"Tell the Kitchen that There's Too Much *Buchu* in the Dumpling": Reading Park Chan-wook's "Unknowable" *Oldboy* (2003)

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Too Cool*?*

Oldboy is one of a slew of Korean films recently distributed in the United States (a list that includes *Chunhyang*, *Memories of Murder*, *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, and Spring*, *Tae Guk Gi: the Brotherhood of War*, *Take Care of My Cat*, *Tell Me Something*, *Untold Scandal*, and *Way Home* among many others) — but, unlike the others, it has been met with surprisingly negative reviews.[1] *New York Times* critic, Manohla Dargis, acknowledged *Oldboy*'s director Park Chan-wook as "some kind of virtuoso [of cool]," but she also wrote that the film is "symptomatic of a bankrupt, reductive postmodernism: one that promotes a spurious aesthetic relativism (it's all good) and finds its crudest expression in the hermetically sealed world of fan boys" (Dargis 2005, B14). Disappointed by the all-too-apparent nihilism *Oldboy* putatively promotes, Dargis argues that it fails to undertake the kind of tangible philosophical inquiries Sam Peckinpah and Pier Paolo Pasolini films explored in the 1960s and 1970s. Dargis' criticisms and others like it undoubtedly dampened *Oldboy*'s chances to perform well:[2] despite the fact that

[1] *New York Times* and *LA Weekly*, both notoriously important publications for any independent films opening in the U.S., gave harsh reviews to *Oldboy*.

[2] *Oldboy* failed to reach the US $1 million gross mark, which is usually held as a benchmark of moderate success for limited-release films. It eventually recorded $707,391, which is not a bad figure for a Korean film, but certainly well below the U.S.

Oldboy won numerous awards internationally, including the Grad Prix (second prize) at Cannes, and despite the cult status it has achieved among young fans of action films, the film managed to generate only mediocre box office receipts in the U.S.

I begin this essay with Dargis' critique of Park Chan-wook because it points out a number of vantage points from which *Oldboy* must be considered when discussed in an international context. *Oldboy*, like *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (*Boksu-neun na-ui geok*, 2002) and other Park Chan-wook films, does not conjure up the kind of humanist themes that Dargis implies to be properly associated with arthouse films such as the ones directed by Ingmar Bergman, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Kristof Kieslowski. Instead of preaching values of tolerance and salvation, Park's protagonists plot revenge by brandishing sharp metal instruments and impatiently waiting for their turn to spill the blood of others. Moreover, the exaggerated male icons featured in Park Chan-wook's films seem to be direct quotations of Japanese *manga* characters or Hong Kong action heroes. These contrast with the realism of his predecessors in Korean cinema such as Park Kwang-su or Jang Sun-woo, who I have argued elsewhere have de-mythologized the masculinity of Korean cinema (Kim 2004). While many of Dargis's points are worthy, she does fail to point out that Park is not the only filmmaker recognized by Cannes in the recent past who has similarly been uninterested in asking epistemological questions about life. Cannes winners Lars Von Trier, Wong Kar-wei, and Quentin Tarantino have similarly created distance from philosophical or political issues, seeking instead to leave their viewers with an indelibly "cool" impression of violence. Secondly, Dargis' article sidesteps the controversy surrounding filmmakers like Peckinpah, whose intentions and philosophical depth have been continuously questioned by critics. Jettisoning some of the exaggerated claims made by critics such as Stephen Prince, who celebrated Peckinpah's "melancholy framing of violence," Marsha Kinder proposes instead that Peckinpah was the first post-war narrative filmmaker in America who "inflect[ed] the violence with a comic exuberance" (Kinder 2001, 67). Peckinpah choreographed scenes of explicit violence as if they were musical numbers, and was considered a pioneer in American cinema. However, the question of whether or not the violence used in his films truly inspires

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box record ($2.38 million) set by a Korean film: *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter and Spring*.

philosophical questions or simply feeds an orgasmic viewing experience of the kind that has spawned the films of Quentin Tarantino or Park Chan-wook is a serious one. My contention is that Peckinpah and Park Chan-wook are, for better or for worse, similar as filmmakers, not categorically different.

My aim in this essay is threefold. First, this essay will try to identify the ways in which the main tropes of Park Chan-wook's work – including flattened mise-en-scène, the commodified body, the mystification of spatial markers, and the disjointed juxtaposition of images and sound – all aim to explore the potential of cinema in ways that may have vexing epistemological implications. Second, I invoke the Nietzschean *ressentiment* in examining Park Chan-wook's assertion that personal vengeance is a plausible kind of energy in a society where its law and ethics have been virtually ratified by the combined interests of liberal democracy and capitalism. Third, in my conclusion, I will entertain the question whether or not the post-politics or anti-history of Park Chan-wook can yield a political reading when placed in a Korean historical context, just as Peckinpah's work, when contextualized in an American socio-political context, was perceived to have cited the violence of Vietnam and the civil rights movement.

Oldboy

Loosely adapted from an eight-volume *manga* (*manhwa* in the Korean pronunciation) mystery novel of the same title,[3] *Oldboy* follows in the footsteps of other Korean films such as *Alien Baseball Team* (*Gongpo-ui oein gudan*, Yi Chang-ho dir., 1986) and *Terrorist* (Kim Yeong-bin dir., 1995) that have adopted the narratives and style of *manhwa* into live-action films. Before Park Chan-wook, the most prominent among the directors who adopted a *manhwa*-approach to filmmaking was Lee Myung-se (Yi Myeong-se), whose films during the late 1980s and the 1990s stubbornly departed from the realist trend of the then-New Korean Cinema. Most of Lee's films – e.g. *Gagman* (1988), *My Love, My Bride* (1990), *First Love* (1993), and *Nowhere to Hide* (1999) – have insisted on a cinematic worldview that treats live-action characters as animated ones,

[3] The Japanese *manga* version, first published in 1998, was written by Tsuchiya Garon and illustrated by Minegishi Nobuaki.

thus presenting a distorted vision of the real world. As such, some similarities can be drawn between the works of Lee Myung-se and those of Park Chan-wook. However, it should be noted that Park Chan-wook's cynicism differs radically from Lee's heavily thematized romanticism.

Oldboy is the second film in Park Chan-wook's "vengeance" trilogy, which has been successful both in the domestic marketplace and on the international film festival circuit.[4] In these films, vengeance is carefully restricted to the realm of the personal, never crossing over into the public domain: it is always aimed at other individuals and almost never against state institutions. This in itself is hardly original. However, in *Oldboy* as in the other two films of the trilogy, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and *Lady Vengeance* (*Chinjeolhan geumjassi*, 2005), the police play only a perfunctory role. This erasure of authority accomplishes several things. First, it emphasizes the fact that the heroes and villains operate outside the domain of the law. They mercilessly abduct, kill, blackmail, threat, unleash violence, and engage in series of reprisals without ever even implying the existence of a public judicial system of the kind that typically occupies a central position in dramas dealing with individual liberty and freedom. (Examples of this mode can be seen in realist films such as *Chilsu and Mansu* (Park Kwang-su dir., 1988) or *Peppermint Candy* (*Bakha satang*, Yi Chang-dong dir., 1999), which foreground the police as sources of corruption or social malaise who meet all acts of transgressions, personal or public, with a violence.

Second, it enables *Oldboy* to suggest a mythical, transhistorical world beyond the mundane realities of a legal system in which figures such as the protagonist Dae-su and the villain Woo-jin freely roam. Philip Weinstein writes about something he calls "*beyond knowing*," a common symptom of modernist narratives that "tends to insist that no objects out there are disinterestedly knowable, and that any talk of objective mapping and mastery is either mistaken or malicious—an affair of the police" (Weinstein 2005, 253). Similarly, Park Chan-wook's films deliberately resist "objective mapping and mastery" and consequently aim to dispel the "knowing." Park unwaveringly refuses to

[4] Both *Oldboy* and *Lady Vengeance* were bona-fide blockbuster hit films while *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* wasn't as successful in the box office.

claim the "knowable," despite having been labeled as superficial by several prominent critics. And in Park Chan-wook's realm of the unknowable, the police are useless.

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

There is one notable exception to this absence of police in *Oldboy*. At the beginning of the film, the protagonist, O Dae-su, appears in a scene that takes place in the police station. Jump cuts centrally figure Dae-su, who is drunk and unruly. He has apparently been brought into the station after having caused some disturbance – in short, he is a public menace. This sequence is shot with a minimum of affect. The realistic lighting and natural acting style differs radically from the saturated colors and highly choreographed action sequences that will later constitute the bulk of the film. Though this police station sequence lasts about two-and-a-half minutes, uniformed policemen rarely appear in the frame. Only their voices are heard, presaging the absence of police throughout the film. Though Dae-su verbally insults the police, going so far as to urinate inside the station, the authorities allow him to leave the station unscathed. The police act as if they were from the 2000s, though this scene is set in 1988. Dae-su's obstreperous acts may be trivial, but as films like Park Kwang-su's *Chilsu and Mansu* (*Chilsu-wa Man-su,* 1988) and Hong Sang-su's *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (*Dwaeji-ga umul-e ppajin nal*, 1996) have proven to audiences time and again, South Korean authorities rarely overlook even the slightest disagreeable incident stirred up by unruly drunkards.[5] Made fifteen and eight years respectively after the release of these other films, *Oldboy* shows the police as having lost their teeth. In this post-authoritarian era, it's not surprising that

[5] In *Chilsu and Mansu* (Park Kwang-su dir., 1988), drunkard Mansu's bar brawl lands him at a police station where he is detained overnight for additional questioning. A small misdemeanor that should have only led to a small fine escalates into a far more punitive action because Mansu, it is revealed, has a father who is in jail as a long-term political prisoner. *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (Hong Sang-su dir., 1996) also includes a scene in which its protagonist Hyo-seop is sentenced in court three-day detention for instigating a fight with a restaurant worker at a Korean barbeque spot.

abuses of power by figures of authority no longer occupy the central concern of the drama.

Dae-su, an ordinary salary-man with a wife and a toddler daughter, is released from the police station only to find himself locked up minutes later in an anonymous cell. No particular reason for his incarceration is cited, and no indication is given as to the duration of his confinement. Days and nights pass, and Dae-su is forced to repeat the same routine every day. Having no one around to talk to, he watches television, undergoes rigorous self-training of his body, eats the fried dumplings (*gunmandu*) fed to him, and digs an escape route through the wall with the tip of a hidden spoon. However, before he can escape, he is released. Fifteen years have passed since the night of his kidnapping and confinement. Not only is his imprisonment unexplained to him or to us, neither is his release. When he wakes up after a session of hypnosis conducted in his cell, he finds himself on the rooftop of an apartment building.

Fifteen years of solitary isolation have transformed Dae-su, who first appeared as an unruly charlatan at the police station. No longer an ordinary man, he now speaks in a succinct monotone that accords him a god-like transcendental status. Throughout the film, several characters ask, "Why do you speak that way?" His sentences are almost always in present tense, and they lack any modifying clauses — future, conditional, or past. This lack of emotions makes Dae-su seem larger-than-life. Furthermore, years of martial arts training while imprisoned has allowed him to achieve a seemingly superhuman agility and strength that he puts to use as a ruthless warrior in search of vengeance. While in captivity, Dae-su had helplessly watched as news reports framed him as the prime suspect in the murder of his wife. Upon his release, he finds out that his orphaned daughter Bora had left for Sweden. With no family to rely on, and no authority figure to appeal to, Dae-su finds himself utterly alone.

The only person he can rely on is his new friend, Mido. The first place Dae-su visits after he's released from his private cell is a sushi restaurant called *Jijunghae*. He's served by Mido, a young woman who has become a sushi chef despite the discriminatory belief that women's hands are too warm to maintain the proper rawness of cold sushi. The two quickly trade lines that mutually invoke a feeling of uncanniness – that is, in Freud's definition, the feeling of "something familiar (homely) that has been repressed

and then reappears" (Freud 2001, 152). Dae-su, who has been given a wallet filled with a sheaf of 100,000 won bills (US$ 100), quickly orders and consumes an entire octopus, served by Mido to him raw and cut. Dae-su loses consciousness when Mido reaches out to grab his hand and tell him: "I think I am quite unusual. My hands are very cold." As is later revealed, Mido is actually Dae-su's grown-up daughter Bora, who had supposedly been given up for adoption to a Swedish family.

Dae-su overcomes his initial suspicions of Mido, who takes him home, and the two of them work as a team to investigate the man behind the arrangement to keep Dae-su in captivity for fifteen years. Feelings grow between the two. Mido promises Dae-su that she will serenade him with the 1990 hit "Bogosipeun eolgul" ("Face I Want to See Again") when she is sexually ready for him. When Dae-su rescues Mido from the thugs threatening to kill her soon thereafter, she sings him her siren song, sending Dae-su into dangerous waters. Unbeknownst to the two of them, they have entered into an incestuous relationship.

The only clues Dae-su has to work with in tracing the origins of the crime unleashed against him are the taste of *gunmandu* (Chinese dumplings) he was fed during the entire period he was locked up and a small piece of chopstick wrapping paper that was accidentally found in one of the dumplings. The paper is printed with the characters for "cheongryong" (blue dragon) – two characters of the restaurant's name. After combing through Seoul, where literally hundreds of Chinese restaurants contain both characters in their names, Dae-su finally locates Jacheongryong (Magic Blue Dragon), the restaurant that matches the taste of the dumplings he has eaten every day for the last fifteen years.

This in turn leads him to the "business group" that specializes in illegal abductions-and-detentions. Only a few days elapse before Dae-su is confronted with the film's villain, his high school classmate Woo-jin. Both Dae-su and Woo-jin had attended the Evergreen (Sangnok) High School, a Catholic school located in the provinces of Korea. Even after identifying the man responsible for his long imprisonment, Dae-su still fails to understand what could have motivated Woo-jin to commit such heinous crimes against him. After further investigation, Dae-su remembers an event from the past that had completely evaded him during his 15-year captivity. This is shown in a flashback in

which he remembers a younger version of himself. The young Dae-su is wearing a high school uniform, and is watching a girl riding a bike. It is his last day at the Evergreen High School before he transfers to another school in Seoul. Su-a, the pretty female student he'd been watching, entices young Dae-su's interest even more when they meet briefly on a bench. For no apparent reason other than curiosity, he follows Su-a and discovers a dark secret about her: Su-a is sexually intimate with her own brother.

"It wasn't my dick that impregnated my sister. It was your tongue," Woo-jin explains when the two finally meet. One of the most intriguing points of *Oldboy* is that linguistic communication almost always falls outside the sphere of rational dialogue. Verbal miscues, infelicitations, and gaps between signifiers and signifieds produce not simply miscomprehensions between two individuals, but also help create a world that is "beyond knowable." Once rumors begin spreading that Su-a fooled around with her brother and had become pregnant with his child, she committed suicide. After his sister's death, Woo-jin also suffered from heart disease and was forced to replace his heart with an artificial one. What first began as innocuous chatter in high school between Dae-su and his friend about Su-a's illicit affair, later resulted in the death of Su-a and the Woo-jin's cardiac arrest. This consequently led Woo-jin to seek revenge against Dae-su, who could not remember any wrongdoing that would have earned him fifteen years of incarceration.

A final showdown between the hero, unfairly imprisoned for 15 years, and his former captor would, in a commercial film, normally favor the victim. But it is Woo-jin who ironically has the last laugh during this confrontation. Once his revenge is complete, Woo-jin descends from his penthouse in an elevator, where he puts a gun to his head and pulls the trigger. Woo-jin's death is a dramatic one, but it could be argued that his heart had already died many years earlier. The only thing that had kept him alive was his desire to seek revenge for his sister. Woo-jin had wanted Dae-su to sleep with his own daughter, as Woo-jin had once slept with his own sister. That mission was accomplished once Dae-su, prostrating himself to protect Mido from the knowledge that he is both her lover and her father, voluntarily cuts off his own tongue. Once this happens, Woo-jin has no intention of seeking a further extension of his life. Woo-jin, who resuscitated his life

through technological means (an artificial heart), claims his subjectivity through the completion of his revenge, not by foregoing it.

Revenge

As explicated in my book, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, memory is a crucial site where contestations between individuals and the state take place.[6] The question of whether or not one is capable of remembering the site of one's trauma is directly linked to the question of whether one can achieve a salient form of subjectivity, usually a male one. Many films made during the 10 year period that stretched from the heyday of the *Minjung* Movement in the late 1980s to the inauguration of President Kim Dae-jung in 1998 centered around the demand that official historiography, especially surrounding the Korean War and post-war human-rights violations, be revised. The personal remembrances found in many films from this period – e.g. *Silver Stallion* (*Eunma-neun oji anneunda*, Chang Kil-su dir., 1991), *A Petal* (*Kkonnip*, Jang Sun-woo dir., 1995), *A Single Spark* (*Areum daun cheongnyeon jeontaeil*, Park Kwang-su dir., 1996) and *Spring in My Hometown* (*Areum daun sijeol*, Lee Kwang-mo dir., 1998) – are crucial to this overarching preoccupation with representing alternative histories that work against hegemonic, distorted representations of the state. Given that public history is at stake, these remembrances accompany an objective that reaches far beyond the realm of the individual. For instance, in *A Petal*, the traumatized girl who lost her mother during the 1980 Gwangju massacre must remember what has happened and articulate what she saw on the fateful day when her mother was among those killed by the soldiers. The girl's personal remembrances cannot be disassociated from the public need for a witness who can narrate the truth about Gwangju and contest the official, state-authorized historiography, one which denies any civilian casualties.

The girl from Gwangju is briefly able to remember the day in Gwangju where the soldiers ruthlessly opened fire on demonstrators gathered to protest the never-ending

[6] See particularly the chapters 3 and 4 from my *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*: "'Is This How the War Is Remembered?': Violent Sex and the Korean War in *Silver Stallion*, *Spring in My Hometown*," and "*The Taebaek Mountains* and Post-trauma and Historical Remembrance in *A Single Spark* and *A Petal*."

military rule, but she quickly relapses into mental disorder. The viewers of *A Petal* in 1995 are offered the truth about Gwangju, but in *Oldboy*, like other Park Chan-wook's vengeance films, remembrance remains in the domain of the personal and never ventures out further. Dae-su's remembrance of himself witnessing the incestuous relationship between Woo-jin and his sister has absolutely no implications beyond a personal matter – it's only purpose is to identify the essence of the resentment, the root cause of the revenge that has demanded such a high price of him.

Because the last three films of Park Chan-wook identify vengeance as the reactive action of resentment, Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment* may serve as a useful reminder of how to better read these works. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, as well as in other works, Nietzsche uses the concept of resentment to further elucidate the relationship between master and slave and also between good and evil. The dreadful power of resentment, Gilles Deleuze wrote as he summarized Nietzsche, is that it is "not content to denounce crimes and criminals, it wants sinners, people who are responsible" (Deleuze 1962, 119). Deleuze, following Nietzsche, further continues to explain that society ends up acquiring the sense of the evil and good as opposites of each other from the idea of *ressentiment*: "you are evil; I am the opposite of what you are; therefore I am good." This derivation of morality ("slave morality" according to Nietzsche) justifies the spirit of revenge, which is conditioned by a hostile world. In this sense, even destructive energy can potentially become creative, good energy.

All of the main characters in Park Chan-wook's films rely on this Nietzschean (or Old Testament) idea. They continuously assert that vengeance is neither evil nor unethical. Woo-jin tells Dae-su, "Revenge is good for one's health." The invocation of "health" in this statement implies not only physical health, but mental health as well. Woo-jin's acquisition of incredible amounts of wealth, though unexplained in the film, is tacitly understood as the fruit of the drive for revenge he conceived while in high school. Analogously, Geum-ja (played by Lee Young-ae) in *Lady Vengeance* and Bak Dong-jin, the factory owner (played by Song Kang-ho), in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance,* both seek revenge because they are good, not because they are bad. Is revenge according to Park Chan-wook an ethical decision that ironically renders a judiciously responsible subject,

not a savage one? Must one seek revenge, rather than forgoing it, to reclaim subjectivity? Are these questions even relevant in Park Chan-wook's entertainment films?

Nietzsche and Deleuze seem to agree that revenge is not antithetical to salvation. Deleuze echoes Nietzsche's idea that no religious value, including Christianity, can be separated from hatred and revenge. He writes, "What would Christian love be without the Judaic power of *ressentiment* which inspires and directs it? Christian love is not the opposite of Judaic *ressentiment* but its consequence, its conclusion and its crowning glory" (Deleuze 1962, 122). In the closing sequence of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, Bak Dong-jin shudders and sheds his tears before brandishing his knife in front of his daughter's killer Ryu (played by Shin Ha-kyun). Bak states, "I know you are a good man. So, you understand that I have to kill you, right?" Herein lies the paradox of Park Chan-wook's vengeance trilogy—revenge comes not from hatred, but from love and pity. Bak's tears are genuine, and he seems to believe that Ryu had no choice but to abduct his daughter in order to pay for his sister's medical bill before inadvertently killing her. Like the acts of terror (kidnap and demanding of ransom) that in Park's films are sometimes seen to be good and at other times bad, revenge in his films is not always bad, and in fact almost always good, if it is executed with good intentions. Bak Dong-jin chooses to remain faithful to his feelings of resentment, which thus leads him to react violently against Ryu.

And yet. And yet. Even though Park Chan-wook's violence is not an act that is categorically severed from salvation and love, one must ask whether a film such as *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* is truly Nietzschean. The open acknowledgment that the enemy is good cancels out the possibility of Nietzschean *ressentiment,* since resentment vanishes once the other is reevaluated to be anything but evil. The question of "what is he seeking justice for" becomes a complicated one. Is Park Chan-wook suggesting that the famous New Testament credo, "love thy enemy" can be just as good when it is reversed into "kill thy brother," a story also found in the Bible (the Old Testament)? What is the point of this if Park doesn't believe in God? Then is "kill thy brother" just a playful, if perverse, speech-act and nothing more? Even if an act of violence committed against the "virtuous" accommodates a postmodern sentiment that negates any cogent correlation between the signifier (the subject's violent act) and the signified (the accomplishment of

justice against evil), the conclusion Park comes to does not make Nietzschean theory any more relevant. What was the point of giving Bak a line telling Ryu that he is good, only if he were to be executed seconds later? The moment you find the other to be good, the excitation that arises out of resentment and hostility should cease to take hold of the isubject. And once the subject abandons resentment or revenge, he or she, according to Nietzsche, is capable of achieving a sovereign identity based on a superior sense of morality rather than a slave one. Is Bak Dong-jin himself then killed for failing to adopt an alternative perspective that is endowed with superman-like power to recognize values beyond good and evil? Are deaths of Ryu and Bak, who both fall into the pitfall of mediocrity by trying to be good and avenge the loss of the victims, simply affirmations of Park Chan-wook's cynicism, which deliberately stands to contradict Nietzsche's firm belief that each human being is capable of becoming an "over-man" or a superman?

Body

Bodily pain is such an important characteristic of Park Chan-wook's trilogy that through this recurring motif, his films achieve what I think are an aesthetics, ethics, and politics of the body. In his films, body parts are often dismembered, and human organs such as kidneys or hearts become detached from the human body. They are either sold for profit or replaced with healthier, artificial substitutes. They are acquired, bartered, relinquished, and redistributed – sometimes legally, but more often outside the law. The body falls far short of sacred in a postmodern capitalist society, where the body's function is configured quite differently than in pre-capitalist ones. A healthy body is a mandatory prerequisite to feeling pleasure and sensations. In nomadic societies, the body was regarded as belonging to the earth; in imperial societies, it belonged to the despot; in the capitalist societies that Park Chan-wook depicts, it belongs to capital. Debunking the mantra of the Confucian society, which posits the familial collective and consequently the nation as being organically linked to individual bodies, the bodies in Park Chan-wook's films are regarded as commodifiable, their organs usually quantifiable in terms of monetary value that can be bought and sold.

Oldboy develops *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*'s thematization of living flesh and organs that metaphorize and make explicit the extreme conditions of late capitalism by attaching price-tags to body parts. Bak Cheol-ung, the president of the underground business that specializes in private incarcerations, is a minor yet important character in the film. When Dae-su identifies the correct Chinese restaurant and locates Cheol-ung, he tortures him by tying him up and starting to take his teeth out with the aid of a hammer. By the time, six teeth are removed from his mouth, Cheol-ung surrenders and provides him with the leads he wants. The next time Dae-su and Cheol-ung meet, the power dynamics between the two has been reversed. Dae-su has fallen into a trap set by Cheol-ung and is on the verge of having the same number of teeth—six—extracted with a claw hammer. Before Cheol-ung is able to exact his revenge, however, he receives a phone call from Woo-jin asking him to stop in exchange for a briefcase filled with cash. Cheol-ung reluctantly agrees on this exchange and gives up his spirit of revenge for this undisclosed amount of cash. Since the "spirit of revenge" had initially demanded the removal of six teeth, Park Chan-wook has set a price (a briefcase filled with cash) for approximately one-sixth of the entire gallery of teeth.

Cheol-ung, not only accepts this money, it turns out that he also trades in his right arm in exchange for the gift of a building from Woo-jin. Though only a minor character, Cheol-ung's agreements to trade parts of his body for monetary compensation are not insignificant. In recent Korean history, where sacrificial acts such as workers self-immolating themselves or cutting off their own fingers to protest human rights violations or to express nationalist ideologies have become ubiquitous, Cheol-ung's willingness to sacrifice parts of his body for monetary gain deliberately scoffs at and renders profane the sacred and political condition of corporeality. The body of an individual is almost a site of transgression that moves from "serv[ing] to protect the entire community," to use René Girard's description of sacrifice, to a crude repository of private assets where each body part and organ can be exchanged for money in order to help realize the goals of capital gain (Girard 1977, 8).

Space

Earl Jackson, Jr. writes that "[t]he way Oh[O Dae-su] tastes each gyoza, comparing that taste with his specialized knowledge of the gyoza he has eaten for fifteen years, seems a darker parody of the Japanese trope of gourmet nostalgia, exemplified most vividly in popular culture in the film *Tampopo*, on the quest for the perfect ramen" (Jackson 2005). With both globalization and modernization in full swing, Seoul has actively participated in the global, border-crossing culture. Chinese food, particularly *Jajangmyeon* (black bean paste noodles)[7] became the first and only ethnic cuisine to which the general Korean populace had access during the 1960s and the 1970s, but its exoticness was quickly erased, and it became a part of Korean food culture (Yang 2005). The use of *gunmandu* (gyoza) in *Oldboy* as the primary evidence that leads Dae-su to his captor is significant not only, as Jackson suggests, because it transforms taste from a high-brow pursuit in the vein of *Tampopo* into a survival skill, but also because it erases the kind of regional identity that is often clearly marked by taste.

In realism, the use of provincial accents clearly marks identity and boundaries that in turn provide a sense of "knowability" and "familiarity." Modernism tries to take away that sense of familiarity. For instance, Kafka's novels erase specific national or regional markers, and thus seem deliberately elliptical, anonymous, and atmospheric. The spaces in these non-realist novels become uncanny, unbound by the specificity and particularity of each and every setting.[8] Of course, it can be argued that postmodern novels like those of Haruki Murakami also achieve a similar sense of the unknowable or the uncanny, but these works register a different kind of impact than Kafka's. The fried dumpling and the chopstick wrapper inscribed with the restaurant name "blue dragon" invoke a sense of easy familiarity for many Koreans. However, precisely because of this ubiquity that's trans-Asian (and perhaps even as global as McDonalds or Starbucks), they slip into the anonymity of unfamiliar territory. As such, the search for a restaurant that both matches the exact taste of the dumpling and has a name that includes the characters for "blue dragon" is a complicated one. There is nothing more disconcerting than the effort to find

[7] In *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, protagonist Ryu's girlfriend, Cha Yeong-mi (played by Bae Doona), orders a bowl of *jajangmyeon*. After placing her order over the phone, she mistakenly thinks that her intruder, Bak Dong-jin, is a Chinese delivery man. Instead of getting her *jajangmyeon*, she receives electric torture.

[8] On "Kafkan uncanny," see Weinstein (2005, 101-106).

a particular restaurant that matches a ubiquitous and anonymous taste like a Big Mac or a *gunmandu*.

"Tell the kitchen that there's too much *buchu* in the dumpling," Dae-su tells the delivery boy from the restaurant that bears the name Magic Blue Dragon and produces dumplings with taste that he'd grown accustomed to during 15 years in captivity. Excessive use of *buchu*, thin spring onions, has made it possible for Dae-su to track down the organization Woo-jin has outsourced to lock him up. But what is the significance of this statement? First, Dae-su's request contains both a complaint and a kind of compliment. He had grown sick of the onion-like vegetable over 15 years, but if it hadn't been for the excessive use of *buchu* in the dumpling, Dae-su would never have been able to find the "company" that had held him captive. Even though *gunmandu* has achieved a kind of taste anonymity in Korean food culture, the excessive use of *buchu* in the Magic Blue Dragon's dumplings made them sufficiently unique for Dae-su. Second, the *buchu* statement could be read as cynically reducing one of the most important modern periods of Korean history into a vacuous, insignificant one. Locked up alone in the private jail, this is the only significant memory Dae-su has from the critical years between 1988 to 2003, during which time South Korea became one of the most successful economic and technologically advanced democratic countries in the world. Dae-su doesn't remember either the deaths of numerous demonstrators during rallies held throughout this period of democratization, nor the workers fired during the so-called IMF-bailout crisis – what matters most to him is the unforgettable taste of excessive *buchu* that he has had to remember to put his trauma behind him.

The *gunmandu* is one of many references used in the film that also makes space both familiar and unfamiliar. The sushi restaurant Mido works at while wearing a kimono, for instance, is called *Jijunghae*, which means the Mediterranean Sea. The high school Dae-su and Woo-jin attended, Evergreen High School, lacks any mention of regional ties in its name, though most high schools, like the ones here, are named after their towns or districts. Since all of the high school friends Dae-su visits to find out about Woo-jin speak in thick regional accents, the viewer can guess that Evergreen High School is located in the provinces. But where exactly is it located? Do the regional accents offer us any other clues beyond this? *Oldboy* makes the regional accent recognizable, but

simultaneously pushes its corresponding spatial identity past the familiar, rendering it anonymous. In so doing, the relationships of the characters in the text to spatial coordinates become largely discombobulated. Our sense of what's what has become so disengaged that even when "culinary taste" or "provincial accent" is invoked, it only adds to the mystification. *Oldboy*'s effective underscoring of the sense of "unknowable" makes globalization almost synonymous with anonymity. The abandonment of the "knowable" suggests the end of epistemology, achieving instead a postmodern condition marred by schizophrenia.

Language

The medium of television is precisely an instrument through which the relation between subject and space is concretized as dysfunctional. Because Dae-su is forbidden from communicating with anyone during the 15 years he's imprisoned, his only access to information is through a television set placed in his cell. Before he is released, Dae-su narrates to the audience that television is capable of being everything from "a clock, a calendar, a school, a home, a church, a friend to a lover." When he states that television is like "a friend," the image on the television in his cell features classic 1931 footage of *Frankenstein*. The corresponding visual image chosen for the linguistic signifier of the "lover" is an image of Min Hae-gyeong, a popular singer of from the late 1980s and the early 1990s, singing "Bogosipeun eolgul" ("Face I Want to See Again"). But can an image on television be classified as a real "lover"? Is Min Hae-gyeong, who dances only on the television monitor – untouchable, unable to interact, and therefore un-affective – capable of becoming Dae-su's lover? Being equipped to address every desire and fantasy, but without being able to deliver on any of them, is like simultaneously possessing a perfect dream and one's worst nightmare. This contrasts with more traditional "realist" takes on alienation such as *The Road Taken* (*Seontack*, Hong Ki-seon dir., 2003), a Korean film that was released the same year as *Oldboy*. They are both dramas about men unfairly put away in jail. An irreconcilable gap, however, remains between Kim Seon-myeong, the protagonist of *The Road Taken*, and O Dae-su: the former is a prisoner convicted by the state for believing in an ideology (Marxism) deemed subversive to the

state; the latter is a prisoner put away by a private man for having been a "loud mouth." Despite having been locked away for over 35 years, a world record for the longest serving prisoner-of-consciousness, Kim has comrades around him who are equally misfortunate. They have no television or any other electronic devices to keep them entertained, they celebrate birthdays, play games, and plan political actions together. In contrast, Dae-su spends all of his time with his only surrogate friend: the television – not unlike the average person in a postmodern condition who spends far more time communicating with machines than with real human beings. Like the *gunmandu*, Min's dance to the samba beat of the Korean song, "Face that I Want to See Again," underscores an anonymously global pop culture that has lost its genuine regional authenticity while perfectly accommodating the cliché of the television medium.

There are two modes that Park Chan-wook's vengeance films typically use to disrupt narrative linearity: first, the use of balletic action sequences that become attractions in and of themselves; and, second, the use of performative language. In *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, much of the dialogue that takes place throughout the film is in sign language because the film's protagonist, Ryu, is mute. Park Chan-wook's creative use of subtitles and intertitles, which feature characters other than Ryu speaking verbally while using sign language to Ryu, help the audience to understand the narrative. But such performative use of bodily gestures and linguistic images complicate the communicative channels of language. The vocal punctuations of sound, the variety of titles, and seeing the movement of bodies and the expressions on faces force us to consider how *Oldboy* may have been influenced by modernist filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, who explored the possibility of pure visuality and sound in cinema. In the third and final film of the trilogy, *Lady Vengeance*, the villain is an English teacher who sometimes communicates in English, and heroine's daughter is an adoptee in Australia who speaks only English. When English is spoken in the film, Park slows down his enunciation so that Korean subtitles can appear word-by-word, choreographed in the exact rhythm and order as the words being spoken so that the audience can witness the process of translation laid bare.

In *Oldboy*, Dae-su makes a dramatic transformation after being locked up for 15 years. As mentioned earlier, one significant change is signaled through his voice. Not

only does he speak in a terse monotone, but he also speaks through voiceovers.[9] What makes the voice so unusual is that it detaches itself from the social and the personal, becoming transcendental. If Woo-jin's artificial heart metonymically underscores his heartlessness and ruthlessness, Dae-su matches Woo-jin's inhumanity through the transformation of his voice. Even before Dae-su loses the battle with Woo-jin, and as a consequence, loses his tongue, it is possible to perceive him as a quasi-mute. Michael Chion elaborates that, according to Jacques Lacan, voice—along with the gaze, the penis, the feces, and nothingness—is ranked as *object petit a*, a part object "which may be fetishized and employed to 'thingify difference'"(Chion 1999, 1). Sexual differences, prohibition, and the law can all be established through the voice. However, Dae-su's transcendental voice (sometimes spoken only through voiceover narration) rises beyond the law and everything that is of the social. This anchors a strong sense of the "unutterable" or the "unspeakable," underscoring the film's invocation of the taboo that remains at its heart. Because Dae-su has achieved a non-human voice, it is assumed that a mundane code of ethics, with all of its prohibitions, do not apply to him – that is, until the very end of the film when it is revealed that he has slept with his daughter. It is at this moment that his voice departs from the transcendental and becomes human again – the precise moment that he also decides to cut off his tongue.

Postmodernism, which is predicated on the pleasurable use of the difference between the signifier and the signified, is also conditioned in *Oldboy* through the use of voiceover and other creative juxtapositions between image and sound. Gilles Deleuze lauds Jean-Luc Godard's achievements, claiming that Godard is "definitely one of the authors who has thought most about visual-sound relationships." Deleuze continues on to say that "[Godard]'s tendency to reinvest the visual with sound, with the ultimate aim of…restoring both to the body from which they have been taken, produces a system of disengagements or micro-cuts in all directions: cuts spread and no longer pass between the sound and the visual, but in the visual, in the sound, and in their multiplied

[9] Park Chan-wook began experimenting with voiceover narration from *Oldboy*. In *Lady Vengeance*, he employed an 60 year-old female narrator with long experiences in radio and television voice actor whose voice nostalgically reminded the viewers of radio dramas or popular television documentary programs like *Ingan sidae* (*Human Life*) from the 1970s and the 1980s.

connections" (Deleuze 1989, 249). Deleuze insists that the visual and the voice are most often taken from human bodies in film, but as soon as they are processed and textually manipulated through the machine— the camera, sound recording devices and other post-production gadgets—they do not remain natural to the body. What Godard aims at accomplishing is what could be considered the cinematic equivalent to cacophonous sound, but achieved through the potentially disjunctive relationship between sound and image. Park Chan-wook aims for something similar. He re-appropriates and self-references this unnatural relationship between sound and image that Godard once experimented with in his films, and between the real and its representation that narrative cinema had seamlessly sutured together over the years in order to produce admittedly coy comical gags and "cool" effects. But the question remains: hasn't the contradiction between image and sound or between reality and its representation already manifested itself to be humorous and playful (for example, in the silent days of cinema)? In other words, isn't this unnaturalness natural to the medium of cinema itself?

"Just Look at the Surface"

"If you want to know all about Andy Warhol," Warhol famously told the press, "just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it." As suggested earlier, the emergence of Park Chan-wook in recent years is symptomatic of a Korean cinema that has been ushered into a definite kind of post-remembrance and post-political mode. The gap between the mode of representation and the mode of symbolization from which metaphors and allegories can be figured is reduced in Park's film to the point where only the surface can be perceived. So we can also ask, does anything exist beyond the surface of Park Chan-wook's films? Or does something lurk behind even this deliberately flattened space, something to which we must accede? In Korea, where the film industry developed out of both colonial and anti-colonial interests during the first half of the twentieth century and communist and anti-communist interests during the latter half, one could bluntly say that Korea has made nothing but "social problem" films throughout the last century. Is Park Chan-wook then making a political statement by churning out excessively, rigorously, and relentlessly

superficial films that defy politics in a country where politics are discussed on every street corner? One of the best memories to be found in contemporary Korean cinema comes from the last scene in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance,* in which the factory owner, Bak Dong-jin, whose daughter had been kidnapped is multiply stabbed by a terrorist organization called the Revolutionary Anarchist Alliance. "Who the hell are you guys?" asks Bak Dong-jin of his assailants. Instead of verbally answering, the anarchists peg a prepared note on Bak's chest with a knife. If this were a film by Godard, such an abrupt and incoherent insertion of violence would have been welcomed as an allegory of class conflict. However, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, like Park Chan-wook's other films and unlike Godard's films, are tightly structured, entertainment films in which every scene is knotted to clear reasoning and causality. Did Park Chan-wook think that he could afford one Godard-ian moment at the end? There are a number of superfluous possible answers to Bak Dong-jin's final question. There's the public one (class hostility), the private one (revenge against Ryu's girlfriend who was also an anarchist), none-of-the-above, or all-of-the-above. The final scene refuses to give us an answer. As such, Bak is able to maintain the premise that representation (which assigns certain mimetic symbols to reality) is untenable – and therefore, that any kind of agency to be excavated from it is inconceivable. While gasping for his last breath, Park tries desperately to read the note pinned to him. Without the strength to move his body, he can only tilt his head – but the note remains beyond his range of sight. Credits soon roll and no one is spared from the frustration.

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