screen
> upon which the nation's virtues and tribulations are
> projected.
>
> (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005: 153)

This stereotyping of Korean actors in Hollywood films mentioned by Diffrient is a

consistent problem which continues to this day. Regardless of how famous a South

Korean actor may become in Korea or even in Asia, to the casting agent for a

Hollywood action film he/she is simply another ethnic minority relegated to the ranks

of stooge, sidekick, henchman or villain. Recent examples include Rick Yun in

Olympus Has Fallen (2013); Choi Min-sik in *Lucy* (2014) and Lee Byung-hyun in

The Magnificent Seven (2016).[30] Han'guk acts as the counter-balance by proving that

South Korean men can be just as heroic as their American counterparts and are

capable of equally superhuman feats of physical process. A clear case in point for

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[30] In saying this, there have been positives on the small screen for Korean male actors. The most notable example of these is Korean-American actor Stephen Yeun, whose turn as fan favourite Glenn Rhee in *The Walking Dead* has garnered him a devoted multiracial fan base.

Silmido can be found during the basic training scenes of the first act, where the recruits are made to sprint literally miles up rocky cliff faces and cross an unsecure rope bridge every day until it becomes second nature to them, fighting through fatigue and abandoning fear. More importantly, while *Silmido* can in many respects be likened to Robert Aldrich's *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) for its similar premise of death row inmates forced to enrol in special forces training, the film offers a far greater engagement with characters than its American counterpart. Each member of the Unit has a unique back story. The most obvious example is the protagonist, who fights for South Korea with the knowledge that his father fought for the North, and his unstable rivalry with fellow squad member Sang-pil which eventually ends in friendship.

Silmido is perhaps most crucial because it argues the division between politics and the military. As mentioned earlier, historians like Adrian Buzo quickly point out that one of the biggest problems with the Korean War were conflicts of opinion among politicians and endemic corruption and mistrust amongst military intelligence which continued through to the post-war dictatorships (Buzo, 2002: 73). Such disorder results in changeable attitudes which do not sit well with largely uneducated soldiers. Historians like Adrian Buzo and political analysts like Gordon G. Chang unanimously agree that the secret to the success of the North during the early part of the war was that those in charge presented their troops with a clearly defined goal which was pursued with ruthless determination (Buzo, 2002: 73). The South Korean government lacked such decisiveness for years and as such their foreign policy was forever deviating between militancy and diplomacy. Such versatility and compromise is acceptable in a society where the people have a fair understanding of political mechanics, however, largely uneducated soldiers like those featured in *Silmido* do not understand or care about the complicated networks of such relations. As such, they do

not appreciate the inconvenience of following a plan rigidly because a slight improvement in relations dictates otherwise. All they know is that the training they received has given them a purpose and without that purpose, their lives have no meaning. Thus being told that this goal cannot be fulfilled creates a dislocation which does not allow the anticipation to vent and predictably it builds to critical mass before finally erupting. This raises myriad questions about the nature of power and whether uneducated troops really deserve the power over life and death. More importantly, it again draws parallels with the Vietnam War. American, and particularly Australian, troops in Vietnam also found themselves experiencing similar disillusionment toward their situation and such a lack of motivation was among the main reasons why the tide of the war shifted so dramatically against their favour.

Furthermore, *Silmido* shares a commonality with Kang Je-gyu's *Brotherhood of War* in that this disconnection between military intelligence and the troops on the ground means that those with power show little consideration for the countless cannon fodder at their command. The second act is a clear case in point where the soldiers are abandoned on the island without adequate food or provisions as they await elimination by their supervisors. This is the first of many instances in this thesis where issues of class shall be investigated. For the ruling military brass during the Korean War, the soldiers they had trained to fight the war on the ground were little more than names and numbers who like dogs could be put down and terminated when they were no longer needed. Many theorists, philosophers and poets talk about the dehumanising effects of war but very little has ever been said about the Pavlovian effects of the military and certainly not of the dominant party in this slave/master relationship. What can be said is that the dislocation between ground troops and

military intelligence not only dehumanises the soldiers but also causes generals to no longer see them as human.

Upon refusing their termination, the soldiers of *Silmido* go AWOL and leave the island, following a bloody battle with their own superior officers, so they can travel to the military headquarters in Seoul and directly confront the politicians responsible for their torment. In so doing, they hi-jack a public bus, therefore becoming branded traitors. This presents damning statement about the subjective nature of heroism as a concept. Heroes are only heroes if their actions are condoned by the ruling elite, otherwise they are vilified and shunned, further debilitating their integration back into society. The final twenty minutes of *Silmido* may well be representative of this ignoble truism. As the platoon catches a ride into Seoul on the public bus, passengers cower in fear despite the otherwise friendly reception they are given by the soldiers. Even in the face of verbal reassurance that they won't be harmed, the civilian passengers continue to quake at the sight of the soldiers, suggesting that the fearsome image conjured by their uniforms speaks far louder of their intentions than their words – even if those words speak the truth. Ultimately, the bus is tracked down by ROK forces, resulting in a blood-soaked last stand which ends with the whole platoon committing suicide with their grenades. In true Korean melodrama fashion it holds an overbearing patriotic national sentiment: a final affirmation that it is still noble to die for one's beliefs even if it isn't for one's country. Arguably, this ending stunts the political message by reverting back to nationalist ideals but it can not discredit the rest of the film and the scathing critique of the war machines therein.

Following the release of *Silmido*, a national enquiry was made into the events surrounding the attempt to create a unit for the sole purpose of assassinating Kim Il-sung which led to the arrest and trial of several key military officials.

Brotherhood of War by Kang Je-gyu (2004)

After Kang Je-gyu shot to national stardom with his highly praised conspiracy thriller, *Shiri*, his next film was a big budget epic about the Korean War and how it was able to tear lives and families apart. *Brotherhood of War* like many civil war films is a tale of family unity.   It tells the story of two brothers, Jin-tae and Jin-seok, who prior to the war lived with their poor mother in a residential district of Seoul. When war threatens, Jin-seok is conscripted into the ROK military against his will (a condition was enforced that any one between the ages of eighteen and thirty be automatically drafted). Consequently, Jin-tae demands that he join as well to look after his brother. As time goes on and the violence escalates, enveloping the two brothers, Jin-tae and Jin-seok find themselves driven increasingly apart.

The main focus of the film is quite clearly emotional impact. A common name for the Korean War is "the forgotten war" because away from Korean borders the Korean War has largely become disregarded as a minor period in history (an insult considering that some Koreans consider it to be the most important event in the history of their country). Through *Brotherhood of War* Kang makes certain that he constantly has the attention of his audience and asserts that the war should be anything but forgotten. The first act of the film paints an idealistic picture of life during Korea's interwar years. Though clearly unrealistic in its period melodrama presentation - Jin-tae and Jin-seok frolicking through a sea of happy, smiling people;

the two of them playing with their mother and extended family in a public fountain –
it seeks to encapsulate the contemporary perspective of a people who were still
celebrating a national victory, asserting their right to a cultural identity and a right to
be themselves. Darcy Paquet mentions that while non-Koreans may scoff at these
images, domestically "the plumbing of national sentiment proved capable of not only
younger audiences, but also viewers in their sixties and seventies who remembered
the war" and possibly the interwar years as well (Paquet, 2009: 380). These scenes
hark back to the films of the short-lived post war cinema period. To quote Paquet,
they act as a sort of "collective remembrance" in their homage to the interwar
liberation films which preceded the Korean War and celebrated the peninsula's newly
re-instated, though tragically short-lived, nationhood following its liberation from the
Japanese and are as much a visual representation of their longing to return to those
days as they are a window into this period (Paquet, 2009: 380).

The remaining two acts of the film exist largely to offer some very sobering
truths about the war itself; not least of which is the opinion that the military brass in
charge of the brothers' small rag-tag band of unprepared though embattled young men
were just as cruel as the Communists they sought to destroy. It would seem that truth
much like everything else at such times of conflict, can not escape the fog of war. The
same could be said of Jin-tae. Passionately portrayed by actor Jang Dong-kun; the
older, less educated brother exists in a perpetual moral grey zone. Originally
volunteering for suicide missions to gain the necessary military commendations
needed to send Jin-seok home, he quickly abandons his quest for martyrdom through
an increasing seduction towards the prestige of the war hero. His character carries
many of the symbolic flaws of heroism evidenced in Luc Besson's *Joan of Arc*
(1998), with both the titular warrior seeress and Jin-tae trading virtue for egotism. He

represents what Chris Blazina identifies as a Zane, similar to the phony Olympic Greek athletes who deceived people into believing that they were heroes. He explains:

> Zane characteristics include cheating to try to win a battle, boasting of strength or heroic feats without the capacity to back it up, and acting in an otherwise dishonourable fashion.
>
> (Blazina, 2003:25)

Jin-tae's rising arrogance and hubris certainly places him into the category of Zane. As his ego increases, so does his degree of genuinely heroic behaviour increasingly diminish. The attack on Pyongyang is a particularly poignant example of this. Amidst all the carnage of the battlefield, Jin-tae does not perform any of the superhuman feats which he displayed in previous conflicts, but instead singles out a solitary North Korean officer (a cameo appearance by Choi Min-sik) before chasing him down and brutalising him so as to create the illusion of heroism.

Ironically, it is not only the character of Jin-tae but also the audience which becomes drawn into this prestigious deception. The image of Jin-tae charging toward a pillbox across open terrain only to blow the bunker to pieces with a single effortless hand grenade makes for entertaining drama but does not accurately reflect the true chaos of war. Like Rambo standing atop a rocky cliff laying waste to swathes of nameless extras, the simulated impression of conflict becomes fantastical. From the perspective beyond that of the peninsula, it could be argued that the prevailing difference between *Silmido* and *Brotherhood of War* is that the latter bears distinct

shades of the material used by military agencies for image training.   The connection

between war films and military nationalist propaganda is well documented throughout

the world by liberal media groups and academics alike, with such common examples

as marines during the Gulf War and the ongoing problem of child soldiers in Black

Africa. In his controversial book *The Gulf War Did not Take Place*, Jean Baudrillard

explains that politically sanitised, visually fantastic representations of armed conflict

serve as much to indoctrinate new generations into supporting the military as it

attempts to document historical events:

> The complement of the unconditional simulacrum in the
> field is to train everyone in the unconditional reception of
> broadcast simulacra. Abolish any intelligence of the event.
> The result is a suffocating atmosphere of vagueness and
> stupidity.

>   (Baudrillard, 1995:68)

For Baudrillard, the creation of a culture which promotes romance and ignorance for

the sake of nationalism affects all echelons of society. He continues by expressing that

even if a passive observer has prior knowledge of a wartime event, then said prior

knowledge then becomes shaped around those romantic representations of

nationalism which displace reason and even moral forethought.

This issue of representation also gives rise to the nostalgically sanitised way in

which wars are remembered. Kim Kyung-hyun seems to agree with Baudrillard's

argument about simulacra by stressing the general scarcity of Korean War imagery in

1980s South Korean cinema. According to Kim, only two films feature

representations of this period and even then "there is no attempt to engage it ideologically" (Kim, 2004: 78 - 79). This is not to say that this problem of ideology is unique to the peninsula. It is no secret that in America and Great Britain, the generation who survived World War II and those born during the 'baby boom' frequently draw on similarly romanticized fabrications when remembering the war, with some even doctoring their own first-hand experiences in complicity to these nostalgic falsehoods. Darcy Paquet's analysis of *Brotherhood of War* offers a counter –balance in stating that contrary to the content of the first Act, the remainder of the film does carry an even-handed portrayal, albeit a cleverly concealed one:

> …the film did introduce some new elements into the long tradition of Korean war films, in that it portrayed atrocities committed by Southern as well as Northern soldiers, and saw one of its soldiers switch over to the Northern side toward the end of the film.
>
> (Paquet, 2009: 379)

As Paquet mentions, Kang, who had been one of the first directors to suggest the commonality of the two Koreas when he released *Shiri* in 1999, seems to have adapted the common formula of the Korean wartime melodrama to accommodate and further cultivate this plotline. While on the surface, *Brotherhood of War* carries all of the classical aesthetics of the Korean War film, the increasingly neutral moral stance toward the two opposing sides is a drastic deviation from the films of previous decades that seeks to further the overriding message of exposing the Korean War for

the pointless waste it really was, just as many British films have sought to portray World War I.

Brotherhood of War also breaks from conformity to the tradition rules of Korean War films if it is considered from a satirical perspective reflected through the irony of Jin-tae's heroic iconography. Kim argues that among the more common traits of New Korean Cinema is the moral debasement of its heroes, such being a form of supreme emasculation (Kim, 2004: 79-80). Jin-tae is clearly an example of this trend. The true hero of *Brotherhood of War* (if there is indeed any hero at all) is Jin-seok. Built up throughout the film as the hope of the Lee family, the studious and largely passive Jin-seok is an almost total foil for his brother. Whilst Jin-tae becomes swept up in the prestige of wartime heroism, Jin-seok remains true to the brother's initial goal of returning home to their mother and is the only one of the two who performs a noble act by trying to protect Young-shin from the Anti-Communist Committee. The bond the brothers share is represented through a designer pen which Jin-tae buys Jin-Seok as a graduation present at the beginning of the film. This pen becomes a pivotal element in both causing Jin-tae to defect to the North, under the mistaken belief that Jin-seok has been killed by the ACC, and then encouraging him to martyr himself when Jin-seok braves a harrowing trip to the frontline to bring his brother home. The latter carries shades of both Dante's *Inferno* and *What Dreams May Come* in that Jin-seok's journey to the DMZ, despite being injured and completely unarmed, is motivated by a similarly blind act of love. This love adds another polarised element to the brothers in that Jin-seok's confrontation with Jin-tae is not only symbolic of the political struggle between North and South but also the struggle between love and hate. Eventually, love triumphs as Jin-seok succeeds in appealing to Jin-tae's

goodness, returning him to the selfless heroic character he was at the beginning of the film.

Ultimately, *Brotherhood of War* takes an awkward position in that it carries shades of both post-Korean War cinema and New Korean cinema. It could therefore be said to be a rare example of the war film as retro-modernist cinema for the way it uses traditional wartime iconography to disparage the myths tied to armed conflict. As Darcy Paquet describes, *Brotherhood of War* is relevant for local audiences mainly through its "portrayal of nation that had lived through tremendous upheaval and suffering, shaping the kind of country that exists today" (Paquet, 2009: 379-380). On a far less cryptic level, the film is also more important for reminding the world of 'the forgotten war' and of the countless numbers who died for a cause with which they did not completely agree.

Chapter 4 – Politics, recessive masculinity and the legacy of Student Era Cinema in *Memories of Murder*, *The Host* and *Mother*

The most common form of masculinity discussed by Kim Kyung-hyun in the earlier pages of his book is that of recessive masculinity. Unable to compete with more dominant cultures, South Korean masculinity has since the Korean War been considered as adopting the position of other in the binary view. In chapter four of his book Kim observes that traditionally, the South Korean man is considered totally helpless. As with the military, this problem is tied to South Korea's history.

In his 1998 book *Post-traumatic Culture – Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* Kirby Farrell made the observation that the national cinema of cultures which have suffered political hardship, like the Balkans or South Korea, use the medium of film as a means of recognising an identity of 'Post-Trauma', "whose mission is to help viewers remember what is too painful to recuperate" (Farrell, 1998). This 'post-trauma' concerns two decades of military rule and violent student uprisings which inevitably led to what is widely considered to be the most dramatic event in South Korea of the late 20th century: the Liberation riots of 1987. These uprisings contradict the concept of a "recessive masculinity" by creating the image of the student as a hero whose intelligence and compassion is the antithesis of the soldier's brutal physicality. This chapter seeks to explore South Korea's culture of post-trauma through an exploration of the South's political history since the end of the Korean War to its democratic liberation. Consideration is given to how its politics are portrayed on-screen, and how that tradition continues today.

What is important to remember about South Korea from the perspective of national politics is that student activism has always played a key role. Don Oberdorfer

notes that the role played by students in South Korean society "is the product of a tradition stretching back over many centuries" (Oberdorfer, 2005: 49). He writes:

> Undergirded by the Confucian emphasis on scholarship, students had spearheaded nationalistic movements against Japanese colonial rule. They saw themselves, and were often seen by others, as guardians of state virtue and purity, and they were expected to demonstrate their opposition to compromise with those ideals...
>
> (Oberdorfer, 1997:49)

Oberdorfer notes that, as the nation's intellectual elite, the image of the student has long since held the sort of romanticized heroism reserved for soldiers in many other cultures. Like the errant Paladins of Medieval Europe, South Korean students were regarded as possessing a Solomon-like wisdom coupled with an ethical purity which under Confucian lore garners both reverence and admiration from the general public. This is similar to the opinion held about the American students of the late 1960s who protested against their country's involvement in the Vietnam War or the French students who masterminded the 1968 Paris uprising. Along with considerable aid from South Korea's sizable Christian community – who themselves have long posed opposition to authoritarian oppression - the student movement was a driving force for change throughout the course of the Twentieth Century, especially in their struggles against the regimes of presidents Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan.

The student movement's momentum first took hold in the years following the Korean War and the developments which occurred in the middle to latter part of

Syngman Rhee's political regime. In "Gender, Genre and The Nation", Kathleen McHugh and Nancy Abelmann mention that one of the primary reasons for the disintegration of Syngman Rhee's political regime and his eventual exile to Hawaii was student activism and the events of April 19, 1960. The event has come to be known as 4-1-9. McHugh and Abelmann write that this was event was the direct result of a newly emerging academically astute demographic which had taken precedence upon the post-Korean War political landscape:

> By the late 1950s, the Rhee regime had become increasingly autocratic, a fact that had become more and more apparent, especially in light of a stagnating economy. Meanwhile, high school and college attendance quadrupled between 1948 and 1960, making for an intelligentsia fuelled by democratic ideals as well as economic desires.
>
> (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005: 5-6)

Fuelled by a strong political understanding and fervent discontent toward the Rhee government's policies – a tightening of the National Security Law and allegations of a normalizing treaty with Japan – student protests broke out across the country and, McHugh and Abelmann notes, along with "the heavy handed suppression of those struggles, which left over one hundred dead and nearly 1,000 wounded" this newly established student populace was able to eventually topple Rhee's regime (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005:6).

This would all change however, when in 1961 Park Chung Hee seized power following yet another military coup hich went unopposed. Despite his ambitious

development plans, Park Chung Hee was also an advocate of Japanese economic rationalism, much to the dismay of the creative and artistic industries. In 1962, Park's Second Republic government initiated the first amendment of the Motion Picture Law. The Motion Picture Law was little more than an extension of the National Security Law and existed purely to tighten censorship and governmental control of the art form. Under the terms of this new law, all film makers had to receive a license from the government in order to operate and satisfy a set of prerequisites regarding ownership of studios, equipment, cast and crew, yearly capital and (most stifling of all) a yearly quota of fifteen films produced per annum (Shin and Stringer, 2007: 217). The MPL also restricted the imports of foreign films, stating that foreign imports could not be imported unless these quotas were met. In the four amendments made to the MPL between 1963 and 1973, these censorship codes became ever tighter with the introduction of a special Censorship Committee able to demand cuts, bans and even cast/crew arrests as they wished should a film scrutinise the military government in any way.

For this reason, the vast majority of films released until the democratic liberation of 1987 were made to suit the traditional genre of melodrama and were often of very poor quality. During Syngman Rhee's regime (prior to the MLP) the annual quota for domestic film turnout was already depressingly low in comparison to the heavy turnover of American Hollywood imports. Lee Hyangjin notes that in the three years between 1946 and 1949 when the prospect of the Korean War first became apparent, "about fifteen films were produced, about half of them silent" (Lee, 2000:47). Thanks to the Motion Picture Law, that number would remain consistently bleak. With tight restrictions came a grim loss of pluralism and many film makers who could not afford to meet studio and equipment quotas eventually suffered

financial ruin. Those who could afford to meet these demands often only made films as a way of fulfilling the required number to allow the import of American films, which the MPL amendments ensured would only be those of the cheapest cost and poorest quality as well.

Interestingly though, despite the detrimental effects of Park Chung-hee's influence on the Korean film industry through the MPL, Park ironically became a favourite character in modern Korean films. In his 2012 publication; *South Korea: The Invisible Country*, Korea correspondent for *The Economist* Daniel Tudor describes this cinematic anomaly in great detail:

> It is no exaggeration to state that one of the great themes in modern Korean cinema is the authoritarian era, with Park Chung-hee a common point of reference. Arguably the most entertaining Park-related film is also the most controversial: Im Sang-soo's *The President's Last Bang* (2005) deals with his assassination and portrays him in an unflattering light…
>
> (Tudor, 2012: 231)

To describe the image of Park Chung-hee displayed in *The President's Last Bang* as 'unflattering' is a grievous understatement. Best described as a strange Korean mix of *Valkyrie* (2010) and *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), the film is, to quote Tudor, "a taut and tense" satire, "laden with black humour" that casts former-President Park and several of his cabinet members in such an absurd light that it reaches the point of extreme parody (Tudor, 2012: 231). Park himself may as well have been Kim Jong-il by

another name. He is portrayed on screen as a childish autocrat who behaves more like a sovereign ruler than a Presidential leader and runs his administration with stringently a top-down sense of hierarchy. In several of the film's central scenes, Park's cabinet members are made to feel more like nannies and nurse maids, charged with looking after their monarchical man-child instead doing of their actual job of helping him to run the country. It is therefore little wonder that upon the film's release Im became the subject of both, as Tudor states, "legal action from the Park family and criticism from the conservative press" in much the same way that *Valkyrie* director Brian Singer came under fire from family members and historians for Tom Cruise's fanatical portrayal of Colonel Claus Von Schtauffenburg (Tudor, 2012: 231).

While this screen portrayal of President Park exhibited in *The President's Last Bang* is deliberately exaggerated for comic effect, it may carry some degree of historical truth. During his one and only private interview with the former world leader, Don Oberdorfer recalls finding President Park's character to be "self-contained and aloof" (Oberdorfer, 1997: 31). He writes:

> …this powerful and greatly feared political leader seemed
>
> reticent and shy, almost smaller than life, as he sat in a big
>
> chair in his Blue House office. As we talked, he toyed with
>
> a tiny chihuahua in his lap and rarely looked me in the eye.
>
> (Oberdorfer, 1997:31)

This perhaps carries a sense of irony, given that the image of President Park, who in the eyes of history is regarded by many as "the father of his country's remarkable economic progress" and the key figure in South Korea's dramatic cultural shift from

feudality to modernity, who frequently clashed with the administrations of Kennedy, Nixon and Carter over ideological and humanitarian disputes, and whose legacy remains one of the most repressive military regimes of twentieth century, would in actual fact be the sort of introverted private soul portrayed by the protagonists of many student era films which used this image primarily to oppose authoritarian oppression. (Oberdorfer, 1997: 33).

Following the death of Park Chung-hee, the restrictive laws laid down by his regime only worsened further during the 1980s when President Chun Doo-hwan seized power. Chun's reaction to politics was less abrasive than that of his predecessor but was no less cruel. Among Chun's first orders of business was to imprison political activist Kim Dae-jung in 1981 on the charge of sedition. Upon news of his arrest, mass protests erupted in Kim's hometown of Kwangju. Unfortunately, similar to the reaction of former Chinese Premier Dong Zhao Ping to 1989's Tiananmen Square demonstrations, President Chun responded to these protests with text book tyranny, initiating the vulgar display of power which came to be known as the infamous Massacre of Kwangju. The myriad atrocities committed by the South Korean army during this event are too ghastly and horrific to mention in detail here, though Kim Kyung-hyun mentions that despite the fact that the body count was greater than that of the Korean War, the event received very little external media attention (Kim, 2004: 17-18).

On this subject, theories behind why there was no backlash are mixed. Kim Kyung-hyun argues the indigenous opinion that it was because the United States government approved of showing such force (Kim, 2004: 17-18). Further, Gordon G. Chang points blame squarely at the United States in the belief that the Regan administration not only condoned the massacre but was complicit in it:

> The slaughter of Kwangju could not have happened – and
> would not have happened – without the tacit consent of the
> United States. If Washington had been dead set against
> using the South Korean military in Kwangju, the military
> would not have been used. American generals tightly
> controlled the movement of Korea's armed forces: since the
> days of Syngman Rhee, who wanted to forcibly take all of
> the DPRK, the joint command was structured to restrain
> South Korea's army from attacking northward.
>
> (Chang, 2007: 96)

It has been well documented that although Park Chung-hee made no attempt to show allegiance to Richard Nixon or the Republican administration of the 1970s, Chun Doo-hwan made every attempt to prostitute South Korea to American Reaganomics. Kim also mentions that during the year or so between the arrest of General Chun in 1995 and his conviction as a war criminal in 1997, the massacre of Kwangju became a polemic subject which would spawn several iconic films, including *A Single Spark* and *A Petal* (1996). Kim Kyung-hyun emphasises the importance of the former in it's relation to the standing of its director Chon Tae-il as a prophet of political change on screen:

> …the Korean movement for democracy, in which Chon
> and the massacre of Kwangju represented the dissenting
> voices for collective reckoning for historical remembrance,

had already been exploited as a nostalgic reference point of

the 1990s.

(Kim, 2004: 107)

However, many of the better established South Korean films of 2000 – 2010 which hold true to the tradition of student cinema now adopt a neutral stance toward the events portrayed on-screen, attempting to identify whether the male protagonists (and indeed the common Korean man) are truly as helpless as they believe themselves to be. By deliberately placing the audience outside the narrative instead of forcing empathy with the subjectivity of individual characters, film makers like Park Chan-wook and Kim Ki-duk encourage viewers to objectively survey the situations on-screen and question whether victimisation is more a matter of perspective than an abstract concept.

An important point to consider in this regard is also that the upheavals that occurred on the Korean peninsula over the course other late twentieth century have also mirrored many similar instances of turmoil overseas. The previously cited protests against the Vietnam War, Maoism and nuclear proliferation are all evidence of how South Korea is one example of many nations that underwent political strife in the latter part of the Twentieth Century. This is not a denigration of any of these events, or of the relevance they hold, though when one considers that the late 1980s in particular were a crucial period not only for South Korea but for several countries throughout the world – the British working classes railing against Thatcherism, the fall of the Berlin Wall – the question must be asked as to whether the idea of wounded masculinity is, from a political context, merely a sign of natural progression. The student cinema movement would suggest so. Whilst Kim Kyung-hyun once again

successfully acknowledges the significance of student movement masculine

representations, he neglects to consider exactly why such representations exist in the

first place. As previously mentioned, the vast majority of these representations existed

as socio-political allegory, and this is certainly true of the few film makers who

continue the tradition today – people like Bong Joon-ho whose politically charged

monster movie *The Host* (2006) has now successfully replaced Park Chan-wook's

Oldboy (2003) as the most popular South Korean film in history. To quote Jean

Beaudrillard:

> The immense majority of present day photographic,
>
> cinematic and television images are thought to bear witness
>
> to the world with a naïve resemblance and a touching
>
> fidelity. We have spontaneous confidence in their realism.
>
> We are wrong. They only seem resemble reality, events and
>
> faces.
>
> (Baudrillard, 1984:14)

In the early twenty-first century, cinematic images which represent ideas rather than

historical truths are common-place and, as with news of early cinema audiences who

fled in terror upon witnessing a train come straight toward them on-screen, I feel it is

best to view these representations in context.   If these representations of recessive

masculinity commonly expressed through student movement cinema were indeed

nothing more than the allegorical by-products of a society coming to terms with its

own demons, then these representations should not be viewed in the negative. Rather

they seek to identify a strength within the Korean male which until recently has not

truly been realised. An honesty of character which strips humanity down to its bare bones and outshines any of the bravado portrayed by its rivals: the truism that no one is perfect but that that same imperfection is also nothing to be ashamed of.

Bong Joon-ho

The most prominent modern film director to advocate the influence of student movement cinema is screenwriter/director Bong Joon-ho. The grandson of a well known South Korean author, Bong majored in sociology at Yonsei University in 1988 and played a prominent role in the campus film society before undergoing a two year course in film at the Korean Academy of Fine Arts. Upon his graduation from KAFA, Bong spent many years working on the projects of other directors before enter the director's chair for the first time on his debut feature *Barking Dogs Never Bite*. This film was exceeding low budget and used the apartment complex he had lived in during the early years of his marriage. Whilst the film was largely a non-event for Bong, it did manage to raise word of mouth among the overseas festival circuits. Large-scale acclaim was obtained later for Bong with the release of his second feature *Memories of Murder* (2003). The film was a tremendous hit among local audiences, selling over five million tickets nationwide from word of mouth alone. Consequently, the cultural significance of Memories of Murder resulted in the film winning numerous Korean film awards and then later numerous attaining overseas festival honours.

In his youth, growing up in the 1970s, Bong was frequently inspired by several of the more recognized transatlantic auteurs of the period. Whilst he also largely credits Hitchcock as one of his most prominent influences, his largest

inspiration stylistically was supposedly Sam Peckinpah. In his biography of Bong

Joon-ho, Jung Ji-youn mentions it was not so much the graphic content of

Peckinpah's films themselves which drew Bong's attention but also the way in which

the Park/Chun dictatorships sought to censor and mutilate this content in accordance

with the MPL. Jung writes:

> He watched Peckinpah's *Cross of Iron*, *The Wild Bunch*,
> *Straw Dogs* and *The Getaway* on TV before he even
> entered high school…even the middle school-aged Joon-ho
> sensed the connection between scenes seemed strange, with
> jumps that suggested deliberate deletions. There is no way
> that this young man, with an already keen sense of and taste
> for film, would fail to see it.
>
> (Jung, 2008)

 Jung goes on to explain that under MPL, especially on television, Peckinpah's films

underwent such rigorous censorship that it would sometimes even compromise the

film's narrative cohesion and therefore it's worth as a piece of story-telling. More

positively however, this also inspired Bong to attempt to piece together these missing

segments himself and contemplate how these missing scenes would be played out

(Jung, 2008). This technique would provide a priceless tool in his future career.

Perhaps the most startling aspect of Bong Joon-ho's films is that the majority

of his canon is inspired primarily from his own life experiences. This process began

long before Bong began his tenure at Yonhei University; Bong's home life alone

exposed him to the harsh realities of living under military rule from a young age. In his interview with Jung Ji-youn, Bong mentions:

> I wouldn't call it a political position, but my father, who was an artist, had a profound hatred for the military government. When he took the family to Seoul, it was when he was starting design centre work, and the chief director there was a retired military man…Whenever my father came home, he would let out his stress and hatred for this director, and as a result I came to learn how Korea was a military dictatorship from a young age.
>
> (Jung, 2008)

This constant domestic experience was further compounded, Jung mentions, by the influence of Bong's Catholic heritage and his exposure to anti-government student activism both through church news bulletins and through his high school bible study group before inevitably playing an active role in the Liberation Riots, or "the struggle for democratization" as he called them, at the age of seventeen (Jung, 2008). Bong recalls to Jung his first experience of the Riots during the demonstration at Eulji-ro:

> When 6pm came around, the citizens all sounded the horns of their cars and the people in the streets started cheering. I can't find words to describe the excitement. It was my first experience with a stunning spectacle of sound. When we fled the combat police into the back streets of Eulji-ro, the

> shop owners and residents there not only hid the protestors,
>
> they even made them stuff to eat.
>
> (Jung, 2008)

Each of these experiences has in some form been translated into Bong's art with each one carrying some form of overt or covert political message, most commonly through allegory. All things considered one could easily argue that many of Bong Joon-ho's films can be read allegorically. During his interview with Jung, Bong loosely admits this heavy use of allegory, describing that the heavily diverse range of characters in his films as "closer to the imaginary" than to anyone with whom he has shared experiences in real life (Jung, 2008). This is certainly true of Bong's 2006 film *The Host* which presents each of the film's central characters as a metaphor for a different stratum of society.

The reception of Bong Joon-ho's films has not been without backlash and has on several occasions seen him "arrested for political activities" (Tudor, 2012: 231). Daniel Tudor describes Bong's problems with the law thusly:

> His films are full of mistrust for authority and frequently
>
> highlight subjects like police incompetence and brutality.
>
> (Tudor, 2012:231)

Memories of Murder discusses these issues as an integral part of its key themes, as does his 2009 film *Mother*. No doubt this anti-authoritarian streak is the direct result of his student days as an activist. Both of the earlier political films of Bong's canon featured in this chapter feature images of mass protests and rioting. This is especially

true in the second of these two films, *The Host* (2006), where these images dominate much of the third act.

Another common factor in Bong's films is that they tend to be police procedural thrillers, relating either to crime or to the investigation of crime. Two of the films featured in this film are chiefly concerned with major crimes (both murder) and emphasize how poorly authorities respond to such situations in light of such issues as policy changes, civil unrest and the need to curb public hysteria. This focus on the investigation of crime relates directly to the common factor that Bong's films also frequently feature a character afflicted with some form of mental impairment, such as a learning disability or a depleted mental age, with these characters often becoming easy targets for police brutality and persecution because they are unable to articulately protest against such treatment. These scenes are crucial to the study of Bong Joon-ho's films because they chiefly concern the relations of authoritarian power and the slave/master relationship of each party. In each case, the afflicted party is cruelly brutalized, victimized and vilified by the ruling power without any valid reason. During the original student cinema era, it was a common trait that films made during this period centred on recessive, anatomically inferior male protagonists who often suffered some sort of affliction – usually a physical or mental disability (as opposed to the war wounds more commonly associated with post-war cinema) which would impede their ability to speak out against their government. After all, many of the dire calamities which were brought down upon the Korean people during the twentieth century were the handiwork of outside governments who, like the sadistic gods of Ancient Greek tragedies, could not be stopped or made to be held responsible by their victims.

However, these films also carried with them a strange sense of parable. Like Greek epics, the protagonists of these politicised films were made to undergo cathartic ordeals where their lost masculinity was redeemed through suffrage and trials of character. Furthermore, they sought to identify that true manhood is not attained through anatomic perfection but through qualities which can not be measured so easily such as responsibility and moral worth.

Perhaps the most crucial theme apparent in Bong's body of work is the recurring message that there is a distinct need for unity and cohesion in order for South Korea to succeed as a nation. In each of the films reviewed in this chapter, the need for cohesion between characters is always a crucial plot point and frequently becomes the deciding factor as to whether characters succeed or fail in their respective goals.   In recent times, Bong Joon-ho (along with several other South Korean film makers included in this thesis) has attracted the attention of Hollywood with his many accolades. In 2013 he released *Snow Piecer* (2013), starring long-time collaborating talent Song Kang-ho, which has once more succeeded in captivating audiences world wide.

Memories of Murder (2003)

Following his feature debut; *Barking Dogs Don't Bite*, and before releasing his first true masterpiece with his highly politicised monster movie, *The Host*, Bong Joon-ho directed what Daniel Tudor best described as "a dramatization of the true events surrounding a small town living in fear of a serial killer" and the failure of law enforcement authorities to bring the monster to justice (Tudor, 2012: 233). The film is relevant not only for its instrumental role in showcasing the circumstances

surrounding the emergence of South Korea's first real serial killer to a world audience but also in exhibiting the way in which progress in the judicial and administrative offices of the state can be grossly impeded by both faction and bureaucracy.

While *The Host* would later trump *Memories of Murder* in weaving a rich political tapestry, the socio-political overtones remain heavy throughout the film. Set against the backdrop of Chun Doo-hwan's military dictatorship; the police in the small town where the film is set are, as to be expected, little more than a band of brutish thugs: amoral badge carrying ruffians who would not seem out of place in Euro-American films like *The Sweeney* (1975), and whose idea of a thorough criminal investigation would go no further than to round up a small clientele of 'usual suspects' and subject them to harsh physical beatings until a confession was given. Such strong-arm tactics do little to further the course of justice and reduce the police to a status not much higher than that of the criminals they are trying to apprehend.

It is in this brutal world that we, the audience, find small town police Detective Park Doo-man (Song Kang-ho), the first of the film's two boorish protagonists who is assigned to the case following the discovery of the second murder victim. He is a prime example of the previously mentioned strong-arm old school police officers; a man who has lived his whole life in the town and is, by all accounts, totally unsuited at the job of modern law enforcement or to the rank of detective. From a political perspective, Doo-man's ill-deserved position of authority could perhaps be Bong's attempt to outline what Daniel Tudor describes as "the stubbornly persistent culture of corruption" inherent in Korean politics which has in turn led to "a culture of patronage" and nepotism where officials are presented with positions of authority regardless of whether they are deserving of the power afforded to them (Tudor, 2012: 160-161). Whilst many psychologists would argue that a good

criminologist would naturally develop similar psychological traits to that of a criminal, major crimes such as homicide demand an investigator with sharp wits and a keen, calculating mind (especially when serial killers are involved). Doo-man has neither of these qualities and, if left to his own devices, would have absolutely no hope of solving the case at all.

The most notable aspect of Doo-man's harsh interrogation methods is that they bare more than one resemblance to *Peppermint Candy*. In much the same vein to Im Kwon-taek's celebrated 1980s political drama, *Memories of Murder* makes a major point of exhibiting the way in which local authorities would use shoestring evidence in order to cruelly victimise the mentally handicapped. On several occasions, Doo-man attempts to extract a false confession from the same mentally challenged local boy, beating him half to death in the process, and only becoming infuriated when the poor boy continues to maintain his ignorance. Much like Gavin Hood's *Rendition* (2009) or Jim Sheridan's *In the Name Of The Father* (1993), the purpose of these images is to emphasize the sheer ridiculousness of trying to torture an honest confession from some one who is clearly innocent - a tack often used by secret police in the treatment of political dissidents. In such contexts, it is not so much a question of whether the right person is charged, so long as someone is charged in prompt fashion.

Consequently, when word of the murders reaches Seoul, the government sends their own investigator; KCIA affiliated Detective Seo Tae-yoon (Kim Sang-Kyung). Younger, smarter and trained in both forensic procedure and criminal psychology, Detective Seo represents the newer more modern school of policing. This school took off worldwide during the late 1980s and eventually usurped the older more physical

brand of law enforcement.[31] Being a skilled criminologist, Seo is able to identify clues and key pieces of evidence in a far more orderly and structured fashion than Doo-man. However, Tae-yoon also falls short of achieving the necessary acumen needed to solve the murder case on the grounds that he is under strict orders to follow procedure and consequently refuses to indulge in any conduct which would deviate from this course. Forensic knowledge is all very well and good, but if one is not willing to bend and break rules in order to put that knowledge into practice in the field then it has little value beyond the realms of academic trivia. This is also not helped by the fact that Detective Seo's position and status make him a slave to beauraucracy. He takes no course of action without first requesting clearance to do so and as such his behaviour retards the progress of the investigation just as much as Doo-man, possibly more so.

Thus, from first meeting, the partnership of Detectives Tae-yoon and Doo-man is doomed to failure. This *L.A. Confidential* type coupling of good cop/bad cop is so tragically dire a combination because the division between the two detectives is too vast. Neither is prepared to make concessions for the other and the two of them spend more time bickering in the squad room like school children than they do out in the field searching for clues to the killer's identity. Doo-man detests Seo's convoluted psychoanalytic investigative theories and his indecisive nature when there is clear need to curb public hysteria by making an urgent arrest; whilst Seo is continually appalled by Doo-man's bullying, belligerent excuse of 'police work' and the nonsensical 'hunches' he formulates as the killer's identity. At one point, Doo-man suggests that the killer would be a Buddhist monk purely on the grounds that he is without hair. Furthermore, Tae-yoon frequently finds himself having to restrain Doo-

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[31] This issue was previously touched upon in earlier Hollywood films such as *Lethal Weapon 4*.

man during his more violent moments. This becomes an escalating problem as the film progresses and reaches fever pitch in Act Three when confronting their prime suspect: an introverted recluse named Hyeon-gyu (Park Hae-il) who lives alone and within the jurisdiction of the murders. Interestingly; in his interview with Jung Ji-youn, Bong confesses that he likens this character to his younger self, describing himself as "the person who quietly read a book or drew a picture in the corner" (Jung, 2008). Extreme introverts of this nature are often mistaken for possessing some kind of mental or learning impairment, e.g. autism, and therefore are often treated with a similar regard.[32]

In some respects, this critical lack of cohesion between the two detectives could be emblematic of the chaotic disorder that is often prevalent in South Korean politics. To quote Daniel Tudor:

> Korean politics is…beset with deep divisions based on regional, age-based and left-right ideological lines. These divisions encourage extreme shifts in policy whenever the other side gains the upper hand, and they inspire politicians to play to the gallery for votes rather than engage in major debate.
>
> (Tudor, 2012:163)

Relating Tudor's description of Korean politics to the possibility of a microcosmic allegory, the divisions between Doo-Man and Seo adopt an even deeper layer, especially with regard to the matter of "playing to the crowd" (Tudor, 2012: 163).

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[32] A recent example of this can be found in Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* where Edward is arrested for breaking and entering but is later released without any charges because the local police believe that his is mentally challenged.

Doo-man in particular cares far more about getting a confession from potential suspects than he does from actually finding the killer or seeing that justice is properly served.

The sad irony is that this act of holding back Doo-man and going by the book is the very thing that allows the killer to slip away. In the dramatic climax of the film, Doo-man and Tae-yoon confront the suspected killer at an old disused train tunnel. Doo-man wants to exact his own brand of justice right then and there but Tae-yoon stops him from doing so on the grounds that it would erase the moral high ground needed for them to be seen as an institution of justice. Whilst the two are bickering, the suspect is allowed time to flee into the shadows of the tunnel and thus evade apprehension. The saddest irony is of the whole ordeal is that the polarizing attitudes of the two protagonists inadvertently encourage them to ignore the obvious. Neither party realises that all the while they were so painfully close to catching the killer since both remain oblivious to the fact that each of the murders are opportunistic and random in nature.

Another intriguing element to consider in *Memories of Murder* is Doo-man's right-hand man, Sergeant Shin Dong-chul (Song Jae-ho). The character is little more than a hired heavy with a badge: a man who not only enjoys the power and authority that comes from wielding a police badge and baton but actively feeds off the violence to which he is subjected by the job. As a thinly-stated side narrative, Dong-chul is assigned the task of policing and ultimately quelling student riots and popular protests within the vicinity of the town. He performs his task with true relish and boasts about how much he enjoys being able to brutalize people for a living. This is until the final third of the film where he is damaged by an IED and is consequently forced to have his leg amputated. In one fell swoop, Bong paints the versatility of life in its ability to

transform bullies into victims in the blink of an eye. Perhaps this is intended to argue the case of young men who go off to war only to return to the world disabled and disfigured, crushed by their inability to actively work or contribute to society any more. Regardless, following the amputation Dong-chul is a broken man and quickly slips into obscurity where once he had been centre stage.

Finally, one must also consider the position within the narrative of the one character that has not yet been mentioned: the killer himself. This character is problematized by the fact that it has no real physical form, much like the killers of similarly themed Hollywood police procedural thrillers, *Zodiac* (2007) and *The Black Dahlia* (2006). Audiences are provided the requisite silhouettes and first person perspective shots of the killer to identify that there is indeed a nocturnal predator butchering young girls but is never seen. Even in the film's ironic twist ending; where several years later an aged and retired Doo-man chances across the real killer nostalgically frequenting the final murder scene, there is no closure. The most likely possibility is that the Killer was never the subject of the film to begin with. Rather the story was designed to focus on the numerous problems and in-fighting within the administrative departments of South Korean society. Hence, if the Killer represents anything at all, then it is the ever present threat of North Korea, the shapeless Red Death whose masque brings doom upon all it visits but pales in comparison to the far greater tensions happening within South Korea's own judiciary.

So what to make of *Memories of Murder* from the perspective of masculinity studies? Is it a simple case of two men from different strata of the same institution failing to achieve their common goal because they are far too busy posturing in an infantile attempt to outdo each other? If there is any major message to be gleaned from the film then it is the same argument posed by Michel de Certeau in his book

Culture and The Plural that men can debate, legislate and negotiate real life sociological issues until the end of time but can never truly inspire change unless decisive physical action is taken (Certeau, 1997: 29-36). As previously mentioned the reason why the Killer was allowed to evade apprehension by Doo-man and Seo was due solely to their failure to work as a cohesive unit. This issue of cohesion is a key theme in Bong's films and is emphasized in even greater detail in his follow-up film, *The Host*.

The Host **(2006)**

Three years after the release of Memories of Murder, Bong Joon-ho he succeeded in surpassing the reputation of Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* for highest grossing Korean film with *The Host* – a delightfully demented monster movie which encapsulated both the problems of being a divided nation, the intrusive self-righteousness of foreign influence and the uniting power of *undongkwon* ("the movement sphere") spirit which swept the country during the 1980s student movement.

The Host sets its story on the banks of Seoul's Han River – a popular tourist destination - where mentally handicapped dead-beat dad Park Gang-du (Song Kang-ho) lives with his aged father (Park Hie-bong) and his daughter, Hyun-seo (Ko Ah-sung), in the back of a mobile shop. Inexplicably, the river bank erupts into chaos one day when an evolutionary abomination emerges from the depths of the Han and abducts Hyun-seo, forcing Gang-du to rally his estranged siblings; Nam-joo (Bae Du-na), an Olympic level archer and Nam-il (Park Hae-il) a former chemistry student who fought in the liberation riots, to rescue Hyun-seo before the monster devours her.

The screenplay, written by Bong and co-writer Baek Chul-hyun, was originally inspired by a news story which exposed the dumping of formaldehyde into the Han River by a US chemical research company (an event recreated during the opening scene) but also touches on several other contemporary political themes such as endemic containment-as –social control. Over the course of the past decade, the world has been struck by a number of potentially fatal cross-species diseases, mostly prevalently the SARS epidemic of 2003 and the swine flu pandemic of 2009. Bong re-creates a similar situation for his own political motives in *The Host* when the US government attempt to police the situation by quarantining those who witnessed the attack as carriers of a non-existent virus and cordoning off the area around as a 'forbidden zone' (a microcosmic analogy of the DMZ). Through this plot line, Bong expresses a common political complaint. Whilst consensuses in many countries show exception toward Washington in its self-righteous quest to police the world, South Koreans hold a far deeper bitterness. Washington's repeated intrusion in Korean domestic affairs has been one of the largest contributors in hindering the peninsula's unification through its zero tolerance policy toward Pyongyang.

The American occupying forces who issue the quarantine also represent the oppressive military governments of South Korea's past. Most notably, the administration of Chun Doo-hwan who, through such violent shows of force as the massacre of Gwangju, sought to quell any opposition to their authority. Accordingly, when Gang-du is caught trying to sneak into the 'forbidden zone' he is placed under military arrest and is taken to be lobotomised. Thankfully, he escapes by taking one of the containment team hostage and continuing his search for Hyun-seo. The intriguing thing about this pivotal segment of the film is that following his capture, an American scientist attempts to question Gang-du about why he was trespassing in the forbidden

zone with the help of a Korean-American translator. Unable to vividly articulate his case of affairs, Gang-du's cryptic explanation falls on deaf ears and is dismissed as the result of some rare dementia. Assuming that Gang-du cannot speak English, the two American scientists then begin to have a private conversation right in front of Gang-du where it is revealed that the virus is a hoax. This audacity proves to be detrimental when Gang-du re-iterates what was said, proving that whilst he can not speak English he can understand what's being said and that he may not be so slow after all.

If one is to assume that the film is entirely allegorical, it could be said that the monster represents Korea's long history of violence where, if the forbidden zone symbolises the DMZ, then the monster's lair represents North Korea. Hyun-seo's abduction directly refers to the dilemma of how countless South Korean and Japanese citizens have been kidnapped over the course of the past fifty years and forced to live in North Korea against their will. Perhaps the best known example of this inhumane practice is Yokota Megumi, a Japanese student who, as Gordon G. Chang describes, was abducted along a coastal road at her hometown of Niigata on November 5th 1977. When North Korean representatives were questioned about this occurrence, they denied everything. Megumi's parents pressed the matter further only for Pyongyang to inform them that Megumi was dead and sent them a selection of dismembered body parts, none of which belonging to their daughter (Chang, 2007: 137-154). People have been disappearing in both Japan and South Korea ever since under similar circumstances and has become such a severe humanitarian issue that it has spawned an aid campaign from Amnesty International. If this analogy is to be believed then Bong clearly has a low opinion of North Korea. Represented by a filthy squalid sewer network beneath the bridge of Won-hyo, bleached in a de-saturated palate of blacks

and greys shades, Hyun-seo is forced to hide from the monster in a rusty pipe with a little boy – another of the creature's abductees – where the two of them struggle to maintain hope of a rescue as the possibility that the two of them may starve to death becomes ever more real.

The rest of the Park family is presented in much the same way as the Kang family from Kim Ji-woon's *The Quiet Family* in that they symbolise the director's desire to offer a wide cross section of society; senior citizens (the father), blue-collar workers (Gang-du), athletes (Nam-joo) and academics (Nam-il). Bong's intention was to recreate "the image of ordinary life" which he had witnessed first hand during his time spent doing volunteer work at a small rural farming community (Jung, 2008). It is this focus on ordinary life which lies at the heart of the *undongkwon* ideal, along with the various bickering class divisions which go with it. Darcy Paquet further elaborates on this by suggesting that the family is emblematic of South Korean society over the course of the late Twentieth Century:

> Each character may also be seen as representing a different decade of Korean society:…the 1960s patriarch who struggled to raise a family amidst poverty; Gang-du…who appears mentally affected by the traumas of the 1970s; Nam-il…a Molotov cocktail throwing veteran of the 1980s student movement, now drunk and unemployed; Nam-joo…an amateur competitive archer of the subsequent generation who seems unable to realise her significant potential; and the industrious and level-headed Hyun-Seo, a middle-school student represents the 2000s…

Consequently, the film's main plot focuses on the family's attempts to function as a cohesive unit, much the same as the detectives featured in *Memories of Murder*. Paquet goes on to explain that:

> The family is nothing if not dysfunctional, but the initiative and passion they display in their search forms a stark contrast to the misguided and incompetent efforts of the Korean and US governments to contain the situation. Ultimately, the four bereaved family members spend more time fighting health professionals, military personnel and representatives of the government than the monster itself.
>

With this in mind the film may covertly protest that if these outside groups had not insisted on interfering in what were essentially social problems then the people could rectify them very easily.

The problem therefore lies in the family's inability to get along. Throughout much of the film, the class divisions between the characters severely stunt their progress in finding Hyun-seo, with Nam-joo and Nam-il continually ridiculing Gang-du out of disrespect because he did not have their privileged up-bringing. An irony then that Gang-du would be the one party involved with enough physical power to pose any direct threat to the monster. Despite his mental deficiencies, Gang-du is gifted with ludicrous physical strength. He symbolises what was known during the

student movement as the strength of the minjung (common people) which the students credited as having the biggest impact on social reform. As explained by Lee Nam-hee:

> The minjung discourse involved and presumed the counter-image of others: the military dictatorship, conglomerates, and foreign powers. The combination of the exultation of the *minjung* and the othering of the three forces gave rise in the 1980s to an unprecedented politicization of the students and society.
>
> (Armstrong, 2007:96)

Gang-du is therefore a crucial symbol of the *undongkwon* because he represents the counter balance for everything that dominates society. Not just in Korea but the world over, when one does not have the means to engage with institutions of power (be those means be intellectual, financial, influential etc.) it becomes customary for one to position themselves against those institutions. This is particularly true when one considers the Foucauldian opinion that human societies function primarily on relations of power, since through the collaboration with the minjung, the students were able to create their own form of political power and thus gain the muscle – the legitimacy – needed to challenge General Chun's dictatorship just as Gang-du's strength legitimises Nam-joo and Nam-il in their crusade against the Monster.

In the end *The Host* is far more than a story about a simple man's love for his daughter or the struggle for one family to put an end to their petty differences. As Paquet explains, it marked a pivotal moment within the South Korean film industry:

> *The Host* represents the final maturation of Korean
> Cinema in terms of its growth from a weak, highly
> regulated industry that operated under the governments'
> hand to a competitive globalised business that could turn
> out almost any type of film.
>
> (Paquet, 2009: 406)

More importantly, it is a film about a people united but divided who come together when looming external dangers strip away the layers of trivial nonsense and expose what is really important. In a century punctuated by natural disasters, disaster films like *The Host*, and the similar though less impressive disaster movie *Haeundae* (2009), suggest that such disasters serve a purpose on a global scale (if only for a brief moment) by emphasizing how people are not as different as they may sometimes believe.

Mother (2009)

Among Bong Joon-ho's less credited successes is *Mother*: a rather uneasy little mystery thriller, directly concerned with the difficulties faced by individuals to sometimes recall highly traumatic past events and the responsibility felt by everyday South Koreans toward their Northern counterparts. The film, set in rural South Korea, tells the story of a middle-aged widow (Kim Hye-ja) and of her mentally handicapped son, Do-joon (Won Bin). When a young school girl is found murdered atop one of the roofs in the town, the ineffectual local police force inadvertently fingers Do-joon as their prime suspect and takes him into custody where he is found guilty and sent to

one of the maximum security prisons on the other side of the peninsula. Refusing to

accept that her son, upon who she dotes emphatically, would be capable of something

as beastly and barbarous as first-degree murder, the widow sets out to investigate the

circumstances of the crime in the hope of gaining the evidence needed to clear Do-

joon's name.

As with *Memories of Murder* and *The Host*, Bong's contempt for state

authoritarianism is on display in predictable form throughout the course of *Mother*.

Once again, the director uses the context of the narrative in *Mother* to identify the

tendency of local authorities to resort to quick fixes in order to curb civil unrest. Right

from the moment of his apprehension, it seems as though Do-joon has been set up to

take a fall. His lawyer is inefficient and the police constantly attempt to take

advantage of his mental deficiencies by tricking him into signing a confession without

proper evidence. It is the sort of blatant witch-hunter mentality apparent in classic

McCarthyism, the very sort lamented by Arthur Miller. This could be seen as both as

an oppressive act by an authoritarian power and also as symbolism for the division of

the Peninsula. Certainly, when the Mother visits Do-joon at the prison to interrogate

him about what he knows regarding the events of the murder, there is a clear sense of

division between them, evidenced not only by the thick pane of glass and the table

which partitions mother from son but also by Do-joon's introversy. This once more

relates back to the topic of North Korean abduction, with both Do-joon and the DPRK

government offering only selective snippets of information regarding events and

whereabouts. Of particular relevance is that while Do-joon admits that when he

encountered the girl and was angered by her childish ridicule, he threw a large rock at

her. The crime scene where the murder takes place is a selection of shadowy back

alleys where visibility is extremely poor, especially at dusk, which was about the time

they encountered one another.   It is only at the very end of the film, where Do-joon reveals that girl died as a result of head trauma caused by the rock that the Mother, and indeed the audience, are fully exposed to the shocking truth.

From a critical viewpoint, it is not too far a stretch of the imagination to assume that Do-joon represents North Korea and that his Mother represents the South. If this hypothesis is to be believed then it is a surprising change of heart on Bong's part. Both *Memories of Murder* and *The Host* present North Korea as either hostile or miserable whilst *Mother* seems almost to argue for its defence in light of international scrutiny. The tagline for the English language version of *Mother* reads: *Don't hate my son. I won't stand for it.* This statement may be as reflective of South Korea's attitude to the world in it accusations against North Korea as it is for the Mother protecting Do-joon from the critique of neighbours in her own community. Since the initiation of Kim Dae-jung's *Sunshine Policy* in the late 1990s and especially since his Kim Dae-jung's diplomatic visit to the DPRK in 2000, common South Koreans have repeatedly expressed feelings of compassion toward the people of the North and a strong desire to aid them in their plight. As a consequence of this compassion, South Koreans have launched many an impassioned attack on outsiders who speak ill of those in the DPRK, regardless of whether the North deserves it or not. Gordon G. Chang writes at length how South Korea has repeatedly defended the DPRK from Washington's scrutiny on the world stage since 2000 even in the face of continued hostility from North Korean military forces:

> The outpouring of sentiment in favour of the North following the 2000 summit was matched by a torrent of anti-Americanism. An acquittal by a military tribunal of

two American soldiers for the accidental deaths of two schoolgirls sparked daily protests in 2002 by tens of thousands in Seoul and by multitudes in other cities. Their unfortunate deaths… were considered deliberate by South Koreans. Yet when five of Seoul's sailors were actually gunned down by a DPRK vessel in southern territorial waters in the same month as the girls' fatalities, there were no large scale expressions of outrage. South Korea is a society that has seemingly lost its bearings.

(Chang, 2005: 105)

Perhaps ironically, the incident Chang describes is vaguely referenced in one of the earliest scenes of the film. One mid-afternoon, as the Mother is busy cutting herbs in her the pantry area of her herbal pharmacy, she spies Do-joon crossing the road en route to the store. From out of nowhere, a white Mercedes Benz speeds past, clipping Do-joon with enough force to knock him off of his feet. Concerned for the safety of her son, the Mother rushes over to Do-joon and is relieved to find that he has barely been harmed, only to then discover that she has seriously cut her finger in the distraction.

Furthermore Chang's observation about South Korea's lack of judgement is once again reflected when the police remand Do-joon into their custody. This incident is a direct mirroring of the scene described previously, occurring on the exact same area of the street outside the Mother's pharmacy. Regardless of context – by this point, Do-joon has been reprimanded for vandalizing the car that struck him and has been fingered for the murder of the schoolgirl – the Mother chases after the police

cruiser as though she had just witnessed her son being abducted. Once again, Bong's anti-authoritarian pretensions work to emphasize the unflattering opinion held by a proportion of South Koreans that other First World powers (Washington primarily) blame North Korea for all of their problems in Asia. To quote Gordon G. Chang, since the 2000 summit a large number of South Koreans "viewed North Korea as the victim of a large and despicable power: the United States of America" who had been deliberately kept under-thumb by accusations and repeatedly vilified as a global trouble-maker (Chang, 2005: 105). The scene is presented very much like abduction. No explanation is given to the Mother as to why Do-joon is being arrested. The police simply rough him up a little and stuff him into the back of their car.

This is not to imply that Bong is sympathetic to North Korea. If Do-joon is indeed an allegory of the Kimist regime then he is indeed a figure of ridicule. Do-joon is a timid and introverted soul, due largely to what appears to be a stunted mental age, but is also well known in the town where they live for exhibiting emotional instability. Especially regarding his tendency to fly into a blind rage when he feels that his mental deficiencies are being ridiculed. Like a petulant child, he is constantly seeking attention and trying to protest his own authority when he feels he is being undervalued, even though he may in fact have none to protest in the first place. In the early segments of the film, when his friend Jin-tae ribs him for still being a virgin, Do-joon immediately becomes defensive and demands that Jin-tae accept that he has indeed been with a woman; and he frequently screams at the Mother upon the mere insinuation that he is stupid. These outbursts and wafer-thin protestations of manhood hold about as much water in his society as the childish threats made to the West by the North Korean government, especially when it is feared that the DPRK has lost face on the world stage. This infantile sabre-rattling is compounded further when one

entertains the notion that Do-joon's attack on the golfers (golf is a common allegory in New Korean Cinema for Euro-American opulence) and his vandalism of the Mercedes are microcosmic representations of the armed incursions and missile tests that have recently resumed along the border of the 38th parallel since 2009. None of them posed any immediate threat to the outside world but were serious enough to garner the attention of Washington and cause a diplomatic headache for the South.

It should also be recognized that the Mother is in no way prepared to hear the truth that her son is a murderer until she is forced to accept this fact at the film's conclusion. Throughout the course of the story the Mother is wholly convinced of Do-joon's innocence, even in the face of an eye-witness account of how the murder took place. The Mother's investigations inevitably lead her to an old junk yard in the vicinity of the crime scene where she encounters the owner, a reclusive shabbily dressed elderly gentleman, who apparently witnessed the whole ordeal from the confines of his hut. He tells her that it was indeed Do-joon who was responsible for the murder, which proves to be a traumatic event for the doting parent. Similarly to those who have previously been subject to horrific cases of rape or torture, the Mother loses control of her senses and, in a bout of temporary insanity, murders the old man before burning the junkyard to the ground in order to cover her tracks. In allegorical terms, if the Mother represents South Korea as a nation, then surely this act could be seen as another example of how South Koreans attempt to cover up the ignoble parts of their past. Concurrently, if Do-joon represents North Korea, then it could also be a reflection of the fervour and animosity which many South Koreans harbor toward outsiders who speak ill of their people. Woe betides anyone of non-Korean ethnicity who even denigrates North Koreans in the South. Such conduct is punishable by vicious assaults. Since Kim Dae-jung's diplomatic visit in 2000, the previous them/us

culture of the Cold War has not so much dissipated as it has shifted focus. It is not so much a matter of North against South as it has become Korean against non-Korean. Gordon G. Chang identifies that many South Koreans no longer even recognize the distinction between the two Koreas, thus an attack on one is an attack on all. He writes:

> If anti-Americanism is the reaction to Korea's yesterday, then unification is the nation's hope for tomorrow. We should stand united, Koreans say, as we are people of "one blood"…it is inevitable the at the Korean nation will be reunited, everyone agrees…The twentieth century was a "deliberate plot" against the Koreans, some of them say, and in light of the way things have worked out it's hard to disagree. As great powers – and bad fortune – worked to keep them apart, the Koreans, at least in their version of the past, have struggled to put themselves back together.
>
> (Chang, 2005: 99)

With these factors in mind, it is understandable why many South Koreans would take exception to outsiders attempting to sew the seeds of dissention in their minds. Once Do-joon confesses his wrong doing to the Mother, however, the situation changes. No longer able to convince herself that the charges are lies, the Mother is about to leave Do-joon to his fate when the police reveal that they have found a patsy: another mentally deficient young man with a history of sexual assault and who lives in the vicinity of the junkyard i.e. an even more lucrative target for their witch hunt. This patsy is eventually convicted of the murder and Do-joon is allowed to get off scot-

free. In one final denigration of legal authority, Bong Joon-ho succeeds in showing how under a corrupt legal system, where image and prestige are more important than justice, people are allowed to get away with murder.

Regardless of whether justice has been served or not, the fact remains that a second injustice has been committed in that the Mother has silenced the only witness who could give correct evidence. As any good conspiracy theorist would attest, when the state commits atrocities of this nature, the common practice for dealing with it is to simply cover it up or, better still, to erase any memory of the event from the national psyche. In keeping with this ideal, when Do-joon is released from prison he hands his Mother a box of acupuncture needles which she apparently left in the junk yard. The Mother then inserts one of the needles into an area of her body supposedly capable of erasing short term memories, thus causing all memory of her ordeal to seemingly evaporate. The intriguing thing about this ending is that when Do-joon gives the acupuncture needles, he does so with the advisement to "Be more careful next time." As innocent as these words may seem, they offer the implication that Do-joon perhaps knew about the incident with the old man and of the true circumstances surrounding the burning of the junk yard. More importantly, it places a whole new spin on the story because it suggests that perhaps Do-joon was simply withholding the truth from the Mother. This hypothesis would certainly seem true from the perspective of political allegory; given that North Korea has a long infamous history of denying its atrocities whilst trying to pin the blame on others. In this case, Do-joon attempts to pin the murder on the old man, which is the whole reason why the Mother attends the junk yard in the first place.

Mother is a strange film in many ways. It discusses Korean nationalism in a light seldom considered by outside audiences and one which extends far beyond

simply the desire to reunify; that like a responsible parent, the privileged, more affluent South feels a certain duty of care toward it's afflicted underprivileged Northern counterpart. Throughout the 2000s, the increasing compulsion by the South Korean government to defend the North from international scrutiny has not been an easy policy to follow (and has become increasingly more difficult in light of the North's recent stint of political posturing). It is a labour of love which often yields many detriments, both nationally and globally, but which it is hoped shall one day bear a long and prosperous fruit.

Chapter 5 - Violence, Fantasy and Global Capital in *The Foul King, A Bittersweet Life* and *I Saw The Devil*

Whilst the 1980s focused on cinematic interpretations of masculinity which were inherently recessive, since 2000 the screen image of the Korean male has changed to suit a more globally palatable model. The influence of the chaebol and more importantly the advent of ' planned films' now meant that South Korean film narratives had to hold an appeal not only to local film audiences but needed the potential to generate revenue overseas as well. In accordance with this new market-driven model, representations of the Korean man, Kim notes, underwent a dramatic overhaul. The pathetic male figures which dominated the student era were made to take a backseat and were replaced by a model more akin to Hong Kong cinema. Wretched bodies with crippled limbs were replaced by well-dressed romantic figures who boasted a similarly dominant air of sophistication. For these men, the flaw lay in what Kim Kyung-hyun refers to as 'symbolic lack': personality problems which are tied to histories of violence and are almost hereditary in nature (Kim, 2004: 11-12). This analogy is common for each of the films featured in this chapter, where each time the alienated male protagonist winds up inadvertently hurting himself or others through his actions.

The switch to commercial film making also marked the time when popular film genres were officially introduced into Korean cinema. Lee Hyangjin states that until this period of cinematic renaissance, the question of genre in South Korean film was for the most part a binary choice:

> …the majority of South Korean films seem to cluster
>
> around two major genres: melodrama and social
>
> commentary. These two genres have the most
>
> conspicuous trend in the history of South Korean cinema,
>
> and each comprises a few variations.
>
> (Lee, 1993:57)

These meta-genres of film fit very effectively into the traditional frame work of South Korean culture through the sub-genres of comedy, romance and war. The more abundant of these meta-genres is melodrama due, Lee states, to "the sheer number of productions" and its ability to maintain prolonged popularity among audiences "regardless of the changing circumstances of the film industry" (Lee, 1993:57). The latter of these two reasons is due in no small part to the way it manages to maintain a prolonged audience among feminine demographics for its stories concerning the struggles of women and, in certain cases though not all, the prevalence of highly sexualized scenes of intimacy. In addition to these traditional genres, the increasingly commercial South Korean film industry now is also host to the horror, thriller, gangster and fantasy genres. Traditionally drawing on examples from Hollywood, Moscow and Hong Kong, 2000 also saw the legalisation of Japanese film distribution in South Korea which has had a dramatic impact on the nature of each of these genres.

More importantly, as was seen in Hollywood during the 1970s and 1980s, the introduction of business ethics into Korean film has led to a more capitalistic approach to narratives, content and visual story-telling. Much like the Brady boys fighting about Cheerios and Fruit Loops in *Jaws 2* or the frequent references to Pepsi and Texaco laced throughout Robert Zemekis' *Back to the Future* trilogy, many South

Korean films now find themselves subliminally posing as a means of product placement for the chaebol. This includes (but is not limited to) a blatant close-up of Oh Dae-su's custom built LG cell phone in *Oldboy* and Ji-woo lounging around his apartment in designer Adidas clothes in Kim Ki-duk's *Time*. The complaint is that South Korean cinema purists fear the same cinematic soullessness which has long since afflicted Hollywood and the underlying anxiety that corporate return will usurp artistic integrity and, as Shin Jee-young describes in her essay 'Globalization and New Korean Cinema', reduce South Korea's national culture to a commodity. Shin writes:

> The concept of globalization through Koreanization "a perfect ground for the ongoing commercialization and commodification of 'traditional' culture by the culture industry, while claiming to protect cultural identity from the threats of cultural imperialism or homogenization".
>
> (Shin and Stringer, 2005: 56)[33]

As much as Shin's account may sound like scare-mongering, it carries some degree of truth in that other countries in the region have suffered similar corruptions of their national heritage. This can be largely attributed to what gender theorist Susan Faludi once described as "ornamental culture": a phenomenon that took root in the first world during the aftermath of World War II and which she believes has led to the betrayal of modern man (Faludi, 1999). In his 2004 publication, *Culture Studies: Theory and Practice*, Chris Baker describes ornamental culture:

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[33] Cited as part of Shin Chi-yun and Julian Stringer: *New Korean Cinema* (2005).

> Ornamental culture is a culture of celebrity, image, entertainment and marketing, all underpinned by consumerism. In this context, masculinity becomes a matter of personal display rather than the demonstration of the internal qualities of inner strength, confidence and purpose. Manhood has become a performance game to be one in the marketplace.
>
> (Barker, 2004: 305)[34]

It is this process, for which media institutions (including the film industry) are largely responsible, that has aided the erosion and dissolution of first world manhood over the course of the twentieth century. In Faludi's 1999 book, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of The American Man*, she explains how ornamental culture (among several other key factors) heralded the decline of post-WWII American patriarchy by creating a scenario where "the boy who had been told that he was going to be the master of the universe and all that was in it found himself master of nothing" (Faludi, 1999: 30). The loss of meaning and growing sense of nihilism caused by this betrayal is becoming a serious problem for the West in the 21st Century and is causing widespread social upheaval in the 2010s through the rise of both the Alt-Right and militant Islamic terror groups; and the election of power-hungry populist oligarchs to high levels of office. Similarly in Asia, the Japanese culture industry has been diluted by American values and capitalist ideologies following World War II. Whilst managing to maintain many of their own traditions and ideals, the resulting

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[34] Cited in Chris Barker's *Culture Studies: Theory and Practice* (2004)

commoditization of Japanese culture has left the island nation in an isolated position – too American to ever be truly Asian but too Asian to ever truly be Western.

South Korea suffers a similar problem through the promotion of its culture industry as well. In *The Evil Demon of Images* Jean Baudrillard complained at length about the sterilizing powers of uncontrolled capitalism by referencing his experiences of Disney's Main Street USA, stating that it was the prerogative of capitalists to make every town and country exactly the same (Baudrillard, 1987). The same can be said of East-Asian cinema, given that on its surface level there is nothing to distinguish a South Korean gangster film from a Hong Kong action movie or a Japanese Yakuza film. Consequently, there has been a through-line since the start of 2000 where the culturally specific elements of South Korean cinema have suffered significant dilution. By the middle of the 2000s, a significant proportion of South Korea's commercial films could be described more as 'generically Asian' than typically Korean.

It was previously mentioned in the Chapter 1 that Dr. Sun Jung considers these changes, and the changes that followed this period in the 2010s, to be reflective of the new-found affluence accrued by as "a new middle class" emerging throughout the continent and its "economic power as a new consumer group" (Jung, 2011: 31). Therefore, the focus of many modern Asian culture industries is to cater to these new cross-national markets instead of simply their own audiences.[35] This is especially the case with the increase of fantasy films entering the market during the latter part of the decade, many of which were indistinguishable from the similarly themed fantasy

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[35] In the early 2010s, this focus on Asian markets also became a primary goal of Hollywood studies as well, with Chinese investors purchasing many of the major film studios and shifting the focus on mainstream content to suit Chinese audiences and adhere to Chinese socio-political values.

pieces of Japan, Hong Kong and China.[36] Contemporary reception studies theorist Lee Kee Hyeong identifies that by 2004, The Korean Wave had generated a net worth of 1.4 Million Won, and that all facets of society was embracing it as a legitimate cultural phenomenon throughout East Asia, with the proliferation of Korean produced films, TV shows and celebrity endorsements becoming commonplace:

> In Asia these days one is bound to see a dramatic increase in things Korean from television dramas to pop stars: there are successive news stories and enough media coverage of popular Korean stars visiting neighbouring countries for promotional tours, having concerts and performing in joint productions, and appearing in foreign TV ads, and of Asian youth chanting the Korean names of these stars during their visits or creating online and offline fan clubs etc.
>
> (Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008:178)

This permeation of South Korean culture into mainstream Asian media could be said to lead to a new homogenized "Asian" cultural model that for commercial reasons is carries as many shades of Hong Kong, Singaporean, Vietnamese and Thai culture as it does South Korean.[37] It should be recognized, however, that this burgeoning crisis

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[36] A prominent Korean example of this dilemma is Kim Young-jun's *Shadowless Sword* (2005). The film is a very generically 'Asian' affair which bears many resemblances to both Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002), and Ten Shimoyama's *Shinobi: Heart Under Blade* (2005).

[37] Lee Kee Hyeong emphasises that The Korean Wave proved most popular in these countries, due in part to the fact that (in case of Singapore and Hong Kong) South Korean films filled the void left by the decline of Hong Kong. Japan, while readily enjoying the cultural products afforded by the Korean Wave (soap operas especially) is probably not listed because of its close cultural appropriation of America's culture industry which it assimilated into its own.

did not go wholly unnoticed. Lee Hyangjin notes that in the early to mid stages of the

South Korean film industry's shift towards commodity culture, there was some

attempt by a small number of film makers to address the issue directly:

> A group of films made in the 1980s and 1990s were
> concerned with the materialism and moral decay that
> pervaded contemporary Korean society. The
> representative works include Kim Hoson's *Three Times
> Shortly, Three Times Long* (1981), Pak Ch'olsu's *Mother*
> (1985), Chung Sonu's and Sonu Wan's *Seoul Jesus* and
> Pak Chongwan's *Our Twisted Hero* (1992).
>
> (Lee, 2000: 60-61)

Additionally, a significant number of Buddhist films also began to emerge during this

period as well e.g Im Kwon Taek's *Mandala* (1981) or Chang Sonu's *Passage to

Buddha* (1994). According to Shin, these films chiefly concerned the lives of

Buddhist Monks and or teachings from Buddhist doctrines and sought to "investigate

the psychological and emotional insecurities that plague Koreans living in the hectic

modern world" (Lee, 2000: 61). Though precious few in number, these sociological

films are undoubtedly crucial to discerning the effects of modernity on a society's

people and on its gender norms, especially when one considers that such insecurities

can help to weaken a nation's gender primacy by shaking the confidence of

individuals in being able to emulate the standards promoted through the media and

authoritarian capitalism.

Almost prophetically, the exponential rate of success affecting the New Korean cinema movement came to a grinding halt in the late 2000s when the bubble finally burst. Daniel Tudor outlines this disaster in great detail:

> By 2005, the increasing popularity of Korean films around Asia, particularly in Japan, had led to inflated actor salaries and focus on simply securing the most famous stars, rather than making good films…This phenomenon resulted in an overall decline in quality and an eventual backlash from the countries that had begun to look to Korea as a cultural innovator.
>
> (Tudor, 2012: 234)

What Tudor has explained is that the fears predicted by the film industry's purists became a self-fulfilling prophesy. Film-making is one of the biggest gambles a person can make in business. Its sales go through boom and bust periods far more vigorously than other markets and as such there is always a strong competitive drive to create financially lucrative products capable of maintaining demand. Hollywood developed the grounding for this commodity system of film making in the latter part of the 1980s but it wasn't until the 2000s that the industry began to witness serious decline in cinema which was first and foremost artistic. This was due largely to the fact that economic rationalism over the past twenty years has led to a fundamental shift in the studio system where it is no longer creative innovators and artists but accountants and financiers who hold the reigns of the studios. Modern films now cater toward generating the biggest possible box office sales in the first two weeks of

release only and for this reason the replay value of these films in often slim to none. For a national industry like South Korea, a position such as this would prove disastrous. Using Darcy Paquet's anology that "the middle [was] falling out of the industry", Tudor relates at length about the numerous losses incurred by the South Korean film industry following the burst of the bubble not just overseas but domestically as well, and just how far it had caused the industry to regress:

> This took the industry back to where it was in 2001, when the boom was just getting started…Big hits like *Scandal Makers* (2008) and *Haeundae* (2009) still come along, but the average film struggles to recoup its investment.
>
> (Tudor, 2012: 234)

Tudor also acknowledges that some good has come of this disaster in that it has allowed the South Korean film industry to take stock and undergo what he refers to as "a period of retrenchment" (Tudor, 2012: 235). Even more promising is that Tudor notes how there has been an enormous influx of enrolment numbers at South Korean film schools, with this new generation of film maker occasionally matching the heights of artistic brilliance left in the wake of the hallyu golden age, though generating only a fraction of the commercial profit (Tudor, 2012: 235). He makes very strong reference to Yang Ik-jun's 2009 family drama *Breathless* which won thirteen film awards at international festivals. Furthermore, the success of films like Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden* (2016) and Yeon Sang-ho's *Train To Busan* (2016) during the mid-2010s has since proven that the industry only faltered in the late 2000s rather than failed. As for the innovators who heralded the original golden

age of the early-mid 2000s, many of them have moved on to newer endeavours, with Hollywood snapping up several of the more prominent names from the industry, including Park Chan-wook and the focus of this chapter, Kim Ji-woon.

Kim Ji-woon

During the period of transition toward the market-driven golden age of New Korean cinema, Lee Hyangjin notes that there emerged a new wave of "young, ambitious and iconoclastic film makers who slowly yet surely have garnered a new energy in the existing film community" (Lee, 2005: 61). Of all the modern directors currently in circulation in Korea, the one who has benefited most from this capitalistic Hollywood approach to cinema is director Kim Ji-woon. Kim's career started well before the turn of the century as a theatre director but he increasingly found his niche directing for the screen. Before 2000, Kim had previously found significant success with his post-modern black comedy _The Quiet Family_ (1998). The film centred on a large Korean family operating a boarding house near the 38th Parallel where, ironically, many of its guests wound up dying under suspicious circumstances. Paquet identifies that the film worked due to its multiplicity of marketable elements:

> Shifting back and forth between comedy, suspense and a
> dull sense of dread as the bodies build up, the film exhibits
> a playful, care free attitude at the same time as it shows
> how one act of violence can quickly lead to more.
>
> (Paquet, 2009: 248)

 This downwardly spiralling domino effect displayed by the violence featured in *The Quiet Family* marks the beginning of a consistent through-line in many of Kim's latter films and it is certainly reflected in the latter two films contained in this chapter.

Kim Ji-woon's films are nothing if not heavily stylized and commercially viable. Paquet makes the observation that *The Quiet Family* was among the first South Korean films which adopted a heavily commercial aesthetic and looked markedly different from the cinematically naturalistic films that came before it:

> Shot in rich, saturated colours, the film prioritised the use of lighting and set design to create memorable visual compositions rather than capture the locale in a realistic manner.
>
> (Paquet, 2009: 249)

Paquet notes that the most crucial element in the success of *The Quiet Family*, however, is that it displayed "an eclectic approach to genre" which was revolutionary for the cinema of the late 1990s (Paquet, 2009: 250). He writes:

> The…casual appropriation the juxtaposition of genre conventions – from the lighting effects of Horror to the broad physical movements of slapstick comedy – set it apart from both the commercial and art-house traditions of Korean film making.
>
> (Paquet, 250)

In particular, the screenwriter/director is always meticulous in ensuring that as much extra content be included in the production of his films as possible in order to ensure lucrative and extensive DVD packages. Kim's opinion of the ongoing conflict of interest between art and business in the film industry is typically divided. Like many film makers he believes that whilst a film should hold some form of intrinsic artistic merit, there is also little value in a film that is unable to recoup its expenditure:

> There's always going to be a divide between commercial and artistic films and I think that there are times…when I'd rather just cater to one of them. Ultimately, I make the film I want to make. That's one of my first priorities, and then I work in that direction.
>
> (Smith, 2011)

For this reason, it could be argued, Kim Ji-woon's films also make careful use of recurring cast-members. Every director is known for choosing favourite talents with which to work (Stanley Kubrick with Peter Sellers; Tim Burton with Johnny Depp etc.), however it could be said that Kim Ji-woon does this more prominently than other South Korean directors – possibly due to his theatre background. Along with fellow director Park Chanwook, Kim Ji-woon has most notably been instrumental in the rise to fame of actor Song Kang-ho. Song has starred in a total of four of Kim's eight previous motion pictures and has each time exhibited a different aspect of his range. What should also be noted here is that Kim seldom works with unknown actors, with his scripts always attracting big names to the table. If Kim isn't working

with Song Kang-ho, then he is working with Choi Min-sik. If he is not working with Choi Min-sik, then he is working with Lee Byung-hun.

Kim has a self-evident love of commercial genres, with each of his films belonging to a different genre of film. Comedy, horror, drama, gangster, and thriller: it would seem that no type of film is beyond the range of the director. During a director interview for *Film Maker* Magazine in March 2011, Kim expresses to journalist D. Smith that he believes these genres are representative of the differing fears which exist in life and how "genre is one of the most immediate and adequate ways" for film makers to confront such fears (Smith, 2011). He explains:

> There are many kinds of fears in our lives, and each genre
> of films has a very representative fear that it [represents].
> You could say that sci-fi is the fear of uncertainty,
> melodrama is the fear of losing love or love that may not
> be achieved, horror could be fear of something unseen,
> and thriller or action films could be the fear of violence
> and danger.
>
> (Smith, 2011)

The use of visual imagery tied to genre allows such confrontation to be more palatable. *A Tale of Two Sisters* proves that this point is especially true of the more extreme genres of cinema like Horror and Science-Fiction, since they also allow for the physical representation of complex ideas and issues which may often be tied to many of these fears. In the case of *A Tale of Two Sisters*, the Japanese Horror mimicry helped to convey the inability of North and South to function cohesively as a

nation while the ever present spectre of those relatives and loved ones lost to the division continue to loom over them. Similarly, *The Quiet Family* used the genre aesthetics of Black Comedy as a means of exemplifying the absurd lengths to which Koreans have gone in order to cover up the dirty secrets of their past, often doing more harm than good in the process.

Additionally, Kim Ji-woon's more successful films retain much of the genre attitudes and traits, as could be said for each of the other directors reviewed in this thesis. One of the main reasons that *A Tale of Two Sisters* worked so well as a piece of story-telling was because it felt more like a traditional melodrama and less like a piece of genre horror. The genre conventions in this film are sidelined in favour of a character driven narrative, which Lee Hyang-jin credits as indicative of the classical South Korean melodrama, but at the same time breaks from the generic trend of complicity toward "the prevailing ideas on the male-centred social values" common in earlier melodramas (Lee, 1993: 57). Conforming to the traditional social conventions of South Korean society, South Korean melodramas have a tendency to favour the position of women in largely masculine terms, where male characters still maintain positions of ultimate authority. By turning this gender model on its head, Kim Ji-woon succeeds in providing a modern, globally marketable slant on a distinctly Korean breed of film making. Thus, to quote Julian Stringer, it seeks to identify that the exploration of even the most commercial genre films in South Korean cinema involves "embarking on a journey on a long and winding road" that often does not end in the expected destination (Shin and Stringer, 2005:102).[38] Furthermore, as Stringer mentions:

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[38] Taken from Julian Stringer's "Putting Korean cinema in its place: Genre Classifications and the contexts of reception", part of Shin and Stringer – *New Korean Cinema* (2005)

> …the meaning of a film genre is never fixed but rather
>
> contingent upon circumstances of reception.
>
> (Shin and Stringer, 2005:102)

This being the case, simply because a film is marketed within the category of a certain genre, it does not necessarily mean that it will be read as part of that genre by every audience and every generation. Regarding Hollywood genre films, the Gothic fiction adaptations made by Universal in the 1930s and 1940s were considered Horror films upon their release and were marketed as such, though by today's standards audiences treat them more as social dramas about the various prejudices apparent in post-World War I society. Similarly, *A Tale of Two Sisters* was successful in rising beyond its genre labelling partially through its differing receptions by its various audiences. In addition to being a genre film to attract younger viewers, it also holds both social and political connotations which can also be read vividly by more mature audiences.

To some degree, this is true of all of Kim Ji-woon's films. In spite of the genre pretensions, Kim Ji-woon's later films especially refer to deep social commentary, not just for Korean society but for the wider audience at large. Shin notes that many film makers of Kim Ji-woon's generation still manage to consider a deeper context beyond his film's genre pretensions, most crucially for the way in which his films often "seek to express the moralistic chaos in the pursuit of individualistic lifestyles against the psychological burden from the society and history" (Shin and Stringer, 2005: 62). A shade of this idea is apparent in most of Kim Ji-woon's films. *The Quiet Family* discussed not only how Koreans dealt with living with a violent past but also explored how it feels for many of them to be victims of unfortunate circumstances far beyond the control of ordinary society. *A Tale of Two*

Sisters discussed the unfulfilled longing for a lost motherland and the anguish felt at having to having to live under the protection of a patriarchal nation which often failed to act in times of strife. The issues of social commentary are perhaps best discussed in the two latter films of this chapter, *A Bittersweet Life* and *I Saw The Devil*, that explore the nature of pop culture and high culture in film respectively and, more importantly, how cinema often fails to identify the true nature of the issues portrayed therein.

***The Foul King* (2000)**

In 2000, Kim Ji-woon followed up on *The Quiet Family* by once more teaming up with Song Kang-ho for this very strange off-beat comedy about an investment banker who attempts to escape his humdrum lifestyle by leading a double life as a professional wrestler. Not so much a wrestling picture as it is a coming-of-age story; *The Foul King* uses the pseudo-sport to emphasize the prominent role of prevailing male fantasies in the modern world. In a review for *Asianmovieweb.com*, Manfred Selzer explains that the crux of the film runs far deeper than simply talking about the art form:

> Despite the obvious wrestling plot the movie actually
> deals about Dae-ho as your typical midlife crisis
> candidate. Being quite timid and without any perspective
> in life as it comes and thus is a pitiable being. His
> sometimes childish character, however, makes it easy for
> the viewer to sympathize with him. It's entertaining to

accompany him on his road to becoming an "adult" who, before anything else gets one important thing: self-esteem.

(Selzer, 2007)

Whilst other films have discussed the difficulties faced by those who work in the medium far more effectively, Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler* (2009) for example, *The Foul King* does however succeed in capturing the medium's absurdity of performance, especially with regard to how drastically it deviates from real life.

Professional wrestling is perhaps the most extreme form of simulacrum in modern media. Whilst it has at times been referred to as 'sports-entertainment', the medium is in fact a very distinct variety of performance art, projecting a burlesque though no less prevalent form of hegemonic masculinity that is reminiscent of Ancient Roman gladiators. In the July 2006 edition of *Sex Roles*, Danielle Soulliere mentions that:

As both a pseudo-sport and part of mainstream entertainment popular culture, the messages concerning masculinity presented by televised professional wrestling may serve as important cultural indicators of what being a man is all about.

(Soulliere, 2006: 2)

Soulliere later goes on to argue that gender theorists like Stroud (2001) have mentioned how the codes apparent in professional wrestling "may be even more

extreme in constructing masculinity than the so-called conventional sports" (Soulliere, 2006:3). Much like other forms of male child/teen orientated pop culture, such as comic books and blockbuster films, the function of pro-wrestling is to provide an outlet for the pent-up frustrations of fans by playing to their childhood fantasies, allowing them to live out their inner most desires vicariously through the drama in the ring. The media is also known for exhibiting in a 'macho' culture where physical dominance and extroversion are the dominantly promoted values. When compared to the highly regimented, gentrified and ultimately meek world of corporate banking, the simulacra of extreme protest masculinity of professional wrestling seem almost polarizing, and offer obvious appeal to someone of Dae-ho's mild mannered, subservient sensibilities whose days are spent in customer service and clerical administration, which are traditionally seen as feminine tasks.[39]

Donning a mask similar to his old hero, Ultra Tiger Mask, Dae-ho uses the guise of Foul King to transform himself from an introverted loser into an outrageous though comical fan favourite. Under the guise of this new alter-ego, Dae-ho channels the reaction of the fans and discovers a confidence he never knew he had. Whereas his timid regular self would shy away from fights, as Foul King, Dae-ho boldly welcomes confrontations with open arms; biting his way out of headlocks, stabbing opponents with forks, publicly boasting about his greatness and dressing as an Elvis impersonator for an in-ring sample of his vocal range. In the most extreme cases Dae-ho even manages to perform a moonsault, one of the hardest and most difficult of all the high-flying manoeuvres, with so much ease that it seems almost like child's play. This issue is made even more impressive by the knowledge that, as Selzer mentions, Song performs all the film's stunts himself without the need for CGI or camera

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[39] Protest masculinity shall be discussed in greater detail later in this thesis.

effects, implying that the experience may have been as much of a confidence booster for the actor as it was for the character (Selzer, 2007). In his analysis of *The Foul King*, Paquet mentions that the majority of the film's appeal came as a result of Song's dichotomous performance:

> It was in this performance, which encompassed everything from acrobatic stunts in the wrestling ring to abject humiliation in the office, that Song first displayed the emotional depth that would characterise his later roles.
>
> (Paquet, 2009: 250)

The development of Song's performance throughout the film is not surprising to wrestling fans, however. It is common knowledge that Pro-Wrestlers are often likened more to actors than sportsmen: not only do they have to constantly indulge in the physically strenuous process of 'competition' but they are also required to rigorously cultivate their own image and learn scripted dialogue, much like an actor would need to cultivate his/her character in a fiction drama.[40]

It is also important to discuss how the performance affects Dae-ho's personality at large. When compared with Dae-ho's weak, flaccid, subservient everyday personality; the larger-than-life presence of The Foul King would therefore offer major boosts to his ego and sense of self-worth. Personality traits like introversion and passivity inadvertently give way to self-loathing and worthlessness, especially in those individuals who have suffered traumatic ridicule or humiliation in the face of failure. Naturally, therefore, there is an incentive for the individual to

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[40] This dialogue is seldom well written.

favour the more dominant, performative persona over the recessive realistic one in spite of the fact that the performative persona is erroneous. This element is ultimately used by Kim Ji-woon as the primary source of the film's comedy by tying it irrevocably to the white tiger mask. It is a well established psychological principle that the wearing of masks and other disguises can act as psychological shields to protect the ego of a performer but Kim Ji-woon takes it to the extreme by making the mask seem almost like a comfort blanket. Unable to otherwise summon up the confidence necessary to face stressful situations, Dae-ho takes to wearing the mask away from the ring, even going so far as to wear it on a date with the Coach's daughter.

This issue is directly tied to the film's other major character: Dae-ho's Boss. If Dae-ho is the Baby Face (hero wrestler) in this scenario, then his Manager is very much the Heel (villain wrestler). His character is reminiscent of a specific kind of Heel known as the 'blackheart' that seeks to inspire fear and loathing from the audience through many despicable means; blatantly violating the rules, attacking opponents outside of match confines, causing deliberate injury and sometimes even threatening or intimidating fans/commentators. Dae-ho's Boss does all of these things and more, even going so far as to trap Dae-ho in a headlock as punishment for being late for work - Dae-ho describes it as the "Headlock of Horror", imbuing it with the connotations of a Heel's signature move (Kim, 2000). His tyrannical behaviour and bullying physical presence carries more than one shade of World Wrestling Entertainment Chairman Vince McMahon, who throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s cast himself as Arch-villain of his own TV franchise in an over-the-top burlesque of his own tyrannical business acumen. In similar fashion to Vince McMahon, who frequently dished out cruel and often humiliating punishments to

'Face' characters like Stone Cold Steve Austin, Mankind and The Rock with total impunity; so does Dae-ho's Manager brazenly put his hands on Dae-ho in anger without ever considering that under workers' rights legislation, Dae-ho could quite legitimately sue him for assault.

So, why does Dae-ho's Manager get away with treating him so shamefully? The reasons for this could be two-fold. First, one must consider the context of the situation. It has already been discussed that under the codes of Korea's business culture, superiors are expected to be considered father figures to younger employees. However, the issue of such abusive treatment puts a whole new slant on the scenario. His ill treatment of Dae-ho is perhaps intended as a metaphor about the abuse of corporate power and how low-level workers are consequently mistreated as a result of this abuse. What has not been discussed with regard to this clash of cultures – business and pro-wrestling – is that the latter does not take into account that society conditions individuals toward those humble, submissive, recessive positions in order to ensure that they will perform their role in society. Kim Kyung-hyun briefly touches on *The Foul King* in the notes of *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, explaining that the film is contextually relevant given its release in the midst of South Korea's turn-of-the century economic crisis. He recalls that during the recession, to quote Kim, bank employees were expected "to play by the old and corrupt rules" (Kim, 2004: 306 n. 10). Even though modernity allows nations to welcome a variety of new and alternative cultural ideals, older institutions like banks have still clung to tried and tested forms of hierarchal business culture. Under such codes, when an individual develops enough of an ego to start resisting the whims of management, they become counter-productive to the organization and therefore detrimental to its functions.

The second possibility is that it fits the narrative more effectively. All things considered, the script for *The Foul King* reads very much like the sort of thin-skinned hero/villain narrative commonly found on TV wrestling shows. None of the characters beyond Dae-ho are really explored, making it feel as though Dae-ho is little more than a heroic underdog striving against the evils of the world at large to emerge victorious, if at least in his own eyes. At the end of the film once he's released from hospital following the beating he receives during his last match, Dae-ho is confronted by his manager in the car park. The manager is noticeably displeased, having witnessed the match on television the previous evening, and it seems almost as though Dae-ho is going to stand his ground. The audience is treated to a tense showdown between the two of them – complete with clichéd spaghetti western music - where Dae-ho raises his fists in preparation to fight, only for him to charge forward and anti-climatically trip over his own feet, landing in a subservient heap at the manager's feet. At this point, it seems that Dae-ho has reverted back into the man-child he was at the start of the film - until he is witnessed in the final shot: Dae-ho once more in his business suit on his way to his job, smiling confidently in contentment with the knowledge that he is who he is.

Perhaps his cathartic journey is symbolic of South Korea as a nation. The entire film may simply be one large allegory about how the country emerged from the subservient darkness of military occupation into one of the major players of Asia. This opinion is left to individual interpretation. However, what can be said is that if *The Foul King* does indeed discuss the Seoul film industry's rise to economic and cultural supremacy in East Asia, it could equally be argued that Kim Ji-woon would later go on to metaphorically discuss the industry's premature self-destruction with his gangster epic, *A Bittersweet Life*.

A Bittersweet Life (2006)

Following his ascent to international recognition with *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2004), Kim Ji-woon's follow up took the director's skills for market-driven imitation and applied them to the highly lucrative gangster genre. Inspired by films like *Scarface* (1983) and *L'Samurai*; it tells the story of Sun-woo (Lee Byung-hun), a criminal underboss who manages an upmarket restaurant in Seoul's entertainment district. One day Sun-woo is assigned by his boss to watch over the boss's much younger wife, whom he suspects of having an affair, and is told to kill her if this suspicion is revealed to be true. When the inevitable happens, Sun-woo disobeys his boss's orders and helps the wife to escape only to find himself cast out from the syndicate and marked for death.

Aesthetically, *A Bittersweet Life* is a quintessential example of modern Korean cinema complete with the full plethora of marketable elements; a handsome, immaculately dressed protagonist; a high octane storyline, heavy action sequences. The film ticks all of these boxes nicely. It is in many respects as much a tribute to the neo-noirs of John Dahl as it is to any action or gangster movie, bearing more than one likeness to such films as *Blood Simple* (1984), *Pulp Fiction* (1994) or Dahl's own *Red Rock West* (1993), especially considering that it centres on a moralistic male character whose troubles are brought upon him by a woman. Genre pretensions aside, the biggest draw to *A Bittersweet Life* is Lee Byung-hyun, whose performance as Sun-woo is the driving force behind the entire narrative. In his review of *A Bittersweet Life* in 2005, *FarEastFilms.com* critic Andrew Skeates described Lee's performance thus:

Lee Byung-hyun brings an understated intensity to his

character, able to defend his life at one moment and then

lost of words when presented with a beautiful woman the

next. His Sun-woo character is the picture's heart, a man

once turned cold now warming up to life again. Never

cocky but confident, never showy but capable of getting

"the job" done, Sun-woo brings an emotional core to the

film and to the type of character that rarely gets a chance

to be human.

(Skeates, 2015)

As Skeates' review states, through Sun-woo, the iconography of Lee Byung-hyun

paints a bold picture of metro-sexual South Korean masculinity. Externally, he is the

sort of man whom women would want to be with and whom other men would want to

emulate. However, he is also afflicted with symbolic lack which eventually consumes

him like a virus. Much like Soo-hyun, the character that Lee would later play in *I Saw

The Devil* (2010), Sun-woo lets his emotions intrude to the point that they usurp his

reason. It is uncertain as to whether it is sympathetic compassion or lustful infatuation

which inspires him to aid the escape of the mob boss's wife and when he is subjected

to the inevitable reprisal – the rest of the syndicate attempts to bury him alive at a

construction site – his desire for retribution twists and perverts reality to suit his own

boyhood fantasies.

Additionally, *A Bittersweet Life* could also mark the greatest example in Kim

Ji-woon's body of work, and indeed this thesis, of the Jungian correlation between

reality and fantasy with regard to human perception. As the film progresses the events

become more and more recognizably generic, working to the same principle as Edgar Wright's action/comedy *Hot Fuzz* (2006). Though distinctly different films in comparison, both share the plot twist of starting out as engaging character pieces but deliberately degenerating into generic violence by the final reel. With regard to this increasingly fantastical plot, it is important to expand on Jung's theory that human beings frequently imitate, emulate and in many cases liken their own lives to fictional narratives and characters. In his *Jung Lexicon* (1990), Daryl Sharp refers to Jung's assertions in *The Technique of Differentiation*, that the escalating invasion of unconscious fantasies into the real world sphere can dramatically alter the perception, and even the very personality, the subject:

> Continual conscious realization of unconscious fantasies, together with active participation in the fantastic events, has … the effect firstly of extending the conscious horizon by the inclusion of numerous unconscious contents; secondly of gradually diminishing the dominant influence of the unconscious; and thirdly of bringing about a change of personality. [CW 7, par. 358]
>
> (Sharp, 1990)

This principle has been widely explored through a diverse number of late 20th Century films e.g. *Brazil*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *Pan's Labyrinth*, and is a very enlightening insight into many of the films explored in this thesis. In particular, Jung's theories place a strong emphasis on the way in which human beings liken themselves to characters in fictional narratives. In David Cronenberg's *A Dangerous Method* (2011),

a dramatized version of Jung (played by Michael Fassbender) explored this principle by likening his affair with former patient and student, Sabina Spielrein, to Germany's legend of *Siegfried*. In much the same way it is not wholly uncommon for young men in the modern world to fantasize and even emulate such characters as Rambo or Sherlock Holmes. This is an idea with which film makers themselves are not wholly unfamiliar and often pursue this idea through their own works for the purpose for scrutiny. South Korea is no exception to this Jungian hypothesis as the character of Sun-woo clearly attests.

Cho Eunsun elaborates further on this point by mentioning how gender primacy can be re-affirmed by colonized subjects, at least in their own minds, through emulation and imitation of their colonizers. She writes:

> The colonized male who is feminized and disempowered by the colonizer fantasizes his empowerment through mimicry of the image of the colonizer, believing that he can recuperate his masculinity through imitation. Through this imitation, he attempts to compensate for his impaired authority to sustain his belief in the power that has been granted to him by patriarchal society.
>
> (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005: 109)

In accordance with Cho's gender hypothesis, Sun-woo attempts to reclaim much of his lost masculine honour through the gender emulation of his favourite Hollywood characters. Just as Michel likens himself to Humphrey Bogart in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1967), so does Sun-woo increasingly liken himself to Tony Montana and

Dirty Harry in spite of the fact that the difference between fact and fiction denies those imitations from ever truly coming to fruition. Therein, Cho believes, lies the fundamental flaw with colonized male figures imitating the iconography of colonizing masculine models. She explains that:

>…to maintain the "dominant fiction" organized by gender difference he seizes upon the colonizer's male image. His survival, therefore, rests upon the colonizer's iconography even as the colonizer's presence undermines his masculinity.
>
> (McHugh and Abelmann, 2005: 109)

The level of detriment to this burden is increased further when the colonizer's iconography is revealed to be spurious, as is sadly the case with the majority of fiction narratives.

An important element to consider when analyzing this film and its subsequent descent into 'gun porn' from the halfway point onwards is the introduction of the stetchkin (KGB standard issue magnum), due in no small part to its reference to foreign investments and how they can influence the content of national cinemas. Similarly to Japan and Singapore, South Korea is known for having extremely tight gun laws and the possession of an unlicensed weapon is considered a serious offense.[41] Hence, in order to obtain a gun, Sun-woo must flee to North Korea where he purchases the stetchkin on the black market. Kim made *A Bittersweet Life* with funding from Russian investors seeking to break into film financing. Therefore, it

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[41] This was also the case with Hong Kong until 1997 when the British handed the island back to China.

would stand to reason that a certain element of Russian content would need to be added to the narrative in order to sell the film to the Russian film market. Russian made guns have a previous history of promotion via Hollywood films. In particular, Benedict Anderson famously recalls in *Imagined Communities* how Hollywood action movies of the 1980s were instrumental in allowing the AK-47 to become the most widely used gun in the world and has led to the manufacture of AK-47s as Russia's largest commercial export (Anderson, 1983). Thus, the promotion of other such exports would therefore pose a lucrative selling point. The fact that this plot twist also perpetuates the subliminal connotation that Russians are a violent and murderous race of people, no doubt an old remnant of Korea's bitter past, is not withstanding.

Like so many of Ji-woon's latter films, *A Bittersweet Life* wears its pretensions on its sleeve, and this is especially true of the film's myriad action sequences which reference both Hong Kong and Hollywood. What it is important to note in this respect is how the approach to action swings from Eastern to Western as the film progresses; with the drama also transitioning from high-octane pulp in the first half to far darker fare in the second. The film opens with Sun-woo policing rowdy patrons at the restaurant, during which time the audience is treated to highly stylized displays of Tae Kwon do. With the introduction of the Stetchkin during the middle of the film's second act, the action becomes little more than a string of highly bloody bullet ballets, culminating in the final bloody climax where both hero and villains wind up being unceremoniously gunned down – an event which Skeates credits in his review as "the best piece since John Woo quit making Eastern films" (Skeates, 2015). It is in this final scene that the likeness to *Scarface* is unmistakable. In similar fashion to the final shot of De Palma's much lauded gangster epic, the camera tracks silently over the blood soaked aftermath of the bar shootout; across a floor lined with bodies before

stopping on Sun-woo as he lies dying with the last thoughts of the woman who ruined his life running through his head. Here, in these final few moments, it is possible to recognize the correlation between the noir film and Korean cinema. Both deal with male inadequacy and often discuss these sexual inequities through narratives involving interactions with women.

By this point, the film has long-since disintegrated into simulacra and Sun-woo is too lost within his own private fantasy to tell whether or not he is really dying. More importantly, the audience is left as perplexed by the succession of visual spectacles as Sun-woo is perplexed by his own romantic pretensions. Large chunks of the second half of *A Bittersweet Life* appear to have been taken almost straight from other films. Prior to Sun-woo's bloody showdown with the syndicate at the penthouse bar, he first murders a rival underboss at an ice rink. This murder bears more than one resemblance to the high point of Wayne Kramer's *Running Scared* (2006), a Hollywood film released in the same year which saw Paul Walker get tortured by the Russian Mafia under very similar circumstances. For some critics, these similarities proved to be detrimental to the overall quality as a whole. 'Chris' at *eyeforfilm.co.uk*, for example, was especially disappointed by these apparent influences. In his review on August 23 2005, he writes:

> The storylines are formulaic and derivative, consisting largely of how to engineer more ingenious punch-ups, torture and revenge posturing. Light humour, afforded in the contrast between suave top dogs and bumbling henchmen, has been done so many times before – the

entertaining debacles could have been lifted from *Kill*

Bill. But entertaining it is, on an undemanding level.

(eyeforfilm.co.uk, 23/08/2005)

'Chris' makes a relevant point in arguing that the overall quality of the second of half of *A Bittersweet Life* suffers from overcompensation on action and a serious wont of meaningful drama. Earlier in his article, he describes the character of Sun-woo as "a humanised Bruce Lee, who has woken up on the set of a Tarantino film" (eyeforfilm.co.uk, 23/08/2005). Disregarding the extremely racist overtones of this statement, it does hold some element of truth in that *A Bittersweet Life* does carry more than a few shades of Hong Kong cinema, which in its heyday afforded little attention to character depth or narrative complexity.

Therefore, it might be argued that this second half of *A Bittersweet Life* is a biting social commentary about the ludicrous nature of the action genre in light of the peninsula's history of colonial bombardment through both international diplomacy and the media. This is especially true when one considers that the second half of *A Bittersweet Life* is essentially a revenge narrative. Revenge films frequently fall into two distinctive categories. The first a straight-forward case of crime and punishment where the aggrieved protagonist is portrayed as a righteous figure bringing absolute justice to the villains - see *Lady Snowblood* (1974), *Kill Bill* (2004) or *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2006). The alternative is to focus on what the protagonist eventually becomes as a result of his vendetta. Here, the focus is blatantly directed toward the former – and less artistically astute – of these categories, with Ji-woon going on to explore the latter in 2010 with *I Saw The Devil*.[42] This offers very little in the way of

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[42] Reviewed later in this chapter.

character development for Sun-woo in this second half of the film, with much of the drama reduced to a succession of sterile flashy images which in no way attempt to convey the nature of this revenge, its lack of moral and ethical wisdom or the additional damage created by this vendetta – with the obvious exception of the film's climax.

As a closing thought, one questions whether *A Bittersweet Life* is intended as a prophetic warning about the cultural and artistic decline of South Korean cinema over the course of the 2000s. Looking at the fate of the industry in retrospect, certain evidence would suggest so. Like Sun-woo, the industry began the early part of the decade in a strong robust condition with a strong sense of personal identity. By the end, it became a confusion of bad choices and poorly conceived commercial ideas. Perhaps Hollywood, which Julian Stringer explains, "represents everything the new commercial Korean cinema either promises or threatens to become" in the eyes of some commentators, was too heavily emulated without proper analysis (Shin and Stringer, 2005: 97). To consider Sun-woo's situation from this allegorical perspective is an interesting topic and one which demands further exploration. For one thing, it fails to take into account not only the detriments which present themselves when the line between fantasy and reality becomes blurred but it also suggests that, like Sun-woo overlooking the detriments of his fictional idols - Montana's empire inevitably crumbles to the ground and Harry spends his days bitter, ostracised and alone - thus provoking his own demise; so did the Seoul film industry overlook the way in which the fixation of Hollywood execs on a commercial style-over-substance approach would one day lead to an eventual dissolution, provoking the inevitable decline of their own industry.

What can be confidently said is that whilst the stylish Hollywood/Hong Kong pretensions of *A Bittersweet Life* represents a dramatic departure from the deep, multi-layered socio-cultural verisimilitude of his previous films like *The Quiet Family* and especially *A Tale of Two Sisters*, it would later be set in stark contrast to the tumultuous moral maelstrom of *I saw the Devil*.

I saw the Devil (2010)

> *Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the*
> *process he does not become a monster.*
>
> (Frederich Nietzsche)

Nietzsche's famous observation encapsulates the entire crux as what must definitely be described as the most ruthless and dark film in Kim Ji-Woon's canon. This follow up to *A Bittersweet Life* can be likened more to the work of Park Chan-wook than to much of his earlier work, due in no small part to its uncompromising attitude to violence, its focus on revenge as a destructive downward spiral and its frequently misogynistic undertones. Stylistically and thematically, *I Saw the Devil* is indeed similar to *Oldboy*, although its delivery clearly lacks the same pulp feeling of kitsch. The biggest similarity to Park Chan-wook's films however is that it sets up a similar premise of the two main characters being thrust by the hands of fate into an uncontrollable collision course. Lee Byug-hun plays KCIA operative Lee Soo-Hyun whose life falls apart when his young (and pregnant) fiancé is brutally raped, murdered and mutilated by a serial killer named Kyung-chul (who else but Choi Min-sik?) in the confronting opening moments of the film. This causes Lee to spiral into

despair and near psychosis as he vows, against orders, to hunt down Kyung-chul and ensure that he never harms anyone again.

Ironically, Nietzsche proved to be one of Kim's primary motivators when researching *I Saw The Devil*. During his interview for *Film Maker* Magazine, Kim confesses that a large proportion of influence was taken from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> In thinking about what direction I could take this story, since it wasn't my own script, I came upon a passage from Nietszche's *Beyond Good and Evil*…I felt those words very strongly and thought I could use those passages in flushing out Soo-hyeon's character. Ultimately, the story is about one man's very desperate, tragic circumstances where he must become the devil to defeat the devil. It's an inescapable position that he has no other way of solving.
>
> (Smith, 2011)

Ultimately, it was Kim's intention to identify this pseudo-Shakespearean corruption as vividly on-screen as possible, causing the content of *I Saw The Devil* to become borderline repugnant at regular intervals. Kim Ji-woon's reasoning for this stems from an in-grained disdain which the director exhibits toward more traditional screen interpretations of vengeance which often detracts from the grim reality of the act itself. He goes on to tell *Film Maker* magazine:

People have a fantasy regarding vengeance. At one point, everyone thinks about something like this, but there are ways to suppress or contain it in their normal lives. Seeing this kind of vengeance that they fantasize about so literally or directly onscreen is a surprise to many people. There is the ethical and moral dilemma. Hopefully, they realize what is driving these actions, because there are circumstances that could have brought it to this point. But there's also a dual nature in that they want it to be carried out. So people will see both sides of what that really means - going to extremes to carry out this vengeance but also knowing that morally, socially and ethically it is unacceptable in our own lives.

(Smith, 2011)

The attitude expressed by Kim Ji-woon regarding the portrayal of vengeance through *I Saw the Devil* bares many similarities to the attitude held by fellow directors Park Chan-wook and Kim Ki-duk regarding on-screen cruelty.[43] The connection is that both directors place a story focus on the importance of spectatorship and more chiefly the position of the audience in relation to the violent acts focalized on screen. Sitting in a darkened room witnessing a violent image played out before them, an audience is able to disassociate themselves from the events regardless of how graphic and unbearable their nature may be. A change in this slave/master relationship between the viewer and the image re-establishes the engagement but whereas Kim Ki-duk

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[43] Kim Ki-duk shall be discussed later in this thesis.

adopts a passive, almost documentarian style for the depiction of his violence – not caring whether the imagery in his films is too repugnant to sit through – Kim Ji-woon adopts much the same style as Park. By going in for extreme, sometimes overtly intimate, close-ups during scenes of high-level violence and atrocity; Kim is able to encourage the same feelings of disgust in his audience whilst ensuring that morbid curiosity keeps their eyes permanently fixed on the screen.

Right from the outset, Kim presents the audience with a highly engaging prospect. For the first time, two actors who have made their careers by representing polarizing masculinities are thrown together with all the ferocity of a head-on train crash. Both leads remain true to form; Lee plays his sleek suited protagonist with the same suave, regimentally measured degree of reserve and control which he had earlier displayed in both *JSA (2000)* and *A Bittersweet Life (2005)*, whilst Choi remains the same scruffy, dishevelled emotionally volatile train-wreck which shot him to super-stardom in *Oldboy*. As the two polarizing personalities square off, the audience is never short of thrills, soft spoken threats become juxtaposed with wild insults, and disciplined martial arts are thrown in alongside blind rage. Ultimately, it is this presentation of order against chaos which makes the film work and witnessing it one starts to wonder why no one had ever thought to bring these two stars together in a film of this nature before.

The world painted by Kim also maintains the theme of polarization in that it juxtaposes the civilized streets of Seoul, where quiet residences are kept in order by a heavy police presence, with the uncertain savagery of the country. It is from these rural scenes where *I Saw The Devil* draws much of it terrifying power. The snow capped mountain roads carry shades of *Fargo* (1996) and *Let The Right One In* (2009). Their bleak white plains extend into a sea of dark emptiness beyond which

lurks all manner of unspeakable horrors. Indeed, though not necessarily a horror film, Kim ensures that the horror trademarks are clear to see, not least in the form of the distinctly torture-porn style barn, equally menacing to any of the locales featured in Western serial killer films like *Seven* (1996) or *Silence of the Lambs* (1992), and a large hydroponic green house which conjours immediate shades of similarly violent British revenge film *Harry Brown* (2009).

It is also important to note that Kyung-chul does not exist in isolation. Toward the end of the film's second act, he takes refuge in the home of an old acquaintance. This acquaintance is later revealed to be a cannibal who eats the flesh of innocent women. Could this be interpreted as a sociological statement by the director about how human development is influenced by the company they keep? If so, then it is strange to notice that Kyung-chul displays a strange amoral integrity during his interactions with his host by reacting to the thought of cannibalism with disgust. This idiosyncrasy breaks the iconographic mould of the serial killer as a character type, since the traditionally simplistic Hollywood idea of psychopathy rarely includes room for personal principles. This is but one example of the stark sociological message which runs through the narrative of the film that poverty breeds degenerate savagery. The fact that previously in the film two muggers attempted to stab Kyung-chul and take his wallet after offering to give him a lift (a mirror image of his own behaviour) suggests that maybe this ghastly creature is in fact nothing more than a product of the world that spawned him: a world which by its very nature is dog-eat-dog and where morality is present only for those who can afford it.

As with *Oldboy* female characters are once again given a back seat and are frequently beaten, shouted down and humiliated by their male counterparts. This misogyny is reflected not just by Kyung-chul, who strips and psychologically tortures

a nurse and then later attempts to rape a schoolgirl, but also by Soo-hyun who ignores and rubbishes his wife's sister when she implores him to abandon his vendetta and move on. Class and sophistication, it would seem, have no reflection on how women are treated in this story and probably in society. At best they are after-thoughts and at worst they are little more than livestock.

Most important of all is the way in which *I Saw The Devil* discusses how a man can revel in his trauma as much as he can suffer from it. Soo-hyun manages to locate Kyung-chul surprisingly quickly and has the opportunity to exact revenge on his quarry by the end of the first act. Yet, he rejects this opportunity. In a mirroring of the slave/master relationship prevalent in *Oldboy*, Choi Min-sik once again finds himself playing cat and mouse, with the slave/master relationship now favouring the protagonist. The fact that Soo-hyun does this implies that a part of him secretly enjoys his brutal and unabated vendetta against the man who murdered his fiancé and, as with Oh Dae-su in *Oldboy*, this begs the question as to why he doesn't simply finish the deed and end the torrent of suffering left in the wake of Kyung-chul and himself. In his interview for *Film Maker* Magazine, Kim Ji-woon makes direct reference to the moment where Soo-hyeon force-feeds a tracking chip to Kyung-chul, stating that it signifies when Soo-hyeon is in effect "becoming the same as the devil" (*Film Maker*, 02/03/2011). Ji-woon describes that through this act, Soo-hyeon figuratively gains a portion of Kyung-chul's essence because:

> He is breathing the same breath, he's doing the same
> movements and speech, he hears everything that character
> is hearing by tracking and emulating him.
>
> (Smith, 2011)

It is the same sort of sadistic pathological obsession practiced by Lee Woo-jin in
Oldboy, with Soo-hyeon becoming ever more tainted and twisted by his vengeful
desires until absolute dissolution of Kyung-chul becomes the only visible goal in his
life. In both instances, Woo-jin and Soo-hyeon have the intellectual and technological
advantage over their respective quarries. Kyung-chul is a remorseless killer but is also
a poorly educated degenerate from a low socio-economic background. Whilst society
still considers his behaviour to be grossly unacceptable, it is therefore more
prevalently expected. His methods are brutal but limited. Soo-hyeon, on the other
hand, comes from a position of privilege and as such has far more subtle and cruel
tools at his disposal. In spite of multiple examples to the contrary over the course of
the past 200 years, gentrification still creates the illusion that people from opulent
backgrounds are less likely to resort to barbaric behaviours. Therefore as his methods
and pathological obsessions toward Kyung-chul reach a crescendo, so the audience
increasingly recognizes Soo-hyun as "an even more fearful force than the serial killer"
(Smith, 2011).

From this point on, the battle between 'hero' and 'villain' (if either can be
called such things) very quickly degenerates into a case of escalation with the
deciding factor becoming a simple matter of doing what other person will not. Thus,
Kyung-chul unwittingly brings a greater and more dangerous man down to his level
and winds up paying the ultimate price for it. The final shot of the film is very
poignant. No image in the history of modern cinema better conveys the come down
from the throngs of psychotic rage than the tears of remorse Soo-hyun sheds as he
walks away from the farm where his fiancé died listening to Kyung-chul's family
crying over his corpse. That this closing shot takes place during a heavy rain storm

only adds to the sense of catastrophe and does so without the usual sense of cliché.

For it is here that Soo-hyun not only mourns his wife or his foe but also the spiritual

degradation of his own soul, much as how society collectively mourns whenever such

monsters are brought to centre stage.

Chapter 6: Masculinity in Conflict in _Sympathy for Mr. Vemgeance_ (2002), _Thirst_ (2009) and _Oldboy_ (2003).

As the interpretations of South Korean screen masculinity underwent a progressive change during the turn of the century from the damaged and self-deprecating image of the post-Korean War era to the clean-cut and sophisticated model, so did the older models of recessive masculine characters begin to wane. These differing interpretations have therefore led to the rise of a new hegemonic masculinity. R.W. Connell describes this process in vivid detail:

> When conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular type of masculinity become eroded. New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony…Hegemony, then, is a historically mobile relation.
>
> (Connell, 1995: 77)

In this analysis Connell uses the example of how hegemonic masculinity can be challenged through its relationship to femininity. However, these conflicts may also arise within the masculine gender sphere. Of particular note is how social contexts and the differences which present themselves between men of differing socio-economic backgrounds can create frictions in the definition of a society's hegemonic masculinity. In the 2002 publication, _Gender_, Connell identifies that:

> Gender involves a lot more than on-to-one relationships between bodies; it involves a vast and complicated institutional and cultural. It is the whole order that comes into relation with bodies, and gives them gender meanings.
>
> (Connell, 2002: 39)

With this in mind, it should be appreciated that different strata within a single society would therefore have different interpretations of a dominant masculine model. It was previously stated in chapter one that a working class man would be unable to equal the grooming and sophistication of men from the higher classes, in much the same way that that these 'socially superior' masculine types would not have the same resilience and boisterousness of their blue collar counterparts. Consequently, a conflict arises between the traditional and modern concepts of manhood with regard to which form of masculinity should be allowed to take primacy.

Cinema has always traditionally promoted what R.W. Connell refers to as Protest Masculinity, which Connell states "is not simply observance of a stereotyped male role" but is instead "compatible with respect and attention to women…, egalitarian views about sexes…, affection for children…, and a sense of display which in conventional role terms of decidedly feminine." (Connell, 1995:112). The term refers to the concept of masculinity through visual representation and is many respects linked to the idea of iconography discussed by such theorists as Laura Mulvey in her book *Death 24x A Second*. Protest masculinity reduces codes of masculine behaviour to a system of signifiers which must be constantly maintained through never ending performance in order to perpetuate the individuals own gendered sense of honour. Connell points out that this is most common among

working class males, particularly fringe groups like bikers and street gangs who

position themselves against regular society.[44] Where the problem with protest

masculinity frequently lies, however, is that to quote Connell: "the performance is not

leading anywhere" and that in maintaining these codes the practitioners succeed only

in continuing their present situations at best. (Connell, 199:116). Thus, Connell

believes that protest masculinity and the emulations it provokes are at best a flawed

cultural practice:

> Protest masculinity looks like a cul-de-sac. It is certainly an
>
> active response to the situation, and it builds on a working-
>
> class masculine ethic of solidarity. But this is a solidarity
>
> that divides the group from the rest of the working class.
>
> The loss of the economic basis of masculine authority leads
>
> to a divided consciousness – egalitarianism and misogyny –
>
> not a new political direction.
>
> (Connell, 1995:119)

This idea of protest masculinity has increasingly taken centre-stage with the

introduction of marketable genres into South Korean film. In particular, Korean

gangster films frequently use protest masculinity to present the criminal lifestyle, as

featured in such films as *Breathless* (2010) and *A Dirty Carnival* (2009). However,

like such Western counterparts as *Boyz N The Hood* (1992) or *Quadrophenia* (1979)

these Korean gangster films seek only to denigrate this lifestyle by showing that at

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[44] Connell's findings regarding Protest Masculinity are the direct result of interactions with several
masculine gender models, most prominently a biker gang.

best there is no hope of improvement in the lives of these characters and at worst it will lead to their deaths.

Furthermore, the nature of protest masculinity, and the subsequent attitudes to it, shifts in accordance with contexts and changes in group dynamics. This is especially true when more than one gender is involved in this dynamic. Connell mentions that:

> Gender politics might seek to complicate and cross-fertilize, rather than to shrink the sphere in which gender is expressed or repressed.
>
> (Connell, 1995: 118)

While such conduct as violent behaviour or disrespect for authority may be able to garner respect or admiration from other working class men, it is unlikely to garner any more respect from a woman than it would from men of a different age, ethnicity, sexual orientation or social class. In all likelihood, such behaviour would in fact be considered toxic. Even as society draws ever nearer to gender parity, many women would find exposure to any sort of violent or perverse behaviour to be wholly deplorable and such exposure may provoke severance of all ties with men who exhibit a propensity for such conduct. As Jack Urwin mentions at the end of his 2017 book, *Man Up*:

> There is a belief amongst a lot of men that hypermasculinity will make them more attractive to women, but their fundamental idea of what constitutes

> masculinity is deeply confused…and while certain masculine qualities can indeed be attractive, a lot of men unfortunately have no understanding of the intricacies of this behaviour or the appropriate contexts of which it is acceptable.
>
> (Urwin, 2017: 232)

Prominent examples of Urwin's observation about the counter-productivity of hypermasculinity have been commonplace in cinema since the 1970s. These include Travis Bickle taking his date to a porno theatre only to wind up abandoned in *Taxi Driver* and Bung-woo being jilted by his crush for assaulting the man who sexually harassed her in *A Dirty Carnival*. Both scenarios emphasize how everything is dictated by social context, and failure to adapt to contextual changes may yield dire consequences. Therefore a need arises for working class men to adapt beyond their stereotypes.

The reverse of this belligerent, brutish vision of masculinity are the handsome, appealing masculine figures which came into circulation following the increase in South Korea's middle-class and the introduction of global capital into South Korea's film industry. However, is this new model really any better than the old one? Despite this shift in masculine representations from mutilated and recessive to sleek and attractive, this does not take into account the concept of 'symbolic lack' that Kim Kyung-hyun mentions at length in his book. This idea of the handsome, stylish, outwardly dominant male who is burdened by a fatal flaw is as potent an allegory for Korea as it is for any nation with a violent past. It acts as a constant reminder of how

individuals are always shaped as much by their socio-cultural identities as they are by their own experiences. As Connell mentions in chapter two of *Gender*:

> If human action is creative…we are always moving into historical spaces that no one has occupied before. At the same time, we do not create in a vacuum. We act in particular situations created by our own, and other people's, past actions.
>
> (Connell, 2002: 23)

With this in mind, one questions whether an attractive, articulate, able-bodied masculine character who is afflicted with a dark personality is really any better than its wretched, physically afflicted counterpart. While the rise of metrosexualism may mean that a growing number of Korean men, middle-class men in particular, benefit from higher levels of grooming and sophistication; they also develop several traits which would traditionally be seen as negative masculine qualities. These detrimental qualities may include, but are not limited to: cowardice, shallowness, arrogance, superficiality, dispassion, vanity, hubris, depression, immaturity, lack of gratitude and anxiety. A common problem with the financially successful, metrosexual version of modern man is that they often suffer a detachment from other humans which is then replaced by a tendency toward materialism and simulacra, preferring to envelope themselves in commercialism to compensate for a lack of meaningful social engagement. Euro-American cinema has presented many examples of financially successful well groomed men who remain unsatisfied with their lives because of their social (often romantic) ineptitudes: Christian Bale in *American Psycho* (2000) and

Simon Baker in *I Give It A Week* (2011) are two such examples. This social

detraction has become a serious problem in the 2010s with the rise of Hipster culture

and the increased prevalence of hikikomori throughout the first world.[45]

Neither of these conflicting masculine models totally bear all of the qualities

required to represent a strong hegemonic national masculinity, which begs the

question of how a new form of hegemonic masculinity can be attained? All media

representations are designed to serve a specifically partial agenda. If the agendas

involved are all flawed, any hegemonic masculinity created to suit these agendas shall

inevitably prove inadequate. Then again, perhaps the answer should be that there

should be no dominant, hegemonic masculinity because concepts of individualism

which go hand in hand with first world globalization and the resulting multiplicity of

beliefs, cultural practices, ethnicities and sexualities inadvertently negate such

antiquated systems of normalization. This is certainly true of the films analysed in this

chapter and each of the masculine characters displayed therein.

Park Chan-wook

Positioned firmly at the forefront of Korean films which compare differing

masculine representations is director Park Chan-wook, whose body of work is

renowned both on the peninsula and internationally. His accolades include numerous

international film awards at both the Cannes and Berlin film festivals, and shooting a

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[45] Hikikomori: Also referred to in the West as *The Sexodus*, hikikomori is a social phenomenon where humans, most prevalently young males, become so socially detached from society that they deliberately isolate themselves from physical life and spend their entire lives in cyberspace. In short, they wilfully drop out of society. Through sites and online forums like 4Chan, the cultivation of organised individuals through hikikomori has heavily influenced much of the political strife currently afflicting first world society, most noticeably the rise of the 'Alt-Right' through which all manner of toxically masculine totalitarian ideals have been allowed to flourish.

high quality short film using only an iPhone.[46] Park originally studied Philosophy at

Sogang University and released his first feature film; *The Moon Is…The Sun's Dream*

in 1992. Neither this, nor his follow-up film *Trio* (1997) proved very successful

commercially and it wasn't until 2000 that Park finally shot to fame in with his

political drama *JSA* which, like Kang Je-gyu's *Shiri*, was instrumental in reshaping

local attitudes to South Korea's relationship with the North. His films are

commercially viable, artistic and edgy; and have previously been lauded by the late

Roger Ebert for "probing the alarming depths of human behaviour" through his

unique talent for creating monstrous characters that are always recognizably human

(Ebert, 12/08/2012). Park has admitted during interviews that growing up he was a

great admirer of directors like Michael Winner and John Boorman, quoting films by

these British directors as being his favourite of all time and a great deal of their

influence to can be seen in several of his better known films, especially regarding

Park's tendency toward presenting audiences with tragic downwardly spiralling plots,

where protagonists have very little control over their destinies (Goodridge, 2006).

There is a particular affinity shared between Park's most popular film, *Oldboy* (2003),

and Boorman's *Point Blank* in the respect that both lead actors, Choi Min-sik and Lee

Marvin, have their dominant physical presences undermined by the wretched

characters they portray. In her 2006 publication *Death 24x a Second* Laura Mulvey

writes:

> Behind even the most achieved performance, sometimes in
>
> an unexpected flash, this extra-diagetic presence intrudes

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[46] Park's contribution has since been influential in the creation of Apple's patented annual iPhone Film Festival.

> from outside the scene and off-screen, giving an
> unexpected vulnerability to a star's performance.
>
> (Mulvey, 2006: 173)

Just as the iconography of Lee Marvin's cold, hard screen persona becomes ransacked by the infrequent tenderness he displays in *Point Blank*, the same can be said of Choi Min-sik crying bitter tears over the loss of his daughter or the happiness he shows in drying Mi-do's hair after they make love. It is perhaps this coupling of the vicious with the pathetic that makes much of the violence in *Oldboy* palatable for its audiences. Rather than displaying the cold psychopathy of Arnold Schwarzenegger or the morose cynicism of Bruce Willis, Park uses the iconography of Choi Min-sik as a way of humanising Oh Dae-su and scrutinising the inequities of Hollywood masculine imagery.

Many critics compare Park Chan-wook to Quentin Tarantino and David Lynch for his tendency to couple sexuality with killer instinct, though in many respects this places his style and technique equally close to Stanley Kubrick. Like Kubrick, Park is obsessed with grotesquery and is capable of identifying the darkly comic malevolence of even the most earnest of characters through a preference toward juxtaposing close-ups with long shots and his penchant for wide angle lenses. In his review of one of the director's most infamous films *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (reviewed later in this chapter), New Korean Cinema critic Kim Kyu-Hyun made a potent observation regarding Park Chan-wook's unique cinematic style:

> The style could be called Modernist, in the sense that the
> 'reality' the characters inhabit is ever so slightly distorted,

> just enough to undercut the viewer's expectations of
> comforting genre conventions and mundane representations
> of everyday reality without explicitly breaking down the
> diagetic effect.
>
> (cited in Shin and Stringer, 2005:112)

Such auteurism is rare in modern cinema and by all accounts should be highly unmarketable. Consequently, not all audiences have spoken favourably about Park's artistic style and he has had to contend with heavy criticism on numerous occasions. However, what makes this style surprisingly popular is that it always alludes to a social context. Rarely, if ever, does the director deviate from a handful of key themes, most prominently the themes of salvation and choice.[47] If nothing else, Park's style is attractive to the actors who work with him on a regular basis. Speaking in an exclusive interview with Daniel Tudor, Choi Min-sik, who starred in both *Oldboy* and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005) was quoted as making the following statement about the reception of Park Chan-wook's body of work and what personally attracts him to it as an actor:

> Some may say that they are sometimes uncomfortable with
> Park Chan-wook's cinematic style, but I find it very
> refreshing. I also value highly the fact that he always tries
> to extricate himself from falling into routine – or from
> going through the motions.
>
> (Tudor, 2012: 238)

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[47] Discussed later in this chapter.

The latter part of this statement is definitely true of Park Chan-wook in that he never allows himself to be type-cast according to genre or theme. If his previous film was a war movie, his next one is a drama; if his last film scrutinized religion, his follow-up would support it. Such versatility is a common trait among the best auteurs of each generation because it shows an active defiance toward the prospect of abandoning artistic principles.

Also similar is the way that many of his films feel as much like performance pieces are they do social commentary. As Kim notes, Park's unorthodox visual style is further accentuated by the unusual (and sometimes unnatural) reactions featured in his actors' performances. In each of Park Chanwook's films, to quote Kim, the characters "are all given a degree of verisimilitude but their acts progressively escalate into extreme, abnormal behaviour" (Shin and Stringer, 2005: 112). Park Chanwook's characters are often emotionally volatile and the tempo of a scene can frequently switch from tranquil to highly intense in the blink of an eye. In other areas, scenes and set-pieces may be orchestrated for no reason beyond dramatic purpose. This is especially common in his latter films, the best example being *Cut* (2004), a short film which uses a variety of theatrical set pieces ranging from the gruesome to the whimsical in order to construct a meta-text about the nature of film making and the process of performance itself.

Among Park's greatest cinematic achievements are *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Oldboy* (2003) and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005): three films which have since become known as Park's infamous *Vengeance* trilogy. Each of these films portrays vengeance as a form of protest performance where characters are driven by a compulsion to seek revenge on their antagonists as a declaration of

gender power. However, in each instance pursuit of this gender protest is off-set both by threats of an unpleasant outcome and by outside influences/circumstances which seek to inspire the protagonist to abandon their obsessions in favour of the new lives fate has given them.

Finally, it is important to also acknowledge the role played by female characters in Park's films. Be they for better or worse, female characters in Park Chan-wook's films constantly seek to invoke a change in their male counter-parts, usually by encouraging confrontation with another male character. This involvement sometimes inspires male characters to become better than their lot in life (e.g. Mi-do in *Oldboy*) but more frequently results in dissolution (*Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, *Cut*, *Thirst*). The most intriguing aspect about female characters in Park's films is that they are always head-strong and assertive, often more so than male characters. This is certainly true of Sophie, the protagonist of *JSA*, as well as for each of the female characters featured in the films reviewed in this chapter. [48] Since 2010 especially, Park has opted to make these strong female characters the central focus of his films. In 2013 Park released his first Hollywood feature film, Wentworth Miller penned family suspense thriller *Stoker* and recently returned to South Korea for his internationally acclaimed lesbian love story *The Handmaiden* (2016).

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance (2002)

In the final chapter of his book, Kim Kyung-hyun imbued his review of Park Chan-wook's *JSA: Joint Security Area* with the title *Each Man Kills the Thing He Loves*. Perhaps equally deserving of this phrase is Park's follow-up film: a grisly

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[48] *JSA* was extensively reviewed in Chapter Three.

tragedy about the destructiveness of vengeful desires which marked the first of many explorations by the director into class divisions of modern South Korea. The film is difficult viewing and has earned a reputation among critics like Kim Kyu-hyun as "one of the most frightening and disturbing films ever made in Korea" (Shin and Stringer, 2005:110). Upon its release *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* did not sit well with local audiences – though it did manage to attract the attention of non-Korean festival goers. Reflecting on an interview with Park in the January 2005 edition of *Sight and Sound*, Mike Goodridge observes that *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* received such a poor reception because there is no clearly defined hero or villain to which the viewer can totally relate (Goodridge, 2005: 6). Rather, it can be said that each character creates a hell of their own making, since each of their respective problems could have been avoided when viewed outside of context.

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance is the story of Ryu (Shin Ha-hyun), a deaf-mute who takes a job in the foundry of a major electronics firm in order to pay for a kidney transplant to save his dying sister. Ryu's troubles begin when his sister's surgeon informs him that he can not donate one of his own kidneys because he does not share his sister's blood type and worsen further when the electronics company lays him off. In desperation, Ryu turns to black-market organ dealers who offer to give him a compatible kidney in exchange for 10,000 won and one of his own kidneys. Ryu agrees only to be double-crossed by the organ dealers who take his money and his kidney, leaving him with nothing. In a last ditch attempt to gain the money he so desperately needs, Ryu and his girlfriend Yong-mi kidnap the daughter of the company President only for events to spiral irrevocably out of control.

Ryu is reminiscent of many of the heroes found in Greek tragedies, unable to stop or even influence the myriad calamities thrust upon him but is instead expected

to endure. His inability to hear or speak is more than simply a social barrier: it is a means through which power can be exerted on him by more able bodied characters. The surgeon, the head of the organ dealers and Ryu's supervisor all neglect his ailments, the latter of which cruelly disregards these afflictions as though they do not exist. For Brian Yecies and Damien Chambers, the organ dealers in particular are of great significance because they represent a dark political side-product of capitalist society. In "Double Take on Vengeance: Journey Through the Syncopic Editing Style of Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance ",[49] they describe the callous nature of the organ dealers:

> They feed off of the ill family, class and nation. They are interested only in exploiting those in need of life's vital organs. Ryu has turned to this illegal medical trade in order to save his sister. After losing his job he is desperate, and suffers the consequences for not having access to better medical care. As we soon see, there is a good reason that their capitalist, black market venture is highly illegal.
>
> (Yecies and Chambers, 2006: 3)

This observation by Yecies and Chambers is distinctly relevant if *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* is to be considered socio-political commentary. One of the capitalist system's fundamental flaws is its ability to inadvertently place society in a position where money is worth more than human life and such amenities as decent quality health care can therefore become regarded as privileges that are restricted to the

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[49] Part of *sympathy for Mr. Vengeance: New Korean Cinema* Serries Vol.10, edited by Moomin Park.

rich.[50] In essence, it forces people from low socio-economic backgrounds like Ryu to seek aid from the wrong kinds of people (organ dealers, unlicensed surgeons, loan sharks etc) that inevitably only exacerbates their problems. In an interview with Seana Sperling for the January 16 edition of *Acid Logic*, Park describes his opinion of these encounters thus:

> I exaggerated this area as a negative side of Capitalism. The Organ Dealers are depriving people of something necessary for life. Although the scenes are exaggerated in the film, this (organ stealing) does actually happen in Korea.
>
> (Sperling, 2004)

Yecies and Chambers argue this point further by describing the layout of these scenes as "a juxtaposition of light and dark", exemplifying how the inequality of the Capitalist system inadvertently forces otherwise good people to resort to questionable conduct, even though it is from a desire to do good (Yecies and Chambers, 2006: 3).

Consequently, audiences are not encouraged to sympathise with Ryu's plight because the mistreatment he suffers is the direct result of his greater flaw that he is easily led by others. As Yecies and Chambers observe, "Ryu isn't necessarily stupid, though he is socially naïve" which makes him increasingly susceptible to the manipulation of more dominant personalities (Yecies and Chambers, 2006: 3). Therefore, when he is duped by the organ dealers, there is an unmistakable

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[50] The most prominent case in point in the 1st World is the US health care system which is dominated by HMOs and has created a tiered system that can produce the sort of class and economy-based problems featured in documentaries like Michael Moore's *Sicko* (2006) and social dramas like Nick Cassavates' *John Q* (2002).

exasperation from the perspective of Western audiences as to why he didn't foresee the betrayal. As Yecies and Chambers describe:

> His zealous efforts to save his ill sister blind his lack of awareness about how the organ traders are intending to trick him…He is left bleeding and exposed on the cold cement floor without money, clothes and a kidney. The organ traders have disappeared with his cash, leaving him in a compromising position. It is precisely this position and its indirect-subjective point of view (POV) that lures us deeper into the narrative.
>
> (Yecies and Chambers, 2006:3)

Ryu's compromised situation makes for an effective plot tool in provoking the question of how he can possibly fall any further, only to then act as the entry point into the film's true downward spiral.

Another manipulation comes from Yong-mi. Like Sophie in *JSA*, Park presents Yong-mi as a woman stuck in a man's world, only this time the woman does not realise the folly she brings upon herself through her meddling. When not spouting political clichés, Yong-mi possesses all the manipulative talent of Lady Macbeth, beguiling Ryu with stories about the difference between good and bad kidnappings, even though both achieve the same result. Yecies and Chambers argue that Yong-mi's attempted legitimisation of Yoosun's kidnapping may be considered protestation:

> It is not a simple question of whether or not there are good
> and bad kinds of kidnappings. Rather, the point is that often
> some members of the working class may be so desperate
> that they feel compelled to resort to this type of violent
> outcry for help. This is one of the darker sides of capitalism
> that audiences don't like to be reminded about.
>
> (Yecies and Chambers, 2006:4)

This idea of a "violent outcry" is then mirrored during the scene involving Dong-jin and the self-harming employee where, to quote Yecies and Chambers:

> The employee's blood-soaked shirt is a powerful sign of
> social protest and again, a symbol of the great sacrifices
> members of the working class make in Korean society.
>
> (Yecies and Chambers, 2006:5)

Her final supreme act of dominance is assured following Yoo-sun's death when she adopts the dominant position during the film's graphic sex scene where she exclaims that Ryu is "like an ant" (Park, 2002).

Ryu's naivety is coupled with the fact that he is also driven primarily by emotion so that when faced with moral dilemmas his reason becomes clouded, perhaps serving as a social commentary about human nature and how people often react poorly to catastrophes. The most telling example of this flaw comes following the suicide of Ryu's sister where, grief-stricken, he fails to consider returning Yoo-sun to her father before going to bury his sister at the lake where they grew up. This

inevitably results in Yoo-sun drowning in the lake while Ryu is performing the burial

rites. Yecies and Chambers relay this compounded tragedy in vivid detail:

> As Ryu tragically buries his dead sister beneath a pile of
>
> rocks by the lake, another tragedy develops behind him,
>
> with Yoosun's accidental drowning. While he is silently
>
> mourning, we hear a splash. The audience is aware of the
>
> dangerous situation before Ryu is. In this way, we are lured
>
> to anticipate the gravity of the situation before Ryu realizes
>
> what has happened.
>
> (Yecies and Chambers, 2006: 6)

It seems at this point in the film that tragedy and catastrophe dogs Ryu at every turn

and, as Yecies and Chambers observe, this final decisive calamity sets him on the

final collision course with Dong-jin and ultimately his own watery grave (Chambers

and Yecies, 2006: 6).

As the President of the chaebol that fired him, Dong-jin (Song Kang-ho) is

Ryu's complete antithesis. He is a self-made man who is not struck with any of Ryu's

afflictions but is fatally flawed by his symbolic lack – putting his business before the

women in his life and each time paying for it. Shortly after she is kidnapped, Yoo-sun

nonchalantly mentions that Dong-jin and his wife are divorced. In a conservative

society like South Korea, a broken home signifies cause for concern and any concern

raised by this plot-point is later verified following Yoo-sun's death when Dong-jin

confesses that his wife left him due to financial troubles because he was unable to

provide for his family. In some respects, Dong-jin's loss of Yoo-sun mirrors the loss

of his wife as much as it mirrors the loss of Ryu's sister, since his inability to keep his daughter from harm is merely an extension of his previous inadequacies. With the discovery of Yoo-sun's body, Dong-jin's purpose in life is thrown out of joint. His thoughts turn increasingly toward revenge and in so doing Yoo-sun's ghost increasingly hangs over him, pushing him further and further past the point of no return. However, Dong-jin also cannot be sympathised with as easily as Ryu because of his extremely unlikable persona. While he shows genuine remorse for what happened to Yoo-sun, haunted by visions of his daughter which blame him for such crimes as not teaching her to swim, he can at times appear sociopathic: watching coldly as the laid-off employee mutilates himself and yawning at the autopsy of Ryu's sister having become distraught during Yoo-sun's post-mortem. For Yecies and Chambers, Dong-jin's extreme emotional dichotomy is a prominent example of how people can be numb to the suffering of those outside their social sphere:

> At the first autopsy, the audience experiences Dong-jin's sharp pain of losing a daughter, as the camera looks up from the POV from Yoosun's dead body to a face showing extreme sadness, anger and remorse…Dong-jin decides to watch his daughter's body being cut open…Though we never see what Dong-jin sees, absorbing the off-screen actions and noises along with Dongjin's deeply-upset expression is just as powerful as if we witnessed the visual of his little girl being cut open…Even more shocking, is Dong-jin's reaction (or lack thereof) during the second autopsy scene of Ryu's sister …We are presented with the

same view of Dong-jin's face…However this time, Dong-jin simply yawns while Ryu's sister is being cut open. He is bored. He has no sympathy for this woman. He is numb to the things happening to others who are outside his class.

(Yecies and Chambers, 2006:6-7)

Like many of the political statements littered throughout Park's earlier films, the director hopes to exemplify the cold selfishness of the business life-style and another flaw of human nature: that people don't care about the world's problems unless they are directly affected.

The X-factor for both these men is Yong-mi, since it is she who sets both Ryu and Tong-jin on their self-destructive collision course. In his review of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, Kim Kyu-hyun described Yong-mi's political stance as "a hopscotch of fashionable slogans…as well as a barely articulated resentment against the industrialist bourgeoisie" (Shin and Stringer, 2005: 112). Yong-mi's character amplifies these resentments almost to the point of farce. Claiming to be a member of a phantom online terrorist organisation with affiliations to North Korea, Yong-mi's behaviour frequently borders on delusional. Even when Dong-jin is torturing her to death, Yong-mi exhibits almost total belief in her delusions, threatening that her ethereal organisation shall gain retribution for his transgressions against her. The emotional power struggle during this scene is quite striking and borders on the psycho-sexual. Below the surface layer it can be said to hold a certain gendered quality where the man inflicts cruel sadism on the female victim but does so in a way that is tolerated because it coincides with the victim's sense of pretence. Like the religious fanatic believing himself a martyr if he dies in the right circumstances,

Yong-mi appears to gain some sense of contentment from this end, playing to her role in an almost performative manner.

Whilst adding possible pathos to an already harrowing situation, this horrific though farcical spectacle does however serve a purpose by the end of the film. Having drowned Ryu in the lake and dismembered his body in the final reel, Dong-jin is about to dispose of the remains of both Ryu and Yong-mi when he is attacked and murdered by a group of four men, claiming to be from Yong-mi's terror cell. For Kim Kyu-hyun, this rather shocking conclusion delivers the final decisive exclamation point on the film's political statement. He writes:

> In *Sympathy*, political terrorism is as illogical and ridiculous as obsessive acts of revenge and, for that reason, far more terrifying than one in a mainstream action film or thriller – just as it is in our 'real' world.
>
> (Shin and Stringer, 2005: 113)

This ending leaves the audience somewhat bewildered and bemused. Having been privy to every bloody detail of this horrible tragedy, they find themselves at the bottom of the downward spiral, witnessing the credits role as Dong-jin murmurs his last words in an unsettling slur of inaudible gibberish. The nihilism of this abrupt and shocking sense of violation stays with the audience long after the credits have rolled and as an audience member one is at a loss to find words to describe the sense of grim hopelessness provoked by this apparent lack of resolution. From Kim Kyu-hyun's perspective, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* sits alongside many other serious pieces of art on the theme of salvation purely because, like George Romero's zombie films or

Igmar Bergman's The *Seventh Seal* (1957), it nihilistically protests that salvation is impossible (Shin and Stringer, 2005:113). Value therefore lies in the film's intricacy in arguing the importance of individual choices and how they can have a dramatic effect on the world around us.

Thirst (2009)

Shortly before his departure for Hollywood to work on the script for *Stoker* (2012) with Wentworth Miller, Park Chanwook released what is certainly the most generic film of his canon. *Thirst* is a strangely off-beat vampire movie about the tribulations of male sexual desire in conservative Korean society and one man's perpetual struggle against his own carnality. It follows the story of Sang-hyeon (Song Kang-ho), a priest who was taken in by the Catholic Church after being orphaned as a boy. Raised to a life of piety and abstinence, Sang-hyeon volunteers to work as a missionary at a hospital in a remote part of Africa where the local inhabitants are succumbing to the outbreak of a killer virus. Offering to become a guinea pig for a new experimental vaccine designed to guard against the virus, it is only a matter of time before Sang-hyeon contracts the virus himself. Saved from death by an emergency blood transfusion, he discovers that the surgeons at the hospital have mistakenly given him vampiric blood, transforming him into a creature of the night forced to sustain itself by drinking the blood of the living. One night, whilst prowling the back streets of Seoul, Sang-hyeon is reunited with Tae-ju (Kim Ok-bin); a troubled girl whom he knew from the orphanage, now trapped in a loveless marriage to her clingy husband, Kang-woo (Shin Ha-hyun) and his domineering mother (Kim

Hae-suk). He and Tae-ju begin an illicit affair culminating in the eventual torture and murder of Kang-woo.

The traditionally conservative nature of the horror genre provides an excellent platform for Park to explore his coupling of killer instinct and sexuality, especially the subgenre of vampires which are in themselves wholly allegorical of sexuality gone wild. As the late Roger Ebert poignantly stated in his review of *Thirst* on August 12th 2009:

> This Priest…is youthful and, despite his vow of chastity, awaked to an urgent carnality by the interloper vampire blood. Perhaps vampires fascinate us because they act not out of a desire to do evil but a need.
>
> (Ebert, 2009)

Ebert's observation definitely raises an interesting point in that vampires are creatures of necessity that exist in a moral grey area where killing is compulsory for the sake of sustenance. An important principle with vampire narratives is that, more so than other Gothic narratives, they play to a fixation on the idea of "psycho-sexual pathology" where the 'sin' of sexuality is framed as the sole source of terror due to its deviation from religious instruction (Powell, 2005: 43). In South Korea, a heavily Presbyterian country where the church has a very strong influence in social affairs, this would prove a controversial subject. As was the case in Eurocentric nations prior to the late twentieth century, in South Korea it is still largely taboo to suggest that a member of the church would be capable of any wrong doing at all, much less that of a sexual nature. As R.W. Connell mentioned in the 2002 publication *Gender*:

> Sexual matters have to be dealt with in all cultures but they may be dealt with in very different ways…Christianity long valued chastity over sexual fulfilment. A vow of chastity was a basic part of being a monk or a nun. Chastity for priests was originally an ideal that was turned into a rule during the great reform of the Medieval church by Pope Gregory VII.
>
> (Connell, 2002: 91)

Since that time; much of the Western world has witnessed periodic revelations of hypocrisy within religious institutions which has caused the influence of religious doctrine to wane in many areas of societal life, sexuality included. Korea, with its traditionally insular attitudes to socio-political affairs, has not been directly privy to such upheavals. Furthermore, since the division of the Peninsula, the churches' influence has gained increasing strength, meaning that in modern Korean society it is frowned upon to even speak about sex in a public setting. As with many countries in Asia and beyond, social standing plays a significant role in middle-class society. In middle-class South Korea a major sign of one's social standing is dictated by a person's piety so, even away from the vestments and scriptures of the churches themselves, any admission of 'sinful' corruptions like lust results in disapproval and ultimately exclusion from that society.

This religious aspect gives *Thirst* a similar sense of classical tragedy to *Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance*. Much like the titular tyrant of *Macbeth*, Sang-hyeon suffers a long, self-destructive fall from grace as the side favouring his unnatural

desires gradually begin to dominate and blacken his once pristine moral compass.

The first half of the film carries slight though no less noticeable shades of the earlier

part of *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) with the protagonists of both films

struggling to resist their abnormal lusts with limited success. The nature of the film's

uncomfortable sexual encounters exemplify a fixation on the sort of "psycho-sexual

pathology" prevalent in the psychological horror films of Kubrick and Polanski

through the way in which sexuality is framed as the sole source of terror for much of

the film (Powell, 2005: 43). In her 2005 publication, *Deleuze and Horror Film*, Anna

Powell argues through a textual analysis of Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* that it is

sexuality and more importantly fear of it which is the main catalyst for violence in

protagonist Carol Ledoux:

> She is repelled by her own sexuality, then that of
> others…her repulsion is triggered by narrative situations
> that act as secondary displacements of the primary cause.
>
> (Powell, 2005: 39)

In similar fashion, Sang-hyeon's life of piety and struggle with vampirism is reflected

by a rejection of his natural sexuality and a near-phobic response to the sexuality of

Tae-ju. She offers an obliging attitude to sex but is also sexually aggressive. The

scene where she first attempts to force herself on Sang-hyeon feels almost like an

inversion of the traditional set up for a rape, with the passive male character

responding to the assertive female's sexual advances with horror and reluctance.

During an interview with Alison Hoffman-han, Park Chan-wook explains at length

the significance of this scene in it's relation to how the sexual atmosphere lingers well after the physical act:

> The first sex scene escalates to a very intense moment, but it gets interrupted and is abruptly stopped. In the following scene at the mahjong table, having had the physical sex which is interrupted…Sang-hyun and Tae-ju…start caressing the mahjong pieces, and they carry on a conversation that is filled with sexual innuendos and double entendres as they steal secret glances at each other. So really, the sexual moment hasn't actually stopped, but rather, it lingers on. That scene is an extension of the physical sex that was interrupted just a moment before.
>
> (Hoffman-Han, 2012: 187-188)

Also of relevance is the way these scenes are tied to the film's other sex scene at the hospital, more so because it emphasises a period of rebirth for Tae-ju on both a spiritual and sexual level:

> This moment is important for Tae-ju…She's liberating herself from the Hellish household she's existed in for most of her life. She steps out of the house to have this encounter, so she's getting away from that tense house and

her husband. So it's not just sexual liberation but on a deeper level, she's moving towards fulfilling her desire.

(Hoffman-Han, 2012: 189)

For the sex starved Tae-ju, this pivotal moment is where her transition begins in the eyes of the director. Ebert mentions in this review that "An unflinchingly realistic vampire would be as unattractive as a late-stage addict", and Tae-ju eventually comes to resemble such an entity as the film progresses (Ebert, 12/08/2009)[51]. In their own ways, all three central characters are addicts: Sang-hyun's vampiric desire for life-sustaining blood, Tae-ju's nymphomaniacal desire for liberating sex, and Kang-woo's infantile desire for constant attention. However, it is in Tae-ju that these desires are strongest, as Park, who acknowledges that he had largely ignored meaningful feminine characterisation up until *Lady Vengeance*, points out forms a key role in shaping female characters:

It's their desire that I hope to describe in my films – an unwavering and honest look at their desires. When it comes to films that set out to be commercially viable, I find that they tend to treat female desire as something that is dangerous. Of course, I admit that in my films, I do sometimes treat women's desire as something that is dangerous, but I would hope that I've done a good job at doing this in the most frank, honest and mesmerizing manner possible. It is when you reveal the hidden desire,

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[51] Ebert also notes that public attraction to vampires comes in part from their often eloquent and theatrical screen and literary personae (Ebert, 2009). Coincidentally, that more familiar vampiric archetype is the central figure of the Horror film being shot at the start of *Cut* (2006).

> when you peel one layer to find another layer of desire
>
> underneath, as it were, that you get the most surprising and
>
> exquisite results.
>
> (Hoffman-Han, 2012: 190)

So it is for Tae-ju. The aforementioned liaisons are the first of many occasions where Tae-ju assumes the role of initiator that causes Sang-hyeon to suffer his calamities, much like Yong-mi was the initiator for Ryu in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. Through these calamities, the misogynistic subtext is presented far more subtly in *Thirst* than in the rest of Park's films.[52] Like Yong-mi in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, Tae-ju exhibits a powerful propensity for manipulation that stems not only from a dominant personality but also from her propensity for lies. The shades of Lady Macbeth previously described of Yong-mi are made even more stark through Tae-ju as she envelopes the innocent and naïve Sang-hyeon by lying about her relationship to Kang-woo, claiming that he physically abuses her. This downtrodden image of spousal abuse provokes sympathy not only in Sang-hyeon but also in the viewer. Ebert believes that this element of her character plays a crucial role in encouraging sympathy for Sang-hyeon:

> We've already seen how willing he is to help the
>
> unfortunate, and now his mercy is inspired by this poor girl
>
> who is mistreated by her sick husband and his shrewish
>
> mother.
>
> (Ebert, 2009)

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[52] This of course disregards *Lady Vengeance* (2005), where events a focalized from the perspective of a female protagonist; and *Stoker* (2013) which turns this misogyny on its head.

Arguably, Kang-Woo's treatment of Tae-ju may be tied to the Joseon period conventions of Hoju and therefore it's correlation to what Connell refers to as the patriarchal dividend which is described as "the advantage to men as a group for maintaining an unequal gender order" where men are deliberately given unfair privilege over women because the welfare of their masculinity is considered paramount on the gender spectrum (Connell, 2002: 142).[53] The fact that Sang-yeon's profession requires him to abandon the patriarchal dividend is what initially makes him more equal to Tae-ju and plays a key role in their attraction.

As a result of their liaisons, Sang-hyeon to conspire with Tae-ju to murder Kang-woo during a fishing trip, therefore breaking his vow of passivity. This is compounded further at the end of Act Two when the guilt surrounding Kang-woo's death begins to haunt the two of them through a series of supernatural visitations, which are undoubtedly the most disturbing parts of the film. As in *Repulsion*, the protagonist's internal headspace creates "spatial distortions" which "concretise intensive mental shifts in gear" (Powell, 2005:39). The most intense of these distortions comes in the climax of Act Two where Sang-hyeon and Tae-ju are attacked by the pallid, watery ghost of Kang-woo. Wailing like a banshee, this soggy apparition grapples with Sang-hyeon and attempts drag him into the depths of Tae-ju's water bed (formerly her marriage bed with Kang-woo). The coupling of the two elements – marriage and drowning – is emblematic of the moral depths to which Sang-hyeon has sunk through his interactions with Tae-ju and this descent continues for the remainder of the film. It could also represent how, as Kim Kyu-hyun says of Ryu and Dong-jin in *Sympathy For Mr Vengeance*, both Kang-woo and Sang-hyeon

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[53] The patriarchal dividend holds great relevance in both Chapters 6 and 7, and shall be explored in greater detail later on through my analyses of both *Oldboy* and *3-Iron*, where I argue that the partrichal dividend is more of a burden than a blessing.

"are identical figures" (Shin and Stringer, 2005: 114).[54] There are distinct similarities between the two films and the two pairs of polarising central male characters: both pairs showcase male characters that despite their contexts are identical in their dissolutions. Just as both men are destroyed by vengeance in *Sympathy…*, so do both central male figures in *Thirst* wind up emasculated by the end of the film. More importantly, both films see the two actors both playing almost identical roles. In each context, Shin Ha-hyun plays a recessive and pathetic male who is eventually murdered by drowning; while in both films Song plays an authority figure that falls from grace when he is driven to murder at the behest of a female character. On a lesser note, on both occasions Song also plays characters that are haunted by the spectre of drowning, perhaps as a metaphor for the depths of moral and spiritual depravity to which they fall.

In foregoing his vows, and therefore playing into Tae-ju's hands, Sang-hyeon surrenders the only form of primacy he has and spends the remainder of the film chasing after her, faced with no chance of redemption left beyond self-destruction. Thus *Thirst* ends in similarly nihilistic fashion to *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. Just as audiences are left staring dumbstruck at the image of Dong-jin bleeding to death by the river; they experience similar ambivalence at witnessing Sang-hyeon and Tae-ju being immolated by the morning sunrise. Whether this final act is viewed as either suicide or penance is left to the viewer's discretion. What is known is that through this film, as indeed in his whole body of work, it is Park's belief that life is worth nothing if it is not lived.

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[54] A strange coincidence given that both character couplets are played by the same two actors.

Oldboy (2003)

If a consensus was taken among Western university students regarding the first South Korean film they had seen, the most likely answer would be *Oldboy*. Adapted from a Japanese Manga by pulp writer Garon Tsuchiya, this often violent, torrid and highly commercial feature film by Park Chan-Wook has received mixed opinions worldwide. Perhaps the most accurate way of describing *Oldboy* is as the Korean *Clockwork Orange*, due to its hazy perceptions of reality and the way the narrative similarly follows protagonist Oh Dae-su (Choi Min-sik) on a seemingly directionless path of destruction, before he comes to realize what really matters in life.

For some critics, *Oldboy* would epitomise the image of the colonial male through its heavy focus on action hero iconography, similar to the masculinities which rocked British and Hollywood cinema throughout the 1960s and 1970s. With a protagonist whose facial appearance resembles, to quote cinema academic Karen Krizanovich, "a Korean Charles Bronson in a fright wig", the incomparable Choi Min-sik embodies the image of the morose, introspective male whose humanity is lost through violence (Schneider, 2004: 940)[55]. Sun Jung argues that this juxtaposition of the sleek suit and the dishevelled hairstyle alludes to what she refers to as "the time between dog and wolf" where Western audiences "can not identify whether Dae-soo is a cool friend or a savage outsider" (Jung, 2011: 32).

Capitalist elements aside, Park remains true to his formula of male binaries through the juxtaposition of Oh Dae Su with the story's antagonist Lee Woo-jin in much the same way as he did with the binary of protagonist/antagonist in his previous two films and would later do again in *Cut* (2006) and *Thirst*. Arguably, however,

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[55] See Steven Jay Shneider's *1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die*, Revised edition (2004).

Oldboy exemplifies this theme best of all. Oh Dae-su and Lee Woo-jin are, at their

core, polarized (albeit toxic) interpretations of the alpha-male and as such find

themselves forever locked in confrontation. This dichotomy is not a new concept, or

one that is restricted to Asia. Chris Blazina explains that as far back as the Arthurian

legends of the early to mid Medieval period, the competitive polarization of

masculinity as either Warrior or Aristocrat was a common paradigm for codifying the

newly emerging multiple strata of middle-class men (Blazina, 2003: 39-47). He

writes:

> Masculinity is dichotomized as reflecting either refinement
> or valour. These, in turn, are attached to social standing
> whereby refinement is indicative of a higher standing and
> valour alone may be suspect of a lower standing.
>
> (Blazina, 2003: 47)

This paradigm translates fluidly to Dae-su and Woo-jin. One is a misogynistic,

working-class pugilist who revels in violence, favours impulse over reason and whose

body has been toned to freakish proportions; while the other is a financially successful

metro-sexual whose good looks and high fashion sense do nothing to conceal the truth

that underneath he is still just a hurt, spoilt little boy. Both repeatedly express their

flaws by treating other masculine figures as collateral in their conflict; Oh Dae-su

saves a suicidal homosexual from falling off a roof just long enough to tell him the

story of his 15 year incarceration, and has a brief though abrasive encounter with a

grubby tramp outside the sushi restaurant in which he receives his cell phone (his

direct link to Woo-jin). Likewise, Woo-jin brutally murders Dae-su's friend, Ju-

hwan, simply for slandering the memory of his late sister and later shoots his Japanese bodyguard for failing to immediately follow orders.

From the perspective of protest masculinity, the majority of power in this conflict falls to Woo-jin due to his money and financial strength. This negates Dae-su's violent pugilism, though in its own cultural terms this pugilism can be seen as an affirmation of his own working class masculinity. Speaking about the observations made during interactions with bikers and yuppies, R.W. Connell comments that:

> One way to resolve this contradiction is a spectacular display, embracing the marginality and stigma and turning them to account. At the personal level, this translates as a constant concern with front or credibility.
>
> (Connell, 1995:116)

This analysis also goes some way to explaining the extent to which Dae-su seeks to create a sense of spectacle for his quarry. The film's biggest moment; an extremely unrealistic though no less impressive fight scene filmed in a single tracking shot, closer in style to a videogame than to a film, is perhaps the best example of this principle. This declaration of Dae-su's protest masculinity is successful in garnering respect from the street gangs but not from Woo-jin, who in disguise helps the wounded Dae-su to a taxi, revealing at the last minute to have been watching him all along.

Further; Woo-jin later reveals that since Dae-su's incarceration, he has had a pacemaker installed which he can remotely switch off whenever he wants, forcing Dae-su to continue playing their game to its conclusion for fear of being denied the

satisfaction he craves so intensely. This presents a similarity between Park and

Boorman in that in both *Oldboy* and *Point Blank* involve, to paraphrase David

Thompson, a vengeance which "takes the cute form of sexual betrayal" where one

party uses the other to remedy a subjective sense of loss (Thompson, 1998: 16). In

Point Blank, Walker (Lee Marvin) uses narrative villain Mal Reese as a substitute for

his dead lover, Lynne, identifying "the homo-sexual frustration/loathing between

gangsters" (Thompson, 1998:16). In *Oldboy* there is a role reversal in that Park uses

Woo-jin to emphasise the same point through his obsessions with Dae-su. He feels a

twisted sense of intimacy from their cat and mouse game and thus is left feeling

rejected when Dae-su wins because he realises that it was only a temporary substitute

for the loss of his sister.

This may also suggest the prospect that protest masculinity may in fact work

against itself in complicity with hegemonic masculinity. If the film has any political

value, then it is designed to show how society is catered toward shaping male

characters in accordance with certain agendas. During their confrontation at his

penthouse suite Woo-jin reveals that everything Dae-su has done on his journey had

been planned by him, right down the smallest detail, and supplanted into Dae-su's

psyche using post-hypnotic suggestion. That, like Frankenstein, Woo-jin had created a

monster purely so that he could revel in setting it loose; suggesting the opinion that

even rebellion exists as a form of cultural conformity.[56] In truth, they are both

prisoners in that Dae-su and Woo-jin are both ruled by past hatreds.

Dae-su's inadequacies are also called into question through his relationship

with Mi-do. During his incarceration, Dae-su discovers that his wife has been

murdered and that he has been framed for the crime. This directly references another

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[56] *Frankenstein* is referenced several times throughout *Oldboy*: footage from the famous blind hermit scene from *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) is displayed on the TV in Dae-su's room and Woo-jin frequently refers to him as a 'monster'.

recurring theme of social commentary that South Korean men are incapable of protecting their women, which is later mirrored in the latter part of Act Two when Woo-jin savours insulting Dae-su's intellectual deficiencies by questioning, "How can you expect to take care of your women with that head of yours?" The resonance of this statement echoes through out repeated viewings of *Oldboy* through the way in which Dae-su treats Mi-do throughout the main part of the narrative, offering another comparison between *Oldboy* and *Point Blank*. In his review for the re-release of *Point Blank* in June 1998, film journalist David Thompson writes:

…the most hostile thing about Walker is his apathy, his inability to make a living connection with others.

(Thompson, 1998: 16)

The same could be said of Oh Dae-su. He and Mi-do are at times presented as polar opposites: Unlike Yong-mi and Tae-ju, Mi-do is a kind, caring individual who on several occasions nurses Oh Dae-su back to health following illness and severe wounding whilst Dae-su, when not ignoring Mi-do entirely, offers such abusive treatment as tying her to her own mattress. The relationship between Dae-su and Mi-do is a vehicle for expressing Park's attitudes to sexuality. The gender inequality between the two characters is quite stark, particularly regarding its correlation to the *patriarchal dividend*. From an Orwellian perspective, Mi-do is to Dae-su what Julia is to Winston Smith in *1984*: an outlet of sexual relief to utilise for his own ends, and on several occasions he attempts to impose his sexual will upon her. It is only when Mi-do decides to make herself available that Dae-su softens towards her, emphasising the necessity of the patriarchal male to find redemption in the arms of feminine

counterparts. This identifies what Connell considers a flaw in the idea of the patriarchal dividend: that it is a convention which only holds power for men as a group and not for individuals. Connell writes:

> The patriarchal dividend decreases as overall gender equality grows…Individual men may get more of it than others, or less, or none, depending on their location in the social order.
>
> (Connell, 2002: 142)

It is this location within the social order and the specific circumstances of the group dynamic which causes the patriarchal dividend that Oh Dae-su attempts to exert over Mi-do to wane and for their genders to become more equal. The sex scene between the two of them is very one-sided to begin with, with Mi-do expressing elements of both pain and distress as Oh Dae-su bears down upon her in an uncomfortable almost rape-like sexual position. However, when they switch to having sex sitting up, and more importantly face-to-face, the resulting gender equality transforms the presentation of the experience from shocking to passionate. By the end of the scene Dae-su has conceded all of his remaining patriarchal primacy, smiling warmly at Mi-do as he dries the sweat from her hair. Over the course of this one scene, Dae-su exhibits a tenderness he previously would never have shown and his character makes a change for the better, suggesting to the viewer that maybe modern man is better off abandoning archaic patriarchal conventions.

Mi-do acts not only as a source of redemption for Dae-su but also a means of atonement. The pseudo-preternatural relationship he shares with her has been

mirrored by numerous earlier directors ranging from Luc Besson (*Leon: The Professional*, 1994) to Stanley Kubrick (*Lolita*, 1967). However, Park uses the set up of an older man courting a young woman to convey a potent social commentary. Whilst the oedipal implications of the film's climactic reveal – Woo-jin confronts Dae-su with the knowledge that Mi-do is in fact his infant daughter grown up - may not be as staggering to some viewers as the script originally intends, Park uses this plot line to critique the culture of the middle aged man who turns to womanising in retaliation to mid-life crises and has illicit affairs with women of their children's generation. In his interview with Alison Hoffman-Han, Park mentions that he was dissatisfied with this scene because of how the narrative demanded that Mi-do not be present during its events:

> … I got to thinking about the daughter character, Mi-do (Kang Hye-jeong). She is not privy to the most important reveal in this film, and of course, she cannot be privy to it in order for the drama of the film to succeed. However, I felt quite frustrated that she was so isolated from the truth.
>
> (Hoffman-Han, 2012: 189)

This observation would inevitably inspire Park to push for stronger and more prominent female characters in his latter films. In the context of *Oldboy* however, the presence of this revelation could also be seen as a final ultimate denigration of patriarchy as means for "the exploitation of women" (Connell, 2002: 38). In a country as domestically orientated as South Korea, such a reminder would present a stark wake-up call to many 'dirty old men' about the importance of choosing the right type

of partner, further compounding the previous image of Mi-do and Dae-su embracing as Dae-su utters the words "I hope that next time you find a younger man." This scandalous revelation, which threatens Mi-do as much as it does himself, at last manages to reawaken Dae-su's conscience and encourages him to rethink the course of his actions. Further, by keeping Mi-do sheltered from the truth, Park ensures that as the one decent and (almost) pure character in this film, Mi-do's innocence does not suffer the same untimely death as that of Woo-jin's sister.

Thus, on revised viewing, the audience is exposed to yet another layer of critical meaning in *Oldboy*: as much as the confrontation between Oh Dae Su and Lee Woo-jin exemplifies the external conflicts of a world rife with multiple masculinities, so does the film also discuss the protagonist's internal conflict within himself. Referencing "the time between dog and wolf"; Dr. Sun Jung argues that this transition is a key reason for *Oldboy*'s popularity overseas:

> The "time between dog and wolf" epitomizes the current ever-fluctuating post modern era, an era characterized by the demise of "the tradition of Aristotelian logic, through which Western society has long defined itself via a series of popular oppositions the central of which were good versus evil and us versus them" (Booker: 2007: xv); this is the time when Western audiences ambivalently embrace postmodern South Korean masculinity that is fragmented and constantly transforming.
>
> (Jung, 2011: 32)

The appeal therefore, comes from the Buddhist/Confucian opinion that there is no black or white absolute, emphasised by a central character that is capable being both honourable and monstrous in the same breath. Oh Dae-su undergoes dramatic change over the course of the narrative. In the first act he is a scruffy outsider, throwing drunken tantrums with police and masturbating over television images. By Act Three, he has traded in his boisterous bodyguard uniform for a sleek soirée suit and his hair goes from wild and matted to styled and flowing – to some he may even appear physically attractive. In so doing, to quote Chris Blazina, Oh Dae su comes to exemplify that rare occurrence of a dichotomized male character who "can straddle both worlds respectively", thus attaining a new meta-status of alpha masculinity (Blazina, 2003: 47). By attaining this new status, he also causes Woo-jin to suffer complete emasculation. As Jack Urwin states succinctly in *Man Up*, "Men fear emasculation" – often more so than death – and few things are more emasculating to a toxic male than the presence of a better man (Urwin, 2017). Therefore, when Dae-su proves that he is indeed the better man, Woo-jin can no longer project his self-loathing onto Dae-su, resulting in his defeat and eventual suicide.

Perhaps this blatant visual emphasis on change represents not only his transition from beast to man but also of South Korea's transformation from violent police state to liberal democracy. By embracing change and abandoning his violent past, Dae-su is able to passively overcome his flaws and therefore vanquish his foil to begin life again anew.

Chapter 7: Gender relations in *Samaritan Girl and 3-Iron*

Although discussed in brief segments throughout the body of this thesis, what has not yet been fully addressed is that masculinity as a social construct can only truly exist via its opposition to femininity. This opposition, which theorists like RW Connell refer to as "gender difference" is prevalent in all societies throughout the world but the degree of severity surrounding these differences varies according to culture, causing traditional ideologies to be bent or broken as times and cultural practices change (Connell, 2002: 68). This has led to the argument in much of the First World that there are in fact no gender laws which exist outside of human culture beyond the level of physical biology. In the 2002 publication, *Gender*, Connell explains:

> Ideologies of 'natural difference' have drawn much of their force from the belief that gender never changes. Adam delved and Eve span, Men must work and women must weep, Boys will be Boys. Serious analysis begins with the recognition that exactly the opposite is true: *everything about gender is historical*.
>
> (Connell, 2002: 68)

If this statement is true, that everything which exists in gender is historically constructed, then an argument arises concerning the need to abandon these rules. Traditionally, women were considered to be the bearers of life and as such it was a man's duty to keep his woman from harm and provide for her so that she could bear

and rear her off-spring as best she could. In many cases, however, this text-book opinion of gender proved to be little more than a veneer for patriarchal tyranny, so that men could control and (in the eyes of many feminists) dominate women. What this does not account for is that the role of women in Western society has undergone several dramatic changes over the course of the past one hundred and fifty years. This is primarily due to the rise in Feminism which works on the basis of protesting that patriarchal doctrines are specifically designed to subjugate women. To quote Connell:

> Women are the main group subordinated in patriarchal power structures and so have a structural interest in change. Feminist movements, mobilizing women, have been energized by this contradiction and have used it to break down inequality. They have persistently used it to claim 'rights' in the public sphere and used those rights to challenge oppression in private spheres.
>
> (Connell, 2002: 72)

Beginning in the late 19th century with the suffragette movement, the role of women in Western society especially underwent a revolutionary shift from the domineering oppression of patriarchal gender rule, to an age which draws ever closer to achieving gender parity.

The same can not be said of Asia where many of these gender rules preserving even greater rigidity and patriarchy continues to dominate to the present day. Throughout Asia, the role of women is traditionally corralled into either that of a wife and mother or of a whore, with authorities imposing strong social pressure to favour

the former over the latter. Thus women are increasingly excluded from social advantages like career progression or higher education; are often coerced or forced into arranged marriages; or are abused and often punished for resisting this fate. These punishments are issued in varying degrees according to the societies involved, ranging from social dishonour to murder and execution in the more extreme cases. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler suggests that this sort of stringently repressive social paradigm exists solely to satisfy male need for autonomous signification:

> …the process of meaning constitution requires that women reflect that masculine power everywhere reassure that the power of the reality of its illusionary autonomy. This task is confounded, to say the women reflect the autonomous power of the masculine subject/signifier becomes essential to the constitution of that autonomy and, line subject, a power which, if withdrawn, would break up the foundational illusions of the masculine subject position.
>
> (Butler, 1990: 262-264)

Thus, as Butler points out, many patriarchal civilisations throughout the world traditionally relegate women to positions which seek only to ensure and re-enforce male dominance. Under the context of patriarchy, femininity becomes largely irrelevant since ensuring the strength and stability of the nation's masculinity becomes the sole objective. In essence, this principle stresses the essentiality of the Patriarchal Dividend explored in the previous chapter. Butler then goes on to explain

that importance of maintaining this convention stems from the male need for the constant assertion of dominance:

> In order to "be" the Phallus, the reflector and guarantor of the an apparent masculine subject position, women must become, must 'be' (in the sense of "posture as if they were") precisely what men are not and, in their very lack, establish the essential function of men.
>
> (Butler, 1990: 262-264)

As Butler points out through her studies, perhaps the only way for patriarchal masculinity to identify itself as strong or dominant is to ensure that femininity and matriarchy are portrayed as recessive or weak. This belief bolsters the patriarchal dividend by attempting to legitimise male privilege and likewise the oppression of females.

Whilst South Korea harbours one of the more liberal approaches toward women's affairs in Asia, it remains one of the starkest examples of this principle, especially considering the presence of a hierarchal gendered social system called *hoju* which was introduced into Korean society in 1898 in accordance with Japan's encroaching influence. Daniel Tudor explains that the hoju system proved quite effective within Korea's already patriarchal social structure, especially considering the misogynistic laws laid down under the Joseon dynasty:

> Earlier dynasties like the Shilla and Koryo had some degree of sexual equality, but the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) saw

the status of women shrink dramatically. Women could not

initiate divorce, though their husbands could divorce them

on a whim; they had to strictly obey their husband's

commands; they were not allowed to inherit property; and

they were generally forbidden from participating in public

life.

(Tudor, 2012: 298-299)

Tudor goes on to explain that as time went on, the number of laws designed to

oppress women slowly intensified. From the fifteenth century to the period leading up

to Japanese annexation, a variety of progressive laws came to pass which eventually

culminated in the creation of a state where women were forced to conceal their faces

when out of doors, assuming they were allowed to leave the confines of the home

(Tudor, 2012: 199-301). Tudor mentions:

The status of women eroded to the extent that the family

home became the only domain regarded as suitable for a

woman…The ideal woman was one who stayed indoors

and faithfully served her husband and in-laws.

(Tudor, 2012: 299-301)

In saying this, Tudor also explains that since 2005, there has been a conscious effort

to re-integrate Korean women into education, the workplace and into public: the

successful election of a female president in 2014 is testimony to this. However, it

would appear that whilst the position of Korean women in society is legally gaining

ground, from a social perspective many of the old patriarchal conventions remain. Many industries continue to remain very much 'old boys' clubs' where women continue to be treated as after-thoughts or overlooked because of sexual bias. As Tudor attests, "the influence of five centuries of Joseon government cannot be swept away with a few legal revisions" (Tudor, 2012: 298-299).

Viewed from a broader perspective, a point of contention arises when analysing the sudden shift in gender attitudes from the more equal periods of Shilla and Koryo to the Joseon period, and especially the period operating under hoju. A key argument made by Butler in *Gender Trouble* regarding Lacanian gender relations is that "Lacan disputes the notion that men signify the meaning of woman and women signify the meaning for men" because patriarchy protests that women signify men but that the cycle not be reciprocated (Butler, 1990: 264). Considering this argument, the contention arises in the observation that upheavals which sought to wound South Korea's masculinity occurred during periods where patriarchy had usurped traditional gender equality. It could therefore be argued that many of the wounds attributed to South Korean masculinity throughout much of the Twentieth Century were a direct result of the failures that stem from a culture of gender norms that are not reflective of the people's indigenous social nature. In a culture where the natural order is for both sides to be equal instead of the bi-partisan dichotomy of Self/Other, the logical conclusion is that adoption of such polarising concepts can only prove detrimental because in ostracising and neglecting its 'Other' the 'Self' is inevitably weakened as well.

Therefore, if one is to truly believe that "men signify the meaning of women and women signify the meaning of men" then to surely afford favouritism to one gender over the other will prove detrimental to the nation's gender as a whole (Butler,

1990: 264). The inclusion and exclusion of genders within society has in recent years become an issue that has taken centre stage outside the peninsula with the rise of fourth wave feminism and LGBT launching a major backlash against traditional patriarchy throughout the First World, revealing patriarchal masculinity to be wounded and ineffectual in the twenty-first century, while at the same time allowing less hostile forms of masculinity (e.g. 'soft' masculinity) to endure.

The dilemma of gender exclusion is blatantly apparent in South Korea's media, which as with many countries is largely owned and operated by right-wing conservatives. Tudor explains that:

> …the media is particularly regressive in the way it portrays
>
> women, as either helpless or overly sexualized.
>
> <div align="right">(Tudor, 2012:)</div>

New Korean cinema has been guilty of this as well. Kim Kyung-hyun draws attention to this issue in the first chapter of *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*. He explains that the role of women is often totally ignored in a large proportion of South Korean films:

> Even the best of the Korean directors that are featured in
>
> this book – while busy pursuing the male-orientated drive
>
> to recuperate their insufficiencies have never seriously
>
> considered vital questions appertaining to women.
>
> <div align="right">(Kim, 2004:8-9)</div>

In much the same way as Judith Butler's findings, Kim's observation suggests a variety of possibilities with regard to how the presentation of screen masculinity could be inadvertently hindered by the exclusion of Korean femininity from the cinematic sphere of investigation. Among the most useful modes of investigating a gendered subject is comparison with its other. If that other is itself found to be insufficient, then its contrast with the self becomes stunted and ineffectual – or worse can not be conducted at all – severely limiting exploration to any extensive level.

Furthermore, films which do include female characters often treat them as window-dressing: one-dimensional shadows which have no personality of their own and serve only to be living set pieces which male characters can exploit and use at their own discretion. When reviewing the role of women in the films of Kim Ki-duk, the focus of this chapter, Kim Kyung-hyun explains that a fundamental problem with female characters in male-orientated South Korean films is that they are often nothing more than poorly written puppets to whom writers and directors offer no thought whilst their male counterparts are given most if not all the dramatic emphasis:

> Women function as masochistic and passive objects predicated on the patented image of mother and whore. The male characters shuffle between virtue and irredeemability, between care and violence, and between fantasy and reality while often the women must remain immutable…
>
> (Kim, 2004: 8-9)

The starkest truth about Kim's statement is that it is true not only of the majority of films in his book but also for the majority of films covered in this thesis. In particular,

it has already been stated that the majority of Park Chan-wook's earlier films contain female characters that are either overlooked, shunned, tortured or sexually abused by bullying, ruthless and aggressive male characters, and that female characters in the films of Kim Ji-woon often act as catalysts for the dissolution of male protagonists. However, it should also be noted that both these directors have also released films with heavy feminist overtones i.e. Park Chan-wook's *Lady Vengeance* (2006), Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden* (2016) and Kim Ji-woon's *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2004). The latter of these three films is particularly intriguing given that *A Tale of Two Sisters* takes place in a world where gender rules are flipped on their head, with the male character assuming the non-existent role in a female dominated environment.

These three films highlight a previously undiscussed advantage of the New Korean Cinema movement in that it has allowed feminism to permeate into the industry. Whilst the volume of feminist Korean films has always been consistently low at best, a problem which in the 2010s is thankfully being rectified; the New Korean Cinema period did manage to produce several very prominent examples of how the role of South Korean women in cinema has been steadily shifting toward a more equal position. Between 2000 and 2010 several high profile films were produced which had narratives centring on female protagonists, usually from oppressive and/or abusive domestic backgrounds who would rise up against their male oppressors and strive for independence. Sadly however, these films often ended with some from of submission by the heroine, either toward her antagonist or her situation, where they would either wind up destitute, insane or returning to their old lives of misery.

Perhaps for this reason, Kim Kyung-hyun poses a very potent question concerning female-centred narratives in South Korean film:

> Could a story ever be conceived in Korean Cinema that focuses on a self-centred woman who is freed from her duties as a mother or wife, without framing her in the convention of a vamp?
>
> (Kim, 2004: 8-9)

The most obvious answer to Kim's question would be that it would be most definitely possible. As with masculinity, RW Connell points out that modern society gives just as much rise to multiple forms of femininity (Connell, 2002: 77). Several prominent film makers have also attempted to answer this challenge in the years following the publication of Kim's book, with the release of several pro-feminist films which saw headstrong females rising up, breaking their gender shackles and conquering the male dominated world. Lee Hyangjin explains that the creation of South Korean films catering toward female audiences took off in the mid 1990s, with films like Chang Sonu's *To You From Me* (1994) and Pak Ch'olsu's *301,302* (1995) listed among the first films to "reflect the changing attitudes of the young generation" on the issue of how women are treated under male patriarchy and consequently "raising questions about the traditional patriarchal values" (Lee, 2000: 59). However, these films were few in number and it wasn't until the 2000s that there was a steady influx of pro-feminist melodrama. Perhaps the best example of pro-feminist South Korean cinema is Im Sang-soo's follow up to *The President's Last Bang*, the controversial romantic melodrama *A Good Lawyer's Wife* (2003). Reviewing each of the characters from a

sociological perspective, the film discusses the dysfunctional nature of the modern South Korean family unit and delivers a damning indictment into the iniquity of South Korean men. It is also relevant for its open dialogue about the legacy of the Korean War and the damaged sense of belonging which afflicted many who have either defected to the South from the North or are descended from those who have previously defected.

The story centres around dance instructor and housewife Ho-jeong (Mun So-ri), who gave up a professional dance career to provide a stable home for her lawyer husband Yeong-jak (Hwang Jung-min) and their adopted son who was brought to Seoul from the North. Yeong-jak is a man-child of the highest order. Whilst he is more than capable of fulfilling his contracted duties as a lawyer, he possesses little to no responsibility as a father or as a husband. When not in the courtroom or liaising with clients, Yeong-jak spends his days either in bed with his young mistress or drinking to excess. Ho-jeong has long since come to terms with her husband's infidelity and accepted it but remains sexually frustrated and fearful of losing her sense of sexuality. Therefore she remedies this fear by seducing a teenage neighbour named Ji-woon (Bong Tae-gyu) and begins seeing him behind Yeong-jak's back. When Yeong-jak originally finds out about the affair he contacts Ji-woon's father. When this attempt fails to quell the liaisons between Ho-jeong and Ji-woon, tensions between them rapidly start to escalate; Yeong-jak's father dies from liver disease and their son is murdered by an alcoholic postman who lost his job following a traffic accident with Yeong-jak. This escalation comes to fever pitch with a confrontation between husband and wife where Yeong-jak breaks several of Ho-jeong's fingers in a drunken rage. Ho-jeong leaves Yeong-jak following the incident and has sex with Ji-woon in her dance studio. Six months later, Ho-jeong meets Yeong-jak at her studio

and she reveals to him that she is pregnant with Ji-woon's child. Yeong-jak replies by explaining that his mistress has left him and promises to raise Ho-jeong's child as his own if she takes him back, to which Ho-jeong refuses claiming that she doesn't need a man in her life any more. The film ends with Yeong-jak leaving defeated as Ho-jeong dances vibrantly to the sound of *Old Langsyne*, emphasizing her clean slate.

Throughout *A Good Lawyer's Wife*, the narrative is primarily driven by actress Mun So-ri, who had previously worked with Im Song-soo on his earlier exploration of feminine relations, *Girls' Night Out* (1998). Among Mun's previous credits was a powerful performance in Lee Chang-dong's off-beat romantic drama *Oasis* (2002) where she played a young woman afflicted with cerebral palsy. Both films, *Oasis* and *A Good Lawyer's Wife* require extreme physical performances through which Mun analyses the theme of how audiences regard feminine bodies by exploring both ends of the anatomical spectrum. As Derek Elley writes in his review of *A Good Lawyer's Wife* for *Variety*:

> Playing in a totally different key from her cerebral palsy victim in "Oasis," Mun makes the wife a sexy, vibrant woman who still has her best years ahead of her — and thus a convincing character within the slightly exaggerated terms of the screenplay. Scenes between her and Bong have a strange mixture of tenderness and forthrightness that establishes their bond as two rebels within different confines.
>
> (Elley, 10/06/2003)

Elley's statement about Mun's portrayal of "two rebels within different confines" presents an especially intriguing premise. In *Oasis*, Mun plays a character imprisoned

by the physiological limitations of her own body yet who is still able to freely control her own life; whereas in *A Good Lawyer's Wife* she plays a woman who despite being at the height of her physical prime is imprisoned within the confines of middle-class marital conventions. In both instances, her characters are able to effectively escape these bonds and flourish in their own unique way, thus proving that even in a country as stringently conservative as South Korea gender codes are not concrete and as such can be transcended. It is for this reason that Mun So-ri can be credited as one of the first true feminist icons of New Korean cinema. In 2010, Mun reunited with Im Sang-soo once again to star in his sexually charged thriller, *The Housemaid* (2010).

Thanks to the achievements of actresses like Mun So-ri and Lee Yeong-ae (circa 2005's *Lady Vengeance*), the 2010s have seen a dramatic improvement in the way women are portrayed in South Korean film. However, this does not absolve the fact that for much of the 2000s the majority of New Korean Cinema still treated female characters largely as an after-thought. While there were some noticeable exceptions not previously mentioned in this thesis, such as Yun Chong-jan's *Blue Swallow* (2005) and the previously lauded performance of Shin Ok-bin as the sexually dominant Tae-ju in Park Chan-wook's *Thirst*, the great majority of South Korean films held a deeper focus on how female characters are treated, or rather mistreated as was frequently the case, in relation to their male counterparts. This chapter is therefore devoted to one of the Peninsula's most devoted film makers in the portrayal of these injustices.

Kim Ki-duk

One of the best examples of South Korean directors who discuss the difficult circumstances surrounding the relationships of men and women is Kim Ki-duk. Of all the directors studied in this thesis, Kim is the least commercial, with his films often being credited for their distinctly 'art house' nature. In his book, Kim Kyung-hyun makes some choice remarks about Kim Ki-duk's body of work. Ever the stark modernist, the majority of Kim's films exist in a state of heightened naturalism which borders almost on documentary. Effects, performance, even soundtrack is kept to a methodically bare minimum in accordance with this aesthetic. At times this can lead to emotional distancing from the viewer whilst at other times provoke an extreme over-reaction. Kim's films are often described as 'the cinema of cruelty' for some of the striking images contained therein. A common emotion felt by audiences of Kim's earlier films is disgust, given that the violent acts contained therein (no matter how sparsely littered through the film they may be) are brutally realistic. This is none more true than concerning the events of Kim's 2000 film *The Isle* which contains graphic footage of real animal cruelty when several fish were mutilated and a frog skinned alive on camera. Whilst visually disturbing, these scenes sought to exemplify a deep sociological grievance regarding the food industry and how social contexts dictate how people regard the treatment of animals for consumption. This attitude would also be reflected again in Kim's follow up film *Address Unknown*, which publicly conveyed the consumption of dog meat that has over the past ten years become the subject of heated debate on the world stage.

Among the most prevalent elements in Kim Ki-duk's films is a sense of pathos toward characters generated by the exertion of cruelty. When reviewing *Address Unknown*, Steve Choe explains that:

> Much of the pathos stems from the inescapable repetition of this violence, both horizontally throughout the community and vertically from one generation to the next, and from an inability to "work through" past trauma.
>
> (Choe, 2007:72)

This can also be said of those films by Kim Ki-duk that concern the treatment of women in modern South Korea. Frequently, audiences are made to bear witness to female characters suffering some form of physical or emotional cruelty at the hands of men (Sun-hwa's heavy facial bruising in *3-Iron* among the best examples of this). What makes this even worse, as Choe mentions, is that whereas in non-Korean films which deal with similar themes e.g. Gary Oldman's *Nil By Mouth*, there is often no real respite from this torment, or if there is then it is eventually corrupted by the self-serving agenda of the woman's rescuer. Choe writes:

> There is little room for the preservation and protection of another's being and in those moments where some residue of care seems to exist, we come to realize that they are in the service of some further profit or gain.
>
> (Choe, 2007:72)

Given the director's affection for heightened cinematic naturalism, this could be considered Kim's way of thumbing his nose at the more commonly accepted conventions of drama. As with the earlier films of Park Chan-wook, there are no black/white boundaries of good and evil in any of Kim Ki-duk's films and therefore many of his characters are indeed self-serving entities. In saying this, it could be argued that, as with life, there is no moral authorship to any of the characters or situations apparent in Kim Ki-duk's films. As Choe observes about the characters featured in Kim's 2001 film, *Address Unknown*:

> They all behave in ways that seem to indicate a lack of moral centre and commit unethical acts apparently without guilt or responsibility. As a result, these characters seem simply weird and foreign.
>
> (Choe, 2007:82)

This statement resonates far beyond the context of *Address Unknown*. Regardless of their position within their respective narratives, the characters in Kim Ki-duk's films appear to be completely amoral, each embodying a moral law solely unto themselves. Furthermore, there appears to be no authoritarian voice to condemn the violence often subjected toward characters, nor is the audience noticeably moved by witnessing it. Choe presents the opinion that such treatment can be considered a social commentary about the nature of spectatorship and the voyeuristic way in which film is regarded in society:

> These ways of looking reinstate the either/or rhetoric of master and slave, whereby the spectator is installed as master of the visual field…by separating the face of the viewer from the face of the screen before such binaries are superimposed. This separation is crucial. It is this ontological distance that confounds quick and easy consumption, as one might consume a Hollywood film, enabling the otherness of the screen to originate its own radiance.
>
> (Choe, 2007:82-83)

Relating to the nature of how audiences view the film as a passive onlooker there is a natural detraction from events on screen because the audience is denied the necessary emotive prompts needed to engage with the events that they are witnessing. The most telling aspect of this visual detraction is that the heightened naturalism and amateur-style camera which at times make Kim Ki-duk's films appear closer in feel to fly-on-the-wall documentaries than pieces of scripted drama. Seldom in a Kim Ki-duk film is the viewer treated to any shot more subjective than a medium-close-up, and when more intimate shots are presented the blocking is often deliberately off-kilter so that it becomes almost parody. The numerous images of domestic violence, humiliation and other such forms of cruelty contained therein become reduced to nothing more than another part of the on-screen image. According to Choe, it is this disregard for such imagery in relation to spectatorship which has created such disgust among foreign festival goers:

This encounter between contemporary modes of face-to-face viewing of images that threaten the viability of those modes throws into relief an authentic form of difference against the flat backdrop of the screen. Affirming the possibility that the impossibility of spectatorship truly impossible seems to me the first step toward making space for otherness.

(Choe, 2007:83)

Yet, Kim Ki-duk is not the only South Korean film maker to manipulate spectatorship in order to provoke a heightened negative response from audiences. Anyone who has seen *A Good Lawyer's Wife* will no doubt condemn Im Sang-soo's irreverent treatment of the scene where Ho-jeong's son is murdered – the actor playing the boy's murderer makes no attempt to disguise the fact that he is throwing a dummy from the roof of the car park - for the apparent thoughtlessness of it. The entire sequence is so callous and insincere that it is difficult not to be moved by it and it is not uncommon to hear gasps from several audience members when the film is screened publicly. Such a stark reaction is just as usual when regarding the films of Kim Ki-duk.

Kim Kyung-hyun considers this issue of spectatorship to be a crucial (if not the definitive) element in Kim Ki-duk's body of work, especially regarding the way in which violence is interpreted between the subjectivities of gender:

The most critical issue that must be underscored in reading the films of Kim Ki-duk is not his representation of men

who are violent, but the explicit nature in which this
violence is depicted and the portrayal of women who
remain uniformly masochistic, without their subjectivities
being declared independently from the men's.

(Kim, 2004: 134-135)

Indeed, many of the film's in Kim Ki-duk's canon are rife with remorseless acts of sexual and domestic violence enacted upon female characters by their male counterparts, often with the female victims simply absorbing the abuse without protestation or complaint. For this reason, Kim notes, many of Kim Ki-duk's films have attracted widespread condemnation among feminist circles in South Korea. According to Kim Kyung-hyun, however, these expressions of outrage exemplify the misguided nature of South Korean feminist gender politics because the offended parties have overlooked the sociological context of the films' narratives. Like moral guardians in the West who denigrate horror films for their unpleasant content, these feminist critics frequently overlook (or conveniently ignore) the fact these images are meant to be disturbing or distressing so that they can alert audiences to the indecent manner in which men often treat women in Korean society. Film, like all other art forms, is supposed to challenge us and Kim Ki-duk's films are nothing if not challenging.

The distressing and morally dubious nature of gender relations in the films of Kim Ki-duk are none more heavily expressed than in the films he made during the turn of the century. It has already been stated that *The Isle* received condemnation for its unethical attitude toward animal rights. The same could be definitely said of his previous film *Bad Guy* (1999) which, quite graphically, depicts a young woman

losing her virginity during a violent act of prostitution. In his review of *The Isle* featured in Justin Bowyer's *The Cinema of Japan and Korea* (2004), film reviewer Donato Totaro quotes an extract of the interview between Kim Ki-duk and journalist Jung Seong-il regarding the graphic and disturbing nature of the sex scenes portrayed in this film:

> I am very conscious about the chastity issue in Korea…my primary aim was to avoid a melodramatic scene. There was no room in my film for cheap sympathy…The sex scene in *Bad Guy* was cruel and very real. Women all over the world are often forced to have unwanted sex. I worked with a female script editor on *Bad Guy*. I saw her turn completely pale when she watched the sex scene. Many Korean women will feel the same way. They will feel humiliated by this scene because the sanctity of chastity is ignored.
>
> (Jung, 2004: 213-214)

The phrase "cruel and very real" resonates heavily throughout Kim's body of work. Denied dramatic gravitas, the images of sex, violence and sexual violence apparent throughout Kim Ki-duk's films carry the sort of stark grotesquery apparent in the novels of Christos Tsiolkas or the artwork of Vince Locke. Yet, Kim admits that he took no pleasure from the filming of this scene, or indeed from sex scenes involving high levels of nudity. In fact, during the interview with Jung Seong-il, he uses this fact to boldly attack the critics who denigrated *Bad Guy* for its gratuity:

I didn't even look at the actors during the shooting of the

sex scene. I just heard the girl scream. I couldn't bear to

watch it. The critics who watched this scene and criticized

me for it are definitely crueller than I am because they did

not turn away.

(Jung, 2004: 213-14)

In this statement, Kim Ki-duk makes an interesting observation which ties back to his theme of spectatorship. As mentioned in Chapter 1, such imagery in Kim Ki-duk's films is intentionally meant to be unpleasant. Therefore if an audience is able to find the images to be tolerable enough to sit through the scene then perhaps it says more about the viewer's attitude toward such content and their subsequent desensitization. Furthermore, it also speaks volumes about the viewer's attitude to women and the societal inability to recognize the existence of such injustices in the world at large. What perhaps makes this imagery even less bearable still is that it pales in comparison to the emotional and psychological violence that characters often harbor toward one another. In some respects, this breed of violence is in many respects worse than its physical counterpart because the ramifications run far deeper and its damage far greater to overcome, as evidenced in two of the films covered in this chapter; *Samaritan Girl* (2002) and *Time* (2004).

Unlike many of the other directors discussed herein, Kim Ki-duk has largely rejected his fame and as such continues to make films in Korea which deal with the often complex relationships at work in modern-day South Korean civil society. His most recent film *Moebius* (2013) brings his study of gender relations full circle by

exploring the Freudian concept of Oedipal triangles and how detrimental they can be not only to personal relationships, but to the idea of society as a whole.

Samaritan Girl (2002)

The first true exploration by Kim Ki-duk into gender relations from a feminine perspective comes in the form of this bleak coming of age drama about the difficulties of claiming independence from the nest. The story follows two teenage girls, Yeo-jin (Kwak Ji-min) and Jae-Yeong (Seo Min-jeong), who set up a prostitution business together in order to raise the revenue necessary to pay for a mutually sought after trip to Europe. The business setup is arranged so that Jae-Yeong sleeps with the clients whilst Yeo-jin assumes the role of her madam, arranging the liaisons and managing the finances. Unfortunately, Yeo-jin is also charged with the task of ensuring that the law does not suspect their activities, no easy task considering that her father is a police officer himself. Things begin to spiral out of control when one day Yeo-jin neglects her guard duties during a job and Jae-Yeong is forced to dive out of a window to escape police apprehension, thus causing her to tragically fall to her death. The event weighs heavily on Yeo-jin who decides to return the money to the clients and offer them an additional sexual favour as recompense. What she does not count on, however, is her father's interference which inevitably destroys the relationship between father and daughter.

The likenesses to South Korea's dark past are unavoidable in this context. The peninsula holds a long and ignoble history of how outside influences have exploited its women for their own ends. In Chapter One, it was previously mentioned how *Silver Stallion* documented the shameful legacy of the *ungongjus* during the Korean

War. Sadly, the legacy of this tradition runs far deeper still, dating as far back to WWII with the presence of *comfort women*. It is therefore little wonder that Korean society places such a fundamental focus on chastity. Whilst First World nations as a whole diluted their aversions to sexual congress over the course of the twentieth century (in varying degrees), these disdains have only intensified in South Korean society and as such behaviours and professions which forego this ethos are heavily frowned upon. This is an issue which also previously played a primary focus in both *The Isle* and *Bad Guy* where similarly, in the words of Donato Totaro, Kim Ki-duk sought to frame scenes depicting sexual relations "in such a way as to de-dramatise and de-sexualise the events" (Totaro, 2004: 213). Thus the spectatorship is shifted in such a fashion as to alienate the audience from the images and present them as grim realities. Totaro describes Kim's methods for achieving this affect:

> Both occur in the same physical space…and are shot from a distance, with a static camera, and employing extremely long takes…Kim's aesthetic distanciation makes it difficult, if not impossible, for a viewer to gain any sort of excitement or pleasure from the moment (sexual or cinematic).
>
> (Totaro, 2004: 213)

This aesthetic is continued in *Samaritan Girl* through much the same means. The audience is not treated to any images of actual intercourse. Instead they are presented with the aftermath of these encounters in a manner which feels closer to observing a

diorama than watching a film. This choice of framing affords a stark sense of reality to the situation on screen and asks the viewer to question the ethical nature of whether it is right for men to pay for sex with young girls. In particular, the fact that Jae-Yeong inevitably dies as a result of this conduct not only seeks to emphasize the same symbolic loss of innocence presented through the respective deaths of juvenile characters of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and *A Good Lawyer's Wife* but also to drive home the sad truism about the sort of fate provoked by such a profession. All of which is almost mocked by the film's title, which implies that such conduct may be considered as a form of charitable service toward pathetic, sexually inept men.

Regarding Yeo-jin's father, his reaction to the knowledge of his daughter's ignoble practices is itself a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the Father could be said to be merely acting as the defender of his child's honour and innocence – a common responsibility felt by many fathers towards their daughters. Another, less chivalrous, way of interpreting the Father's violent reaction to finding out about his daughter's prostitution business is that it is an act of gendered political outrage at the possibility that his own daughter is attempting to emasculate him by usurping his gender primacy. As R.W. Connell notes in *Masculinites*:

> Treating gender as a system of symbolic relationships, not
> fixed facts about persons, makes acceptance of the phallic
> position a highly political act. It is always possible to refuse
> it – though the consequences of refusal are drastic.
>
> (Connell, 1995: 20)

In a stringently conservative society like South Korea, this observation holds even more weight for a woman than it would for a man. The traditional position of the man as sole bread-winner and provider is one which is held in high esteem. It is a position with which Yeo-jin's Father measures his manhood and which Yeo-jin and Je-Yeong are attempting to undermine. Jack Urwin attributes this occurrence to be a fundamental cause of masculine gender crisis by throwing the historically grounded sense of male purpose out of joint. He writes:

> …men often took great pride in fulfilling what was expected of them: going to work and single-handedly providing for their families gave them a sense of purpose and, in doing what only men were supposed to do, they affirmed their masculinity. As the number of women at work rose, and men watched their wives and partners get jobs, they began to lose their sense of purpose and, with it, felt that their masculinity was under threat.
>
> (Urwin, 2017: 28-29)

This is added to by the fact that since he represents the law, Yeo-jin and her clients are also denigrating the authority provided to him by this position. Therefore, he attempts to reclaim his lost masculine primacy through violent retribution. He is unable to enact this retribution against Yeo-jin (doing so would cause him to relinquish what little remaining male authority he still has) so he instead claims his retribution against the men who aided his daughter in dishonouring him.

This violent act of reclamation inevitably sets both Yeo-jin and her Father on a downward slope to self-destruction. The final act sees Yeo-jin and her father retreat into the rural countryside, winding up on the banks of a river similar to the one featured in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. In truth, Yeo-jin's Father leads her there because he is on the run and he makes no attempt to explain this truth to Yeo-jin. The night before her Father is apprehended by the authorities, Yeo-jin experiences a strange nightmare predicting that she will soon find herself alone and abandoned in the world. It should be mentioned that even during cinematic dream sequences, Kim Ki-duk makes very little attempt during this scene to digress from his naturalist aesthetic save for a cold blue filter over the lens. The rationale is that the prophetic nature of the dream dictates that the scenario contained therein is destined to come to fruition. The following morning, when the police track down father and daughter and all is revealed, Yeo-jin refuses to allow them to take her Father away from her (thus fulfilling the prophesy of her dream). The final shot of the film shows Yeo-jin struggling to give chase using her Father's Range Rover only for these efforts to inevitably come to nothing since she does not know how to drive.

This downward spiral into the very depths of moral and social dissolution for Yeo-jin and her Father exemplifies the previous Lacanian opinion of Judith Butler that women and girls must conform to certain behaviours in order to bolster male autonomy by suggesting that deviation from those clear defined gender guidelines is inadvertently able to de-stabilise the harmony of the established order and, in essence, castrate the male subject:

....."being" the Phallus is always a "being for" a masculine

subject who seeks to confirm and augment his identity of

> that "being for"…Lacan disputes the notion that men
> signify the meaning of women and women the meaning of
> men."
>
> (Butler, 1990: 264)

This attitude also reinforces the misogynistic belief that the stability of the whole world rests solely on the welfare of the man's position of dominance within the gender spectrum. This has proven to mark a consistent through-line over the course of many of the films within this thesis and has frequently appeared at various intervals when discussing the various topics. The Lacanian argument that Butler presents, which is at its core the same grounding to which Kim Kyung-hyun bases the psychoanalysis used in his book, argues that (contrary to what has previously been discussed on the subject) if both genders are indeed mutually exclusive to one another, why then would there be such a push to police feminine conduct? Once more, the paradox of the patriarchal dividend creates a dilemma in identifying that it is not necessarily feminine conduct that brings about male dissolution but rather the tragically fated male desire to control it.

Could it be said that Yeo-jin's actions, and inevitably the problems created by those actions, are the direct result of her Father's failings as a parent? If nothing else, it may very well be the direct result of his inability to accept that he did not do enough to keep his daughter from slipping into behaviours dubbed inappropriate by civil society. However, this does not excuse the fact that the reason for his inevitable arrest, a graphic murder outlined in great detail during Chapter Two of this thesis, was ultimately the result of his own actions. If, as Kim, Connell et al suggest, the defining quality of manhood is self-sacrifice then the events of the film's third act

could be avoided if the Father had simply accepted responsibility for Yeo-jin's conduct, thus keeping his honor. As with *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, the male lead's symbolic lack once more acts as a catalyst for both characters (Yeo-in and her Father) to commence similar paths of self-destruction from which their circumstances can never recover.

3-Iron (2004)

Made during the same year as *Samaritan Girl*, Kim Ki-duk also directed *3-Iron*: an off-beat love story which is perhaps the best known and most renowned film of his canon. The story concerns the exploits of a silent vagrant named Tae-suk (Jae Hee) who survives with very few possessions and no fixed abode by entering people's houses unlawfully when the owners are away and, in accordance with the traditional Korean cultural custom of *sori*, repays the owners for the food and services he uses by doing odd jobs. One day, Tae-suk chooses to reside in a large middle-class modern house in Seoul where he chances across Sun-hwa; a battered wife who lives in misery at the hands of her abusive husband Min-gyu – a Seoul businessman of considerable maturity who lives under the foolish misapprehension that material wealth equates to happiness. Enthralled by his simple and good-natured ways, Sun-hwa elopes with Tae-suk and the two of them start living on the road together. When Min-Gyu discovers that Sun-hwa is missing, he becomes irate and, convinced that Sun-hwa has been abducted, demands that the police find her and bring her back to him. When the police track the two of them down; Tae-suk is arrested for kidnapping, compounded further by also being charged of a murder he didn't commit, and sent to the local penitentiary after being brutally beaten whilst Sun-hwa is returned to Min-gyu whose

cruelty toward her only intensifies. Thankfully Tae-suk escapes from prison and, after briefly claiming retribution against the police, returns to Min-gyu's house and secretly continues his relationship with Sun-hwa with Min-gyu oblivious to it all.

Viewed in context, the sub-text behind *3-Iron* is very stark. Similarly to Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*, Kim presents the idea of the old school Korean male versus the new school one. In this instance however, it would appear that Kim is very much a traditionalist, disillusioned by material excesses of modern capitalist South Korea. Consequently, the more traditional male is presented as the more appealing. Tae-suk may dress like an uncultured rebel and own nothing of any real value beyond his motor cycle but he makes up for this with his myriad skills. His lifestyle exemplifies what Nietzsche famously described in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as "a moderate poverty" in that he is able to function autonomously without the excesses of material wealth without ever becoming wretched (Nietszche, 2003: 77). In the early scenes of the film he is seen repairing a set of kitchen scales, quietly telling us that he is mechanically minded. He cleans clothes and scrubs floors implying a strong and determined work ethic and at no point does he attempt to steal or damage any of the owners' personal effects proving that his intensions for entering their homes are not criminal.

Min-gyu on the other hand is a truly pathetic individual. Dwelling in his cavernous over-furnished suburban home, complete with garish ceramic lawn ornaments, he is portrayed by Kim as one of life's losers. Even in his sophisticated suits and crisp polo/golf shirts Min-gyu appears stressed and dishevelled, and he seems to have no skills or personal qualities which would serve him beyond the context of modern urban living. As with Oh Dae-su's violent tendencies in *Oldboy*,

Min-gyu's gross accumulation of material wealth in *3-Iron* can be tied to RW

Connell's idea of the *Patriarchal Dividend*. In *Gender*, Connell observes that:

> A wealthy businessman draws large dividends from the
> gendered accumulation of advanced capitalism; an
> unemployed man may draw no benefits at all.
>
> (Connell, 2002: 142)

This statement provides a useful insight into the way in which both Tae-suk and Min-gyu think and also about what drives them as individuals. All of Min-gyu's gender power is drawn from his financial successes and from the volume of unsightly over-priced trinkets he acquires. It is the same principle of over the top showmanship expressed by young men in black American communities with regard to the accumulation of 'bling', where the individual's self-worth and ultimately his manhood is reduced to visual signifiers conveying the (often erroneous) image of prosperity.

Darcy Paquet agrees with this theory in that he considers the film as a whole to be representative of "a philosophy of living with its critique of the idea of possession (both of physical objects and of the husband's desire for a wife)" (Paquet, 2009: 349). The prospect of a possible political sub-text about the expectations of modern Capitalist culture in *3-Iron* is easily noticeable, considering that Min-gyu has all the material a social trappings of success but at the same time is no more of a man for any of them. Tae-suk on the other hand is quite the opposite. Having learned to function autonomously in society without the need for gross symbols of excess, he can retain some degree of personal honour without having to invest in the deceptive

trappings of wealth. Instead, his manhood is constituted through several other means. As Connell also explains:

> Monetary benefits are not the only kind of benefit. Others are authority, respect, service, safety, housing, access to institutional power and control over one's life.
>
> (Connell, 2002: 142)

The last of the qualities listed above relates to Tae-suk most of all. In many respects, the thing that makes Min-gyu pathetic most of all is that he is as much a prisoner as Sun-hwa. The difference being that he has chosen to be a prisoner by becoming so inescapably bound by capitalism that he has lost control over his own life and lives as a slave to what George Orwell once referred to as 'the money God' (Orwell, 1934). Tae-suk by contrast is a slave to no one. Despite having no fixed abode or financial means to speak of, he is in *total* control of his life and he uses this knowledge to garner his own unique sense of authority. This authority is what gives him much of his respectability and what inevitably makes him so appealing to Sun-hwa.

Min-gyu's masculinity is further denigrated by his marital circumstances. His 'relationship' with Sun-hwa is more slave/master than husband/wife. Seemingly unable to express emotion beyond the superficial surface level, Min-gyu treats his wife with little more regard than he would any of his other material possessions. He speaks to her in stern commands and he feels no remorse when he hits her, instead blaming her for making him angry enough to strike her and then complaining that she responds coldly to him. Through Min-gyu, Kim Ki-duk expresses the opinion that along with their affluence, modern Korean men have also developed an overinflated

sense of entitlement where they feel they can receive everything they want and give nothing back. This opinion is self-evident in Min-gyu when one considers that he never once thinks about offering Sun-hwa even the slightest ounce of genuine tenderness. This vile mistreatment of Sun-hwa identifies another addition to the list of problems associated with the patriarchal tyranny of hoju: one that still continues to this day. Daniel Tudor explains that such blatant domestic abuse has been common place in South Korean society since the seventeenth century. He writes that under the codes of *hoju* which reduced Korean women almost to the position of beasts:

> It was…considered perfectly acceptable for a husband to beat his wife. Many old expressions exist that reveal the harsh nature of the times: "If you don't beat your wife every three days, she'll become a fox", held one. As in other countries, the fox was a symbol of cunning wily femininity.[57]
>
> (Tudor, 2012: 299-301)

If one is to consider Min-gyu emblematic of the post-Joseon era male and of the patriarchal repression of *hoju*, then the reason why he abuses Sun-hwa with such cruel prejudice and lack of remorse is simply because he believes that he is doing no wrong. Rather, he is simply mirroring the behaviour laid down in societal lore. Alternatively, Tae-suk could be said to represent the masculine model of the pre-Joseon era which positioned itself more as an equal to its feminine counterpart. Tae-suk makes no attempt to mistreat or exclude Sun-hwa in any way and as such his

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[57] This more directly relates to the legend of the *gumiho* (nine-tailed fox): a legendary apocalyptic demon. According to superstition, the *gumiho* can shape shift into the form of a beautiful woman and beguile hapless men, and is also prophesized to one day drown the world in Hellfire.

masculinity is able to better compliment her femininity. Therefore, she responds more positively toward him than she does to her own husband. This extreme polarizing interpretation of conflicting masculinity also works dramatically, framing Tae-suk's cuckolding of Min-gyu as a form of chivalry where the honourable hero rescues a damsel in distress from the whims of a cruel despot.

Perhaps the biggest difference between these two male characters, however, is regarding speech and silence. It has already been established that Tae-suk is silent throughout the course of *3-Iron* and this is not because he is deaf or mute like Ryu was in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. His refusal to verbally engage with other characters emphasizes not only the socio-political inequalities which arise from creating a social hierarchy where the working classes and the poor are essentially voiceless but also to explore the many different ways in which silence can be used. In modern society, silence is either considered to be cause for concern (Tae-suk's refusal to speak whilst in police custody helps them to frame him for the death of an old man) or a sign of submissive subservience (evidenced by Sun-hwa's refusal to tell anyone about the physical abuse she suffers in her marriage). However, Kim Ki-duk argues through this film that silence can also be a sign of strength and humility. What this theme of silence versus speech seeks to prove is that hegemonic gender relations (indeed homogeny in general) seek to convince us of the fraudulent opinion that there is only one established "right" way to do anything. Communication is no exception, as human society has for centuries been corralled within the realms of verbal and written language whilst conveniently ignoring the myriad other forms of communication available. As Connell states:

> Though language – speech and writing – is the most analysed site of gender relations it is not the only one. Gender symbolism operates in dress, make-up, gesture…and in more impersonal forms of culture…
>
> (Connell, 2002: 66)

This is definitely true of Tae-suk, whose dress, mannerisms, expressions and actions speak a language of defiance far greater than words ever could. As with many of the characters played by the great Bruce Lee in Hong Kong cinema, Tae-suk does not need to resort to empty words to prove his worth as a man. Instead he exhibits a quiet self-confidence and as an audience one never questions this throughout the film. Alternatively; Min-gyu represents the sort of vain self-promotion which is common in modern capitalist society, yet he always wonders why Sun-hwa never listens to him. In a strange mirror image of what modern life is really like, Kim creates a world in which speech has become as much a sign of personal weakness as it is authoritative power. With his every utterance Min-gyu further embarrasses and denigrates himself before the viewer, accentuated by the fact that his wild mood swings frequently make him appear hysterical.

More importantly, Tae-suk's interactions with Sun-hwa seek to explore loving silence and the way two individuals can simply enjoy being together without the need for words. As the film progresses, Kim Ki-duk uses the silence between Tae-suk and Sun-hwa as the main aspect of the film's romantic element, among utilizing the absence of dialogue for several other points as well. Without the constant chatter of speech, even the slightest of physical interactions develop a heightened state of personal intimacy. The scene in the tea garden during Act Two where Sun-hwa

simply touches Tae-suk with her bare foot (it seems as though they are almost holding hands) expresses more about her emotions than words ever could, as does their first meeting when they stand together on the newly repaired bathroom scales. This simple and silent incident visually represents the gender parity that the two of them have achieved by doing away with the trappings of auditory language. When discussing the work of Witting on how feminine gender is curtailed through the suppression of language and male authority is established by the assertion of it, Judith Butler writes:

> …the primary ontology of the language gives every person the opportunity to establish subjectivity. The primary task that women face in trying to establish subjectivity through speech depends on their collective ability to cast off reifications of sex imposed on them which deform them as partial or relative beings.
>
> (Butler, 1990: 572)

Theoretically, this principal works both ways. Just as women are problematized by the frequent inequalities of language when trying to compete with the vocal dichotomies of patriarchy, so should they be relieved of this dilemma when a male chooses to relinquish his vocal dominance. In Tae-suk's case, language affords him no dominance at all but from his perspective would only lower him to Min-Gyu's level. In so doing, the gender scale is evened out and the commonality between Tae-suk and Sun-hwa is established, eradicating the dichotomy of man/woman to superficial and anatomical coincidence. From a romantic genre perspective this is an important point to consider. As the two share the silence together there is a constant

sense of understanding between them which never has to be explained, perhaps a strange reflection of how real relationships are supposed to be.

This minimalist approach to dialogue is also so effective because it strips away the surface layers of dramatic pretence common in modern cinema and reduces the story purely to the state of visual text. In his article for edition 15:1 of *Positions* magazine, Steve Choe expands on this opinion by likening it to films from the silent era in that all elements are made equal in the film when verbal dialogue is negated:

> Humans and the world in which they are embedded appear on the same surface – the film screen – as separate elements "brought on to the same plane." While their categorical separation constitutes their otherness from each other, making it impossible to subsume humans, objects, and animals under a single concept of identity, because they are made of homogenous material" (that is the play of light and darkness that is the cinema), they inhabit a shared world of appearance. It is affect that serves as the organizing principle of the world.
>
> (Choe, 2007:79)

As an audience, it is often easy to forget that images themselves are a form of communication in much the same way as facial expressions and physical actions and one through which messages can be conveyed more extensively than through any verbal means. A single photograph or painting can offer more information about an emotion or a situation than a page of scripting or exposition and with this in mind, it is able to carry a degree of intimacy which extends far beyond hollow words.

Inevitably, the silence is also beneficial for allowing those things which are said to receive a far greater relevance. At the end of the film, when Tae-suk leaves the prison and returns to Sun-hwa's home, she utters the words "I love you" upon seeing him (the first piece of dialogue she says in the whole film). Whilst these words have been used millions of times previously in numerous other films, the context of *3-Iron* adds weight to this phrase and gives it legitimacy. Further, it identifies the final definitive concession of the patriarchal dividend, in much the same way as Dae-su's removal of his own tongue in the climax to *Oldboy*. The fact of the two lovers, the woman is the only one to speak suggests that there is no unfair gender advantage in Sun-hwa and Tae-suk's relationship and that she can speak freely, unlike with Min-Gyu where such conduct would no doubt end in violence. The fact that at the end of the film Min-Gyu is reduced to the hollow spectre of a deluded cuckold only add further weight to this argument. The final defining image of the film – Sun-hwa and Min-Gyu sharing an embrace as Sun-hwa kisses Tae-suk over Min-Gyu's shoulder – sends a stark message about the dilemma of modern man in society: that one can acquire all the physical trappings of gender success but ultimately gain nothing at all if there is nothing deeper or meaningful than the surface layer. In short order, it is a methodical, intellectual and touching exploration of gender relations that encourages viewers to judge the measure of people by their actions and their personal worth because, most of the time at least, talk is quite clearly cheap.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Within the seven chapters of this thesis, I have attempted to comprehensively cover many of the more prominent South Korean films of the early twenty-first century. Many of these films have been the work of directors who have gained either fame or infamy through their art and notoriety with industry circles. This being said, I now realize that the issue of gender is a larger phenomenon than I had originally ever could have anticipated when I started this thesis in April 2009. It has encompassed not only film studies and gender studies but also the realms of psychology, philosophy, mythology, theology and politics at large. All of which, I have learned, has helped to shape the industries throughout history.

From this investigation, many new and intriguing concepts regarding gender have presented themselves, offering some very stark findings with regard to what constitutes not only South Korean masculinity but gender at large. One of the principle reasons for my choosing this subject for my thesis was that many of the issues and areas of contention tied to it could be explored and expanded in a far broader context than merely its cultural boundaries. Consequently, the analyses contained herein have presented me with a diverse range of conclusions.

In Chapter 3, it was discussed that gender was tied to the idea of nationhood and that hegemonic gender models have always been promoted by the media and other institutions of power in order to maintain the devotion and compliance of the people through such ideals. What needs to be remembered here is that these messages are always designed to suit a specific agenda. This is especially true of civil wars like The Korean War, where common people are frequently encouraged to kill their own kin. Ironically, when nationalistic campaigns set the wheels of the propaganda

machine into motion, the issue of exactly who seeks to benefit from these campaigns is seldom brought to centre stage. Even in light of documentary films like Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and Jehane Noujaim's *Control Room* (2004), there is still not enough of an attempt to expose the true detriment afforded to society by these elements or the true intentions of those who seek to promote such fervour.

Nor is there enough of an effort to discern fact from fiction when discussing representations of armed conflicts: if anything the simulacrum apparent in these representations has only gotten worse. If one is believe Schirato and Webb's analogy that film and television footage of armed conflict, actual or simulated, is merely another means through which the media constitutes "a kind of machine for producing the politics of effect" then is it possible to trust these representations at all (Schirato and Webb, 2004: 183)?[58] Perhaps, as Jean Baudrillard theorized, the simulacrum of media representation has assimilated us all into the fog of war and what we experience as viewers is nothing more than a highly doctored falsity? Considering this possibility, perhaps the representations of manhood portrayed in war films should therefore largely be disregarded given that they seldom portray war for what it is or the men and women it taints and corrupts as who they really are.

As for South Korean masculinity's comparisons to its Northern counterpart, it should be remembered that whilst North Korean society may be able to produce a masculine model which more closely imitates traditional masculine screen iconography, North Korea is also an isolated and ostracized rogue state. Whilst the South has enjoyed prosperity, economic growth and a prominent standing on the world stage, the North continues to exist in a state of diplomatic exile with a culture that has experienced very little in the way of social advancement. In recent years,

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[58] Regarding the politics of effect, see Schirato and Webb (2004).

even Beijing has been distancing itself from Pyongyang, driving North Korea further toward Third World status. For this reason, it is therefore foolish for South Korean gender models to continue comparison with the North because Northern gender models are at best antiquated relics which have no place in the 21st Century global community.

Chapter 4 discussed how traditional forms of wounded masculinity could be manipulated in South Korean cinema to serve a political purpose. Each of Bong Joon-ho's films discussed in this thesis identify that there is a consistent set of themes and agendas to which these afflictions are suited. Overall, mental disability is used to transform characters into figures of sympathy; even though these deficiencies may hide the character's other worthwhile qualities or even plays to that character's advantage. In *The Host* for instance, Park Gang-du's mental retardation often caused other characters to write him off as a primitive nobody, in spite of the fact that he was still able to understand the American scientists' conversation about the non-existent virus and was still able to rally his siblings so that they could ultimately defeat the monster.   As Kim Kyung-hyun observes through his analysis of Jang Sun-woo's *A Petal*:

It is interesting that the critical moments of historical crisis have often been cinematically depicted through the characters who suffer from hysterical conditions.

(Kim, 2004: 112)

In similar fashion to the protagonist of *A Petal*, whom society relegates to its bottom rungs because of his mental afflictions, the ability of Park Gang-du to succeed in

achieving political change may in part come from his relegation to society's bottom rungs. During the introduction, I mentioned that women with the same disadvantages would naturally be driven to rebel against the systems and institutions that seek to denigrate them. There would therefore be little doubt that men similar would be compelled to react similarly. The advantage afforded to these characters by their respective positions are that since they are already at the bottom of the hegemonic gender ladder (or in some cases not on it at all) that they are often able conduct their respectively rebellions largely unabated and allowed to gain ground because there is often little way to further denigrate them. As Kim mentions, the traditional external reaction to this segregated, recessive position can be "communicated through violence and rage, two of the characteristics of social revolution" (Kim, 2004: 112). Whilst social change has sought to pacify such physical hostile behaviour in recent years, this desire for social revolution continues very prominently today. Real life examples include super-plus size model Tess Holiday who is gradually breaking the myth that large women are sexually unappealing.[59]

More importantly, this chapter also stressed the strong imperative for cohesion between the differing strata of South Korean society, and failure to do this often leads to far greater failure similar to the kind experienced by the detectives in *Memories of Murder*. As with the real-life history of the student movement protests that inspired Bong's work, his film argue that real substantial change in a society can only be truly achieved when people put aside their superficial differences and unite against a common enemy. This principle has also been argued through cinema in Matthew Warchus' comedy-drama *Pride* (2014) which told the true story of how London's gay

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[59] This myth has only existed in Western culture since the 1950s and has also been protested throughout the late 20th in varying degrees of success through several different media e.g. the art-work of Leonard Nimoy.

and lesbian community joined forces with destitute South Wales miners in protest against the oppressions of the British Conservative Party throughout the 1980s.

In both the aforementioned issues discussed in Chapter 4, the prevailing element which makes both these principles work as pieces of cinema because "the dominant convention of cinema is the melodramatic impulses that motivate the a victim to triumph against the odds" (Kim, 2004: 112). Underdog scenarios speak heavily to the majority of audiences by relating to their own feelings of inadequacy, motivating in them the desire to see the protagonist succeed. Additionally, the idea of the afflicted underdog as accidental hero plays to the premise of placing the underdog into a position of power by causing the remainder of society to descend to his level. As with Park Gang-du, the underdog is no longer recessive because he becomes representative of the majority and is therefore no longer an outsider. As the first world governments continue to progressively indulge in greed-driven conduct a the expense of the poor in the early 21st Century with increasing ruthlessness, could it therefore mean that this once recessive model of South Korean masculinity may in time become globally recognised as a hegemonic model? Characters in many recent politicized films – such as Evey Hammond in *V for Vendetta* (2007) and Wikus Vander Merve in Neil Blonkamp's *District 9* (2009) – may very well suggest some truth to this theory.

However, Kim recognizes that stories (and the circumstances which inspire them), may not be sufficient tools for political change alone. Regarding his analysis of *A Petal*, he refers to the murder of central character Ch'on Tae-il and the abduction of one of the several nameless female characters would be valid motivators for the resurging inception of the minjung. He writes:

…the dialectical conception of subjectivity, acknowledged in Marxist thought that must first deconstruct itself in order to acquire the means to represent itself properly. It would be difficult simply to argue that the death of Chon Tae-il and the disappearance of the girl are necessary preconditions for a subaltern minjung to resurface as a viable political agency. Would this not be the very abstraction of historical determinism that Marx warned us against?

(Kim, 2004: 128)

Kim makes an important insight into this topic. Indeed, as Marx and Engels outlined in the pages of *The Communist Manifesto*, Capitalist society would eventually cannibalise itself not only because it would create the disparity and discontent in the common man but also provide them with the means to do it, so must other such factors be taken into account when concerning similar political changes (Marx and Engels, 2002: 226). The manifesto states that:

The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to compromise the wealth created by them. And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand by the destruction of mass productive forces; on the other by the conquest of new markets, and by more thorough exploitation of the old ones. That is to say, paving the way

> for more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means
>
> by which crises are prevented.

(Marx and Engels, 2002: 226)

This passage is reflective of many periods of history through the Enlightenment and the 20th Century; including The French Revolution, The Bolshevik Revolution and the South Korean Liberation riots. In each of these instances, change existed as the product of long-term circumstantial factors that built up over time with escalating severity. These events, when combined with fictionalized accounts of similar incidents portrayed on film, can well be used as a means for inspiring change. The most prominent examples are the Occupy Movement which saw activists globally performing sit-ins at major financial and judicial centres, and the rise of online activist group Annonymous: both of which have become synonymous with the Guy Fawkes mask worn by Hugo Weaving in James McTiegue's cinematic adaptation of Alan Moore's 1987 graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (2007).

Chapter 5 analysed the rise to prominence of the South Korean film industry and how it eventually fell into decline. As mentioned when discussing the work of director Kim Ji-woon, a film does indeed hold little value if it can not recoup its losses – no easy task considering that around 66% of all motion pictures are money losers – however, it is also of little value for a production company to make films which may look impressive but have narratives with such poorly conceived ideas that audiences no longer wish to see them. This is the problem currently afflicting the Hollywood industry which, outside of a few meagre studios like Marvel and Pixar, has almost entirely used up its well of ideas thanks in part to a refusal to take creative

risks.[60] Such a premise would prove detrimental to both the creative and business sides of the medium and as such a concerted effort should be made to ensure that one party does not dominate the other.

On a more positive note, New Korean Cinema movement could be said to represent what Stringer describes as "the new Asia in formation" (Shin and Stringer, 2005: 57). This new Asia does away with the old feudal and regressive ideologies and expresses a new and unique form of identity which not only transcends the failings of previous generations but in some cases of the West as well. South Korea's journey from police state to liberal democracy was a hard one but similar social changes are happening throughout East Asia, with many countries now developing a culture and affluence which had previously only been enjoyed by Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore. If anything is to be taken from the New Korean cinema period, it is that it perhaps offered a glimpse of what was to come and what to expect from 'the Asia century'. As Chinese investors continue to buy out production companies in Hollywood and Hollywood film companies continue to produce blockbusters increasingly catered towards Asian as well as domestic markets, this trend should only be expected to intensify.

Perhaps the most extensive part of this thesis regarding gender politics was Chapter 6. This chapter revealed that the multiple forms of masculinity prevalent in a society may at best only lead to a contextual form of hegemonic masculinity. This is especially true considering the way in which each brand of masculinity comes with its own strengths and weaknesses. As mentioned during the chapter, gentrification and the rise of the metro-sexual male has helped to do away with many of the negative

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[60] A clear case in point is the ailing former juggernaut of Universal which, having previously overdrawn from its current action franchises (*Men In Black*, *The Mummy, Terminator* etc), is now having to resort to diluted remakes of the very Gothic Horror franchises which brought them to the table in the 1930s – the 2014 release of the uninspired *Dracula Untold* the dire 2017 remake of *The Mummy* and are testament to this desperation.

traits more commonly associated with chauvinism, but at the same time has produced several of its own negative character traits as well. Chris Blazina suggests that this ever-changing idiosyncratic set of gender standards is fundamentally the work of elites and that from a historical perspective masculine codes always change with the coming of modernity and the introduction of new socio-economic cultural revelations. In his book, Blazina refers to R.W. Connell's observation that responsibility has always lain with the landed gentry, stating that:

> The gentry were closely aligned with the state, filling such positions as administrators or military officers…revolution and civil war helped turn the social order upside down. These events had a major impact on the shaping of the definition of middle-class masculinity. It is important to consider social class and/or class distinction in this process, as the gentry and the middle class seemingly co-existed, the former occupying a higher place in the socio-economic status.
>
> (Blazina, 2003:40)

The most important element to consider in this statement is that Blazina argues how it was not only a growing middle-class but also major political upheaval which helped to establish this shift in masculine gender models to a more gentrified, less aggressive format. Blazina also suggests that even when there seems to be a shift toward class parity in representations of gender, the party beginning this transition with the largest authoritative advantage is still able to maintain a degree of control over it. As he

suggests regarding his study of European masculine gender models during the Medieval period:

> Masculinity is dichotomized as reflecting either refinement or valour. These, in turn, are attached to social standing whereby refinement is indicative of a higher standing and valour alone may be suspect of a lower standing. It is only a rare individual in myth or reality who can straddle both worlds respectively.
>
> (Blazina, 2003: 47)

Reviewing Blazina's argument in the purest terms, it could therefore be contested that only that rare proportion of individuals every truly achieve the status of 'Alpha male'. His theory of the warrior and the aristocrat as polar opposites perfectly translates to Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*, especially when considering that by the end of the film Oh Dae-su's catharsis allows him to attain that meta-status of masculinity. What each of the films reviewed in chapter six suggest is that no singular form of masculinity can truly be said to have primacy since each presents its own obstacles. The physical ailments of Ryu and Dong-jin's lack of humanity in *Sympathy*, the animalistic nature of Oh Dae-su and the immature sadism of Woo-jin in *Oldboy*, and the sexually phobic personality of Sang-hyeon in *Thirst* all seek to outline the absolute worst qualities of these character models.

One school of thought that Korean film theorists often overlook is that the masculine characters in Park's films so frequently fall into dissolution because they all represent toxic masculinity. Modern gender theorists like Urwin point out that,

even when there is gender variety, masculinity is still largely defined by "an arbitrary list" that caters to the rigid belief that there is only one true form of hegemonic masculinity for each group (Urwin, 2017: 232). However, the analyses contained in Chapter Six present the suggestion that these infinite multiplicities can result in the eradication of any true form of hegemonic masculinity at all. The differing forms of masculinity (protest masculinity, grooming, sophistication etc) are often so specific to the socio-economic and cultural back grounds of individuals that the concept of hegemonic masculinity can never truly provide a satisfactory position for most people. What can definitely be said however is that certain forms of masculinity are more enduring than others. In the case of protest masculinity, to quote *Watchmen* villain Adrian Veigt, the "schoolboy heroics" to which this form of masculinity is tied often proves detrimental to the fringe groups that practice it (Moore, 2008). Better that such performative behaviour is transcended in favour of less aggressive alternatives such as reason, intellect and understanding.

Furthermore, as the nature of a country's masculinity changes, so do the contributing elements of that masculinity change as well. This chapter analysed the role of the patriarchal dividend in gendered society and argued how in modern times it may prove beneficial for men to abandon this convention and its practices. As Feminism continues to gain strength, not only on the Korean Peninsula but globally as well, so does the imperative for the patriarchal dividend become forced increasingly further into recession. In time, the continued push for gender equality may also possibly give rise to a matriarchal dividend to act as the counter-balance.

Finally, in Chapter 7 I explored the way in which women are presented in South Korean cinema and how they are treated (or rather mistreated) by their men. Whilst the traditional treatment of women since the dawn of the Joseon dynasty has

largely been one of abuse and neglect, it is pleasing to see that in-roads are now being made in favour of Korean women and especially with regard to how they are now receiving a far greater number of positive representations involving bold and complex characters. As mentioned previously, in spite of the stellar pioneering efforts of feminist actresses like Mun So-ri and Lee Young-ae, the path to South Korean gender equality on screen is still a long and difficult road. Jack Urwin observes that, even today, the biggest barrier standing in the way of gender parity is that most men "fail to grasp that *masculinity is not the opposite of femininity*" and, in the case of South Korea, centuries of preconditioned gender attitudes cannot be forgotten overnight (Urwin, 2017: 232). However, the early 21st century has definitely seen some very promising advancement in the achievement of gender parity for the peninsula.

Despite my reluctance to fully explore South Korean screen feminism in this thesis, I must also confess that in so doing I have inadvertently followed Kim Kyung-hyun by focusing my critical analysis on predominantly male directors. Even though in the earlier chapters I made frequent mention of Park Chan-ok in relation to her film *Jealousy Is My Middle Name*, that was sadly as far as I ever came to analysing the contribution of female directors toward the politics of masculinity on screen. As stated in *Variety*, Park previously worked as an Assistant Director on Hong Sang-soo's 2000 film *Virgin Stripped Bare by her Bachelors*, and it is possible to identify "surface similarities in her main protagonist's indecisive personality and the way in which the pic deals obliquely with human emotions" (*Variety*, 29/11/2002). Kim Kyung-hyun talks extensively about *Virgin Stripped Bare by her Bachelors* in *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*. In particular, by the final reel, Park Chan-ok manages to conjure the same deep feeling of nihilism about male competition in

Jealousy Is My Middle Name as Hong does for the concepts of marriage and romance during the climax of *Virgin Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors*. Kim writes:

> The foreboding of marriage is not a celebratory instance; on the contrary, it is a grim prospect of facing another obsessive cycle of the game to which they are eternally bound. The film's ending leaves a bitter taste by provoking the question, "What else do you expect in a world where the meaning of romance has lost its intrinsic value?"
>
> (Kim, 2004: 217)

Similarly through *Jealousy Is My Middle Name*, Park dissects the issue of male intergenerational rivalry and encourages audiences (both male and female) to question whether there is really anything to be jealous of at all. In youth, human beings are burdened by immaturity, ineptitude and inexperience (evidenced by Won-sang's bumbling misadventures in both his work and love lives) whilst the ever-present threat of mortality looms over the old with increasing menace (as is the case with Wong-sang's Manager whose life takes a sobering turn with the loss of his father). By the end of the film, it becomes clear that the only thing these three male characters – 20 year old Wong-sang, the 40 year old Manager and the Manager's 60 year old Father – have in common is alienation. Each seems to be suffering their own specific variety of what is these days referred to as a 'quarter life crisis', the source of each being a crucial lack for commonality with other people. The relevance of this last statement rings true for the majority of films featured in the New Korean Cinema

movement and is not purely limited to this thesis. Be they male or female, there has always been a consistent through line throughout cinema history of portraying characters who are burdened by isolation. From Charlie Chaplain's The Tramp to Eli in *Let The Right One In*, the concept of loneliness is one of the prevailing themes in cinema and ultimately – in spite of dominance, sexuality and all the myriad other themes discussed on screen – the respective quests of these lonely characters to find that one soul who makes them not feel alone in the world remains a consistent staple to this very day. Perhaps it is a reflection of modern human society, that underneath all the layers of pretence and bravura to which people surround themselves, all they really desire is some one they can relate to. In an age where technology is quickly replacing actual physical socialization, this trend may seek only to increase in relevance.

Looking at masculinity in global terms, the real question posed by this thesis in the 2010s is whether the whole concept of masculinity is in crisis? More importantly, can there be a universally conclusive answer to this question? Jack Urwin writes:

> Is masculinity in crisis? I don't know. Maybe. Some people say it is. Some people don't. Some people say it is but in a totally different way to how the first people say it is, which is confusing…Personally I think that 'masculinity in crisis' is too vague and ambiguous to be in any way helpful to you, me, or anyone who gives a shit about men.
>
> (Urwin, 2017: 37)

At the end of his book, Urwin concludes that it is more appropriate to regard masculinity as confused rather than in crisis because it has not been offered the social attention previously granted to femininity (Urwin, 2017:231). Therefore I feel that, in the early stages, the best remedy for this confusion is to accept its fluid nature.

The politics of gender ultimately constitute the same set of source principles as all other aspects of human culture. They exist only to suit specific agendas and to maintain social control. To quote Judith Butler's work on performative gender norms:

> As a set of sanctions and taboos, the ego ideal regulates and determines masculine and feminine identification. Because identifications substitute for object relations, and identifications are the consequence of loss, gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition. This prohibition sanctions and regulates discrete gendered identity and the law of heterosexual desire.
>
> (Butler, 1991: 352)

If Butler is to be believed then these societal norms simply play to the Foucaldian agenda of controlling and conditioning the populace through a perpetual assault of the ego and the propagated policing of their subjectivity. I have used South Korea in this thesis to exemplify the methods and codes used to promote complicity to these agendas and to the parties who benefit from them, but these issues extend to the greater world at large as well. Throughout this thesis, reference has been continually

made to the media as a means for communication and more specifically for propaganda. However, when pluralized, it can also become a liberating force as well. As Butler mentions regarding her work into these coded systems of gender and the identifications propagated by them:

> …the contention that incorporation is a fantasy suggests that the incorporation of identification is a fantasy of literalization or a *literalizing fantasy*. Precisely by virtue of its melancholic structure, this literalization of the body conceals its genealogy and offers itself under the category of "natural fact."
>
> (Butler, 1991: 381-382)

At the same time, Barker's analysis of Butler identifies that "There is always a gap or slipping away of identification" (Barker, 2004: 299). With this information in mind, should there not be a greater drive toward identifying the spurious nature behind many of these representations? If one is to believe that each representation of gender is at its heart designed to suit an agenda, then one must surely also be encouraged to see past the layers of sensationalism and exaggeration which go with them.

Perhaps more importantly, it is crucial to always remember that cultural codes are always changing in accordance to context and world events. As Barker points out:

> Identifications can be multiple and need not involve the repudiation of all other positions. Indeed, repudiated

> elements are always within the identification as that which
>
> is rejected but returns.
>
> (Barker, 2004: 299)

Barker's point rings true both in relation to Butler's work and globally. As socio-cultural attitudes change, new generations and ethnic groups take centre stage and the power relations of societal strata wax and wane, so do differing forms of hegemonic masculinity and femininity attain the position of dominance. Both Barker and Chris Blazina make prominent references to how the rise of the 'landed gentry', and then later the emerging mercantile and middle classes respectively, encouraged European masculinity to shift from a brutish physical model toward a more passive intellectual one.[61] Such changes still occur today, such as the shift from conservative attitudes during the sexual liberation of the late 1960s and early 70s. This in turn begs the question of whether hegemony should even still exist at all in the modern world beyond its true form: a system through which relations of power can be exerted upon individuals in a society.

As for South Korea, with the world now into the second decade of what is currently being referred to as "the Asian Century", it would appear that this once humble and isolated industrialized nation has at last come into its own. Even though the South Korean film bubble may have burst, South Korea is still at Asia's media forefront with a music industry that is garnering an ever-growing fan base from all corners of the globe. In the 2010s, at a time where First World masculinity in general is suffering the very 'crisis' that was believed to have afflicted South Korean masculinity, the nations that once appeared superior to the small underdog nation

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[61] See Barker 2004 and Blazina 2005.

should take note of its successes. In so doing, to quote Jack Urwin, these nations can ensure that it "need not be an end to masculinity but a beginning" (Urwin, 2017: 232). It is most definitely no longer a nation, a culture or masculinity in recession; but rather is now one of the most prominent stars on the world stage.

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