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From "Vengeance" to "Forgiveness":
The Spectatorial Ek-stasis and Hitchcockian Cinematic Language in Park Chan-wook's Oldboy

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Abstract

This paper considers the visual shock Park Chan-wook utilizes in Oldboy *that provokes spectatorial revulsion, a reaction to the excessively brutal logic of retaliation, in relation to Hitchcock's suspense to explore how their films deal with ethical issues in terms of film spectatorship. Particularly, by examining how the excessive brutality of* Oldboy *and the film viewer's disgust that follows, can lead to the ethical themes of "forgiveness" and "liberation," this paper resurfaces the universal ethics about "how to be with the other ethically" in a global and transnational context. If Park's* Oldboy *confronts our safe and familiar voyeuristic viewing positions, it is because his film uses the eye-to-eye encounter with the spectator as the filmic element to awaken the spectator's sense-ability. In connecting ethics to film, this is precisely a Hitchcockian cinema technique that includes visual assault on the spectator in order to link "ethically looking" toward the other with "ethically looking" in the cinema. Considering Park Chan-wook's* Oldboy *in connection with Alfred Hitchcock's cinematic language, and in doing so, investigating how the two film directors permit the film viewer's ethical awakening via visual shock, this paper sheds light on the spectatorial ethics itself.*

Keywords: Park Chan-wook, *Oldboy*, Hitchcock, an eye for an eye, spectatorial ek-stasis, forgiveness, Korean movie

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Introduction

Park Chan-wook (Bak Chan-uk) is a Hallyu ("Korean Wave") film director who has established a renowned global reputation for his films. Despite his popularity, however, many Western film critics have marginalized his films. A number of popular reviewers criticize his "excessiveness," generally focusing on the violence or gender politics of his films. Some of them call the director Park as the Tarantino of the East and classify his films into "Asia Extreme" for his trademark stylized blood and guts (Macnab 2006). They relegate Park's films to cult movie-status, praising his films' postmodern approach, distinctive style, and images while avoiding the serious thematic arguments he proposes. However, the label "Asia Extreme" belongs to Neo-orientalism as a Western intellectual enterprise which otherizes the regional characteristics of East Asia against the West (Jeong 2012, 310). Park Chan-wook became not only a nationally known director but also a global director when *Oldboy* won the 57th Cannes Film Festival Director's Award (2004). Korean critics argue that, unlike Im Gwon-taek's, Park's films do not use the self-Orientalizing technique. Largely influenced by Sophocles, Kafka, Dostoevsky, and Hitchcock, Park's films can be considered transnational; they are produced, shared, and understood in every part of the world; that is to say, they reach the global audience (Jeong 2012, 320). I also argue that Park's films tell us about who we are and how we live in the present day in the context of self-reflection. Park's cinema renders "an epistemological shift" and enables us to rethink and requestion the ethical relationship between "the I" and "the other" in an allegorical way and in a global and transnational context.

This paper particularly explores how the director Park's cinema languages are linked to the audience's reading practices that share responsibilities for the future. As a Hitchcockian, director Park's films challenge any ideas of certainty, suspend any phallic attempts to find a fixed meaning, and require us to rethink what we read and what we see, with regard to what does not appear in them. Thus, Park's narratives are intrinsically connected and interwoven with the viewers' readings; watching Park's films, we become witness to what is happening in Park's screen

which demands that we critically examine and take responsibility in this transformative experience. In the twenty-first century, if Park Chan-wook's films provoke controversy in the international film market, it is because they continue to ask viewers what ethical positions they will adopt in a somewhat different and unpleasant way; namely, by retaining the element of scandal and disturbing specularity. When we read his films as parables in humanistic and philosophical contexts, Park's films ask us to reconsider the spectator's stake, particularly with regard to an ethical responsiveness and responsibility toward the other.

When asked whether his vengeance trilogy—*Boksu-neun na-ui geot* (Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, 2002), *Oldeuboi* (Oldboy, 2003), and *Chinjeolhan Geum-jassi* (Lady Vengeance, 2005)—was aimed at 9/11, Park answered that it was not intended to justify or rationalize vengeance but to show that it is an act of total stupidity. He aimed to make the audience feel and taste how gruesome the consequences of an endless circle of revenge can be when taken to the extreme (Hill 2013). Commenting on the end of his vengeance trilogy, Park articulated that his aim was to call attention to the ethics of "forgiveness" by showing the ultimate failure of revenge right in front of the audience. If Park's vengeance trilogy problematizes the representation of violence and vengeance in the cinema, rather than rationalizes it, his most famous film *Oldboy* indeed suggests a hyperbolic ethical vision of forgiveness with its allegorical power, while promoting the viewers' participatory responses. From this perspective, I will read Park's *Oldboy* with an emphasis on "forgiveness," not "vengeance," and examine how the film involves spectators in the ethical obligations toward "the other."

Park's *Oldboy* is one of the most frequently written about on ethics and film in recent years. For example, Steve Choe's *Sovereign Violence* (2016) has a whole chapter on *Oldboy* and its ethics of revenge and forgiveness; Jeon in *Positions* (2009) on trauma and forgetting in the film would also be relevant, as is Kim Kyung-Hyun's chapter in *Korean Horror Cinema* (2013). In line with their arguments, but with different focuses, I engage Park's *Oldboy* with "Hitchcockian" aesthetics; this paper considers the visual shock Park Chan-wook utilizes in *Oldboy* that provokes spectatorial revulsion, a reaction to the excessively brutal logic of retaliation, in relation

to Hitchcock's "*suspense*" to explore how their films deal with ethical issues in terms of film spectatorship. Alfred Hitchcock is famous for using visual attacks toward the film viewer's eyes as well as the characters' eye-to-eye encounter with film spectator. This is in order to raise the ethical question in terms of "spectatorship" and to respect the question as a question. In the same vein, Park's films also utilize the so-called cruel and unusual punishment that seems to be levied at the spectator in order not to defend uncivilized Korea but to raise exactly the question of spectatorial ethics itself (Choe 2007, 69). In this context, this paper will examine how Park's *Oldboy*, referring to Hitchcockian cinematic language that problematizes the typical position of the spectator, deals with the film spectator's access to the ground of ethics.

Mise-en-abyme in *Oldboy*: An Eye for an Eye

In *Oldboy*, "an eye for an eye" does not merely indicate lex talionis (retaliation as the mirror punishment). Rather, considering the mirror-relationship between the two main characters, Oh Dae-su and Lee Woo-jin (Yi Wu-jin), it is relevant to an "eye-to-eye encounter" which is multiplied in a way that evokes an image of *mise-en-abyme* reflected by two parallel mirrors. Mise-en-abyme means, by definition, "placed into infinity" which indicates the visual experience of standing between two mirrors. When the two avengers face each other, they become mirror images of each other and their victim-perpetrator relationship creates a mise-en-abyme structure in the vicious circle of revenge which indeed constitutes the narrative structure of the film. Park elaborates the mise-en-abyme structure of the two old boys' mirror-relationship through the reversal of the observer/observed in their eye-to-eye encounters; the effect is to question spectatorship in the cinema, in which the spectator's responsibility is problematized in the extreme.

In the primary scene of the mirror-relationship between Dae-su and Woo-jin, Dae-su accidentally peeps through a broken window, like that shown in figure 1 and discovers the secret love affair between Woo-jin and

his sister Su-a. This scene depicts Woo-jin like a baby boy sucking at his mother's breast; this strongly implies Woo-jin's Oedipus complex. Here, Dae-su's observing eye, which interpellates the other as an object-to-be-looked-at, is voyeuristic much like the eyes of film viewers. Never guessing what the consequences of it will be, Dae-su judges what he sees immediately. Ironically, he is unaware how his voyeuristic gaze will commit serious violence against the other. Dae-su's quick judgment and lack of discretion drive Su-a to her death. Su-a, who has been dogged by rumors, suffers from false signs of pregnancy and commits suicide before Woo-jin's very eyes. However, Dae-su lives an ordinary life because he remains ignorant of the impact of his careless words. Indeed, it is such self-centered blindness and irresponsibility toward the other that leads him to his tragic downfall.

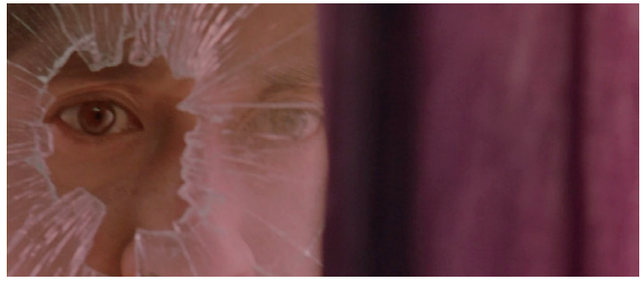

Figure 1. The eye of the young Dae-su accidently peeping through a broken window at the secret love affair between Woo-jin and his sister Su-a

Over the next few decades, Woo-jin works to ensure Dae-su faces an identical situation in order to "get even"; according to Woo-jin's retaliation plan, Dae-su comes to re-enact Woo-jin's original shame. When Woo-jin peers through the glass-covered eyeholes of a gas mask to witness Dae-su's incestuous affair with his daughter like in figure 2, the scene tells that the situation is exactly reversed. In their mirror-relationship, the distinction between Woo-jin and Dae-su is removed, and we witness what happens when the two observing eyes meet. Thus, "an eye for an eye" can be read

as a metaphor for such eye-to-eye encounters which obligates "the I" to be aware of "the other." Considering the narrative structure, it constitutes a dizzyingly reflexive mise-en-abyme.

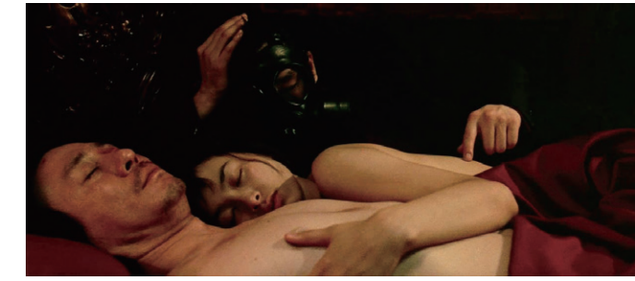

Figure 2. Lee Woo-jin peering through the glass-covered eyeholes of a gas mask to witness Dae-su's incestuous affair with his own daughter Mi-do

Reversing the positions between the observer and the observed, Woo-jin's "eye for an eye" can also be read as a warning to film viewers, who tend to lack empathy from a spectatorial distance. Indeed, while Oh Dae-su must find out the answers to the question "who?" and "why?" in order to free himself, film viewers are also required to carry out their own spectatorial *ek-stasis* (i.e., getting out of the "I/eye"-centric position) following Dae-su's memory traces, as the director demands in the person of Lee Woo-jin.

The distant "I" can easily enjoy a voyeuristic spectacle without a sense of guilt or shame; even when it is about the other's pain, "the I" maintains a safe emotional distance, proclaiming his/her innocence as well as his/her impotence. Susan Sontag argues that such spectatorship blunts the discriminating powers of the mind and neutralizes our moral force by encouraging unresponsiveness and irresponsibility toward "the other" (2003, 105–107). In this way, Park's films are highly Hitchcockian, because they are deft exercises in audience manipulation that confront safe, voyeuristic viewing positions and facilitate and guide spectatorial *ek-stasis*. When Park's cinema turns its face toward the audience with a deliberate

frontality, the onscreen audience oversteps the boundary between spectator and spectacle usurping the positions of the object in the space of the gaze; this forces the audience to consider what it means to observe a film in an ethical manner.

The relationship between Woo-jin and Dae-su echoes the relationship between the film and its spectators, making it more difficult for the audience to distance themselves emotionally. Even if we can barely empathize with the characters, we look at and with the characters. In his role as the proxy for the audience, if Dae-su's lack of empathy and judgmental eyes illustrate his inability to engage in self-reflection, in observing Dae-su's ethical faults, we are obligated to look back on our own "response-ability" with regard to the act of looking. Here is where Hitchcockian *suspense* occurs; experiencing the narrative on-screen, we, the film viewers, go beyond mere comprehension by encoding and producing participatory responses. Thus, in the spiraling layered plot of *Oldboy*, like the *mise-en-abyme*, we come to be included in the film and become the outermost layer of the film.

"Remember and Free Yourself!"

Dae-su has been imprisoned for 15 years for an unknown offense. When Dae-su is released as suddenly and inexplicably as he was captured, Woo-jin says the game has just begun. According to Woo-jin's scheme, in order to liberate himself, Dae-su needs to first figure out why he is released, rather than why he was imprisoned. Woo-jin suggests, "Review your whole lifetime. School is finished. Now it's time for your homework."[1] To figure out what Woo-jin means, Dae-su is now called to remember what he has completely forgotten: meeting with Woo-jin's sister, Su-a, in his youth. He must find this memory to realize and uncover what was not known at the time. Thus, while on the surface *Oldboy* looks like a story of "revenge," what this film actually pursues is an ethical awakening through "remembering." The whole

1. The characters' name and quotations cited in this article come from the film's official English subtitles.

story derives from Dae-su's memory trace, which he conveys to a hypnotist at the end of the film. Even though conveying his story to his hypnotist aims to erase his painful memories of the revealed truth, most of the film that unfolds in the flashback is indeed Dae-su's remembrance of his memories. Through the practice of remembering, Dae-su is required to engage in self-reflection and thus also to reveal the hidden wounds of Woo-jin, who has committed terrible acts against him. To free himself and his perpetrator, Dae-su needs to enter Woo-jin's mind in order to gain a deeper understanding of the other's reality. When he can finally empathize with the other's pain, he will be able to see where the excessively violent action originated from. When he can remember his own wrongdoings and realizes that he was also a perpetrator, he will finally understand how it all fits together.

After his release, Dae-su receives a call from his captor while dining in a sushi restaurant where Mi-do (Dae-su's daughter) works. He first asks the caller, "Who are you?" Woo-jin answers, "Who I am is not important. What's important is 'why.'" It turns out that, in Woo-jin's scheme, Dae-su is hypnotized and programmed to ask, "Who are you?" upon hearing a certain ringtone on his phone. At the end of the film, when Woo-jin reveals to Dae-su the whole story about "why" prior to his suicide, the two men's faces overlap. More precisely, we come to see a face vertically split on the screen; the left half is Dae-su's face, and the right is Woo-jin's, like in figure 3. Thus, when Dae-su asks the question "Who are you?" as programmed, it looks like Woo-jin also asks the same question.

Figure 3. When Dae-su asks, "Who are you?" as programmed, the two men's faces overlap. And, it looks like Woo-jin also asks the same question.

In light of their mirror-relationship, the hysteric question might be exactly what Woo-jin has desired to ask Dae-su for a long time, along with the question: "why." In the past, Woo-jin and Su-a were unwittingly sighted by Dae-su, and Dae-su's loud mouth ruined their lives. After his sister's suicide, Woo-jin might struggle to comprehend "why" it happened; his lonely fight to escape the nightmarish trauma is comparable to Dae-su's losing 15 years of his life in prison. Bereft of the will to live, his desire to "get even" might sustain him. Moreover, the perpetrator Dae-su, now the victim-turned-avenger, does not remember his wrongdoing or even who Su-a is. Thus, Woo-jin might decide to make Dae-su ask the very same question that he had always wanted to ask.

Before revealing himself, Woo-jin contacts Dae-su through an online chat program with Mi-do. With an ID called "Evergreen" and a message describing himself as "The lonely prince in the high tower," he asks to Dae-su, "How's life in a bigger prison?" When Ju-hwan (Dae-su's best friend) tracks down the owner of the Evergreen ID, he discovers the person is called Su Dae-o and lives just across the street from Mi-do's apartment. The name "Su Dae-o" is the inversion of "Oh Dae-su"; thus, when Dae-su arrives at Evergreen's apartment and meets face-to-face with Woo-jin, it is as if Dae-su sees his reflection in a mirror. When Dae-su finally faces Woo-jin, it is Woo-jin who asks the question "Who are you?" Mocking Dae-su, Woo-jin declares, "You must find that out for yourself. It's a game. First 'who?' Then 'who?' When you know the answers, come and see me. Until July 5th." This is the date Su-a committed suicide.

With an obvious homage paid to Hitchcock, Woo-jin's enigmatic questions are central to the plot, guiding Dae-su's self-awareness of the ethical dimension. In view of the fact that Woo-jin's questions compel Dae-su to consider the other's gaze and thus to escape the "I/eye"-centric perspective, this can be compared with the corresponding question in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). In *Rear Window*, when Thorwald confronts Jeff eye to eye by crossing the boundary between the observer and the observed, he asks, "Who are you? What do you want from me?" In a sense, Jeff is our surrogate in the film. Jeff looks at Thorwald as if he is an image on the screen, from a safe and voyeuristic viewing position. We also

see events from Jeff's voyeuristic point of view. However, when Thorwald notices that he has been observed and thus turns his eyes to the observer, the situation is reversed. As he is returning Jeff's stare, Thorwald's direct gaze into the camera (literally, "an eye for an eye" which engenders the suspension of the observer's "I/eye"-centric and thus violent voyeurism) rips the screen and opens a space towards the observer. At that moment, Jeff (and the film viewer) becomes the one who is observed. Furthermore, when Thorwald crosses over to Jeff's apartment, he is no longer a mere image over the window. Indeed, this sequence is one of the most emblematic examples of Hitchcock's ability to build suspense.

Through the eye-to-eye encounter with Jeff, Thorwald enables him to get out of his overly "I/eye"-centric and self-enclosed space. Thorwald actually pushes Jeff out of his apartment room through the rear window. Thus, for the first time, the film viewers, who have only seen the film from Jeff's point of view, are able to see Jeff's rear window from another perspective. Allegorically, we have the chance to "look back" on our own spectatorship from a different perspective. In this famous sequence, if *Rear Window* carries out the eye-to-eye confrontation with the spectator, problematizing the spectator's voyeurism and spectatorial attitude and rendering the spectatorial *ekstasis* (i.e., an ethical awakening) possible, Park's *Oldboy* also does the same. However, in Park's film, these themes are far more exquisitely elaborated.

To return to the main subject, at first glance Woo-jin's Evergreen ID seems like a clue intentionally given to Dae-su. Woo-jin is Dae-su's old classmate; they are "old boys" (alumnus) of Sangnok ("Evergreen") High School (hence the film's title). However, in reference to Woo-jin's "an eye for an eye"—his mise-en-abyme-like convoluted scheme to make Dae-su pay for his transgression—, it is critical to note that Dae-su's current situation is exactly mirroring Woo-jin's. Thus, when Dae-su creates a web ID named "Monster" to contact "Evergreen" and Woo-jin calls Dae-su Mr. Monster ("Yes, you are the monster that I created"), the name "Monster" seems to reverberate between the two very twin-like "old boys," along with the question: "Who are you?" That is to say, Woo-jin himself is another monster living "in a bigger prison." Woo-jin needs to know the answers to

his questions; otherwise, his life would be weighed down by grief and guilt, with the memory of the loss of his sister uncured and remembered by no one. Here, Woo-jin's virtual ID "Evergreen" may refer to his open wound that will never heal and thus will be "evergreen."

For this reason, Dae-su is forced to dredge up memories of "why" he himself caused Woo-jin to live in a prison without bars for such a long period of time. That is "why" Woo-jin releases Dae-su after 15 years. In order to end lonely grief, Woo-jin may need to have the perpetrator repent. While forgiveness must not be made conditional on the perpetrator's repentance as this would, in a sense, leave the victim dependent on the perpetrator, contrition in the perpetrator is a key factor in facilitating the experience and expression of forgiveness in the victim. Conversely, the apparent refusal by the perpetrator to acknowledge his/her wrongdoings leads to a lack of closure for the victim and in fact may be experienced as the trauma being perpetuated (Ransley and Spy 2004, 141).

During imprisonment, Dae-su attempted to write a list of all the people he had offended, quarreled with, and hurt, in order to work out why he was imprisoned. Later, he confesses, "It was both my prison journal and the autobiography of my evil deeds. I thought I had lived a normal life, but there was too much wrong-doing." Nonetheless, Dae-su cannot remember "who?" and "why?" Woo-jin tells him, "Do you know the real reason why you can't remember? It's because you just forgot. Why? Because it wasn't important to you." In the film, both Dae-su and Mi-do hallucinate about ants that symbolize their extreme loneliness, helplessness, and hopelessness. Considering Woo-jin's desperate effort to exact revenge, what this signifies is that Woo-jin has been as lonely, helpless, and hopeless as Dae-su and Mi-do. Just as 15 years of solitary confinement has transformed Dae-su into a monster, Woo-jin's solitary remembrance of Su-a without knowing "who?" and "why?" intensified his wound to a point where he too has become a monster. While Dae-su seeks revenge, Woo-jin waits for Dae-su to complete his mission, or, in other words, waits for his own death; because after Dae-su has solved his riddle, Woo-jin as "the Sphinx" (to be explained in the following section) will destroy himself. When Dae-su's obligation of remembering is completed, Woo-jin will finally be free from his lifelong

resentment. Perhaps, this is Woo-jin's desperate way to attend to Su-a's last words "Remember me!" and also to "get even."

Forgive and Forget Me Not

If Dae-su is liable for Su-a's death, "looking back at himself" will enable him to respond to her dying words, "Remember me!" Given that he has to realize his true identity in order to solve Woo-jin's enigmatic puzzles, it is no coincidence that the Korean pronunciation of the name "Oh Dae-su" sounds similar to "Oedipus." In Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, the Sphinx asks an enigmatic question to which the answer is "a human being," in order to test whether human beings are able to engage in self-reflection. Similarly, in Park's *Oldboy*, what Woo-jin asks of Dae-su is to seek the answer to the question "Who are you?" and "What does it mean to be human?" Thus, Dae-su, who considers himself the victim, is now supposed to face his own monstrosity.

In this context, it is remarkable that while incarcerated, Dae-su would constantly break his mirror and pass out, as if obsessively refusing to look into the mirror would allow him to avoid an eye-to-eye encounter with "the other" within himself. Instead, Dae-su would stare at the abstract painting of a grotesque figure[2] mounted in his prison cell, as if looking at his own reflection. What is odd is that with each passing day, his face changed; it began to resemble the monstrous figure. Significantly, during the close-up shot of the broken mirror, the figure of the painting itself, instead of Dae-su, is reflected in the mirror. In this scene, Park's cinematic language renders distinctly visible the mise-en-abyme structure by emphasizing frames within frames. Including the frame of the screen, the spiraling layers of rectangles, which is apparently analogous to the film's narrative, constitutes

2. It is *The Man of Sorrows* (1891), James Sidney Ensor's cryptic self-portrait—significantly, which is compared to the suffering of Christ. In the film, the bottom of the painting is inscribed with Ella Wheeler Wilcox's most famous lines: "Laugh, and the world laughs with you; weep, and you weep alone."

a "mise-en-abyme"; this becomes an allegorical "prolepsis" in the film. The mise-en-abyme-like mirroring marks a climax at the end of the film, when the two old boys look at each other eye-to-eye, through a mirror.

In the scene where Dae-su confronts Woo-jin and his gaze meets Woo-jin's through the mirror, Woo-jin's reflection is reminiscent of Dae-su's portrait. That is to say, Woo-jin is none other than Dae-su's mirror image reflecting Dae-su's monstrosity even though they are ostensibly connected by a victim/perpetrator relationship. Meanwhile, for this "eye-to-eye" confrontation with Woo-jin, Dae-su ought to bring the right answer to the riddle of "who?" and "why?" Thus, being directed by Woo-jin's guide and by his own desire to remember, when Dae-su chases what is to be remembered, we come to follow him into the innermost core of the film's spiraling narrative structure. Through the short distinctive flashback, we finally see what Dae-su has forgotten, "with" Dae-su himself.

In this memory chase scene, Dae-su pursues a younger version of himself who follows Woo-jin out of curiosity. As Park himself admitted, this chase scene involving a staircase is inspired by Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958); just as Scottie Ferguson returns to San Juan Bautista and drags Judy up the stairs of the bell tower in *Vertigo*, Dae-su revisits the spiral stairs of a building in Sangnok High School (Jeon 2009, 729–730). After running up and down the stairs in the school, when each version of Dae-su peers through the hole in the shattered window to witness Woo-jin and Su-a, they see the event differently; while the younger Dae-su sees something that he ultimately forgets, the older Dae-su sees the cause and reason for everything that has happened to him (Jeon 2009, 730). After revisiting Sangnok High School, Dae-su reconstructs his memory of "Lee Su-a," and convinces himself that he has all the answers to Woo-jin's questions. Thus, he meets with Woo-jin both to assure himself that what he has discovered is correct and also to demand Woo-jin's death. Dae-su criticizes Woo-jin for his abnormal relationship with his sister and blames him for her death; Dae-su bets that Woo-jin murdered her to cover up their scandal. However, Woo-jin offers Dae-su his revisionist account of the whole story while he changes his clothes as if dressing up for a special occasion, that is, his own death.

This scene is extraordinary as Woo-jin addresses Dae-su through a mirror from beginning to end. Accordingly, the audience can see both their faces in the frame simultaneously. At the end of the scene, the camera zooms in on Woo-jin's quizzical, cynical face, which expresses bitterness and resentment towards Dae-su. However, Woo-jin's direct gaze into the camera through the mirror makes him look like he is staring at the audience, as we see in figure 4, not Dae-su who appears as a blurred figure in the background. This is a quintessentially Hitchcockian technique. In Hitchcock's films, when a character's look into a mirror becomes a direct look out of the frame, character and spectator become mirror images although the spectator is not literally present in the film (Peucker 2007, 90).

Figure 4. Woo-jin's direct gaze into the camera

In Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, we see a representative example of the character's direct look out of the frame. In the last sequence of the film, Judy looks directly into the camera just before she falls to her death. This paradoxical point undermines our position as a neutral, objective observer and pins us to the observed object. This is the point at which the observer is already included, inscribed in the observed scene—in a way, it is the point from which the picture itself looks back at us (Žižek 1991, 91). Thus, Judy's gaze "sticks out" from the film and gives us a sudden visual shock; it cuts open a space towards us as if asking some questions. Judy's direct gaze is

targeting the vantage point of our spectatorial gaze. Throughout the film, the audience is only privy to Scottie's perspective and therefore become co-spectators of Judy's horror of being objectified or thingified. Through Judy's gaze, the film penetrates spectatorial space; fictional representation and reality momentarily collapse into one another. Through the eye-to-eye confrontation with Judy's gaze, we turn our gaze back upon ourselves. In other words, guided by Hitchcock's cinematic language targeting the spectator's voyeuristic gaze, we come to reconsider visual ethics and spectatorship.

Thus, if the eye-to-eye confrontation between Woo-jin and Dae-su, which takes place through a mirror, is borrowed from Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, the object of Woo-jin's deriding glance is none other than the film spectator. If Woo-jin's direct gaze into the camera here is a direct declaration of the camera's presence, a look that acknowledge Park and us, Woo-jin's looking out of the frame fleetingly brings us into the space of representation. However, in the ensuing shot, Dae-su becomes the object of Woo-jin's look. Owing to this diegetic replacement, we avoid the direct "eye-to-eye" encounter with Woo-jin's gaze and keep watching, at a safe distance, the critical consequences of "an eye for an eye" between the two old boys, the two monsters.

In the next scene, Woo-jin playfully uses a green laser pointer to lead Dae-su to a violet gift box that sits on a table. The box is wrapped in a pattern that appears often in the film, representing Woo-jin's panoptical surveillance. At this point, an identical box is also given to Mi-do. Dae-su opens it and finds a family album. The last page of the album contains a series of snapshots, conveying a coming of age story about Mi-do who is now Dae-su's lover and also his own daughter. When Dae-su's eyes turn to the blank page opposite to the last picture of Mi-do, he faces his own gaze reflected in the glossy black surface. The following words by Ella Wheeler Wilcox appear on the bottom of the page: "Laugh, and the world laughs with you; weep, and you weep alone." In an earlier scene, Dae-su would see himself in the abstract painting of a monstrous figure, which contained the same inscription. Looking at himself in the abstract painting instead of a mirror, Dae-su tried to avoid any contemplative self-reflection. However, now, the monstrous

figure in the painting is replaced by his reflection. Gazing at his reflection, Dae-su finally realizes, with horror, what he has done.

When Dae-su acknowledges his re-enactment of Woo-jin's original shame, the boundaries between "good me" and "evil them" begin to shatter. Sphinx Woo-jin wanted Dae-su (Park's Oedipus) to transcend his I/eye-centric perspective as part of his true self-awareness; having reached this point, Woo-jin allows him (and presumably also the film spectator) to venture into the territory of empathy. Although Dae-su had been physically incarcerated for 15 years, it is actually Woo-jin who is still imprisoned in a living hell; Woo-jin's resentment bonds the two men together. On the one hand, Woo-jin wants to ascertain if Dae-su is able to make a different choice in the "identical" situation. On the other hand, Woo-jin desperately needs someone who is connected with his pain at a deep level and thus can understand what he has gone through to free himself from the pain.

Just before Dae-su left Mi-do to visit Woo-jin, Mi-do prayed that Woo-jin would kneel before Dae-su and beg for forgiveness. However, now it is Dae-su who must beg for forgiveness. When he eventually faces his own monstrosity, Dae-su is able to empathize with his persecutor, Woo-jin, who is the other and yet also connected to him. Only after he lets go of his blindly defensive self-righteousness is he able to realize that he is the perpetrator, not the victim. Thus, Dae-su immediately kneels down and says "Forget, please. We are Evergreen old boys, remember? If you want me to be a dog, I will." Dae-su barks, wags his tail, and licks Woo-jin's shoes like a dog while Woo-jin covers his mouth with a handkerchief to keep himself from laughing. Woo-jin once stated that the reason for Dae-su's incarceration was that he "talked too much." Now Woo-jin says to Dae-su: "Your tongue got my sister pregnant. It wasn't Woo-jin's dick. It was Oh Dae-su's tongue." In response, Dae-su decides to silence himself forever in order to buy Woo-jin's silence. In order to spare Mi-do shame, Dae-su cuts off his own tongue, equivalent to Oedipus's gouging out his eyes.

As Woo-jin requested, it seems that Dae-su has understood all that he was supposed to learn. In fact, more than recovering what he has forgotten, now he seems to "know too much." Nevertheless, this fails to provide a solution for neither Dae-su nor Woo-jin to deliver themselves. If Dae-su is

a duplicate version of Woo-jin, what happens next? As Choe (2009, 38–39) articulates, while the compulsion toward revenge unfolds throughout the film, absolute retribution finally fails to provide the catharsis that will allow the vengeful to continue living; even if Woo-jin fulfills his revenge, he would not be able to bring back his lost years nor can his dead lover return.

Indeed, Woo-jin himself prognosticates that the hidden pain will return when he completes his revenge as if warning Dae-su. In the end, his lifelong plan to "get even" culminates in his suicide. After finishing his version of "an eye for an eye," Woo-jin, "the lonely prince in the high tower" tumbles down to his death. In a sense, Woo-jin's death finally leaves Dae-su free from his surveilling gaze. However, how will Dae-su be free from the shame and guilt, with the intolerable burden of the past? It may be the reason why Dae-su decides to erase his memory of all the secrets. While Woo-jin opts for death, Dae-su wants to forget, so that he may live. Thus, Dae-su visits the hypnotist, who had, at Woo-jin's request, repeatedly hypnotized him and Mi-do to orchestrate their unwitting incest. Entreating her to wipe his horrifying memory clean, the tongueless Dae-su asks, "Even though I'm no better than a beast, don't I have the right to live?"

Here Oh Dae-su's choice appears to be the opposite of Oedipus's, considering that his namesake "Oedipus" determines to sustain life along with his memory, after awakening to the truth, in order to genuinely bear his own load. However, Park's ending of the story is no different to Sophocles's. If Park designed the character "Oh Dae-su" with Oedipus in mind, Oh Dae-su, like Oedipus, is supposed to embark on a new life with different but lighter vulnerability at the end of the story. When he stops being a victim and moves forward to a new way of being, he can make a heroic triumph out of this gruesome tragedy of vengeance. When he concludes not to return the evil his persecutor has inflicted on him, the cycle of vengeance will be broken and he can restart his life from the very point that we call forgiveness.

Cherry articulates, "Forgiveness is humanizing for the victim, the perpetrator and the bystander" (2012, 164). Oh Dae-su needs to let go of anger and bitterness and move in the direction of forgiving, not merely forgetting; in this way Mi-do and Dae-su do not become monsters. This

explains why *Oldboy* starts and ends with Dae-su's retrospective narration; the framing structure that situates the whole story as a flashback is key to how this movie works. By remembering and telling his story, Dae-su can confront his past and review it from a different perspective. To cope with his trauma and to decide his future, now he has to reconstruct his own history. To borrow Cherry's words, forgiving someone does not mean that you condone what the person has done; it is not to let what happened dominate the memory; it is "to have that inner prison cell vacated since resentment, anger and grudge are all burdens to carry" (174). The "for-give-ness" which is based on "for-other-ness" is to take risks in order to refuse to let evil or death, bitterness or hatred, have the last word. This is what it means to be human, and what can only be described as a transformational experience.

Given that such "for-give-ness" is not an event but an ongoing process, the main focus of this film shifts after Dae-su's confession of guilt to the hypnotist, a diegetic audience who serves as a surrogate for the film audience. From that point on, the story proceeds predominately as an allegory. In this way, it leaves the meaning of the ending scene open-ended and dependent on the reader's interpretation. To put the point another way, how to unravel the Sphinx Woo-jin's open-ended questions depends on Dae-su's decision about how to live the rest of his life and how to proceed with new and renewed responsibilities and relationships.

Hence, the last sequence of the film, which portrays the hypnotist erasing Dae-su's memories, is intended to be interpreted allegorically. The hypnotist uses "mirroring" to blot out Dae-su's unbearable memories. The hypnotist tells Dae-su to imagine himself back at Woo-jin's penthouse. She uses hypnosis to split Dae-su into two personalities: the monster, who remembers the secret, and the ignorant Dae-su, who doesn't. When the hypnotist asks Dae-su to split into the two people, a reflection of himself appears in the window. The hypnotist tells him that the monster will walk away and for every step he takes, he will age a year and die when he reaches 70. Responding to the hypnotist's instruction, the monster Dae-su takes several steps forward, leaving the "ignorant" Dae-su (his reflection in the window) behind.

When Dae-su wakes from the hypnosis that was designed to make him "forget," white snow falls from the sky and Mi-do emerges from the snowy woods to come to him. Caring for him, with puzzled eyes, Mi-do asks whether he was with someone. When Dae-su turns around and looks back, the camera pans across the snow, to show the track of someone's footsteps. At first glance, we think that the footsteps belong to the monster that was supposed to walk away and die, along with his unbearable burden of guilt and remorse. However, when the camera changes direction and turns to Mi-do and Dae-su, we realize that the footprints start from one of the two chairs which the hypnotist and Dae-su were sitting in during the previous scene. This indicates that the present Dae-su is still the one who carries the painful memories. There exist only a single person's footsteps in the snow. Then, what happened to the hypnotist's footsteps? While we cannot be sure, we can guess that Dae-su's conversation with the hypnotist may be a hallucination. Presumably, this transpired as a result of his desperate longing to erase memories in order to be free of such a heavy burden.

Figure 5. Mi-do embracing Dae-su with loving words

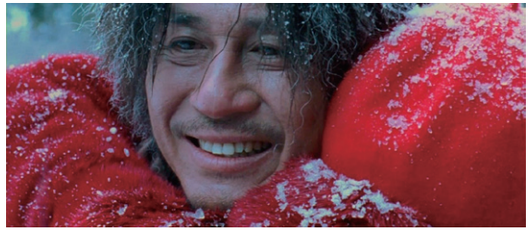

Figure 6. Dae-su's face which is ambiguous whether laughing or weeping

From another perspective, figuratively speaking, if it is true that the monster died as he wished, what it signifies is that Dae-su has redefined himself even with such painful memories. That is to say, when he awakens and raises his body, it symbolizes the beginning of his new life. At this point, the focus of the narrative is no longer on the mirror-relationship between Woo-jin and Dae-su. From here, Park shifts his homage from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to *Oedipus at Colonus*. In order to start a new story as an ethical subject, by overcoming abjection through active self-creation, Dae-su must not repeat Woo-jin's faults. When he takes the first step toward a truthful transformation, stepping outside his old dead self, the desolate place around the abyssal void in the midst of the gaping wound is transformed into a new place so he may live a new life. Allegorically for the resurrection over death, now he is standing in a new place, toward "elsewhere." Mi-do says to him "I love you . . . *ajeossi* (which means "Mister," referring politely to an older man and not a father)" and embraces him in the snowy woods, like in figures 5 and 6.

At the end of the film, thus, the white snow acts as a token of "redemption;" the whiteness of the snow suggests a way "to forgive" rather than "to forget." This allegorical suggestion of "forgiveness" is crystallized in *Lady Vengeance* (2005), the last episode of Park's "vengeance trilogy" when, at the end of the film, Geum-ja bakes her own white cake, instead of a traditional white tofu cake of atonement, and offers it to her estranged daughter, telling her to "Live white, like tofu," while white snow falls from the sky. While female characters in Park's vengeance trilogy, such as Geum-ja and Mi-do, speak about forgiveness (for both atonement and redemption), at the end of those films, I will say, Park is asking his viewers to respect their secrets through his cinematic language, such as filling the screen with falling snow, the whiteness. We cannot be sure whether or not Mi-do is aware of Dae-su's secrets. Nor can we be sure that Dae-su, unlike Woo-jin, has actually "forgiven." However, the focus lies on Dae-su's choice to deliver Mi-do from guilt and shame, as the most humane action. Therefore, Mi-do's loving words and desire to embrace Dae-su must be understood as her response to Dae-su's self-sacrificing resolution. At the same time, those words are her own answer to Dae-su's previous question:

"Even though I'm no better than a beast, don't I have the right to live?"

This is the very reason why Mi-do is the character that embodies possibilities for redemption: not because she herself has sinned, but because she will remain alive and carry out her responsibility of sharing Oh Dae-su's suffering (just like Antigone in *Oedipus at Colonus*). Indeed, her words and gestures are congruent with both the pain of reality and with the generous, trusting, vulnerable empathy that is integral to forgiving. As the embodiment of a new possibility, a new beginning, Mi-do promises to restore themselves to themselves, refusing to remain victims or monsters, "refusing to take harsh and ugly events, perceptions and descriptions on their own terms—instead, moving things to a higher register, to forgiveness" (Cherry 2012, 113).

The Ending Scene, a Parable for the Spectatorial Ek-stasis

Revenge always acts in the form of reacting to an original trespass. However, if Dae-su suffers throughout the film for accidental witnessing an incident that was not supposed to be seen, my point is that we are also responsible for his pain because we, as voyeurs of the voyeur, saw what he saw. During the eye-to-eye encounter between the two old boys through the mirror, when Woo-jin gazes out of frame toward the audience, we cannot not hear Woo-jin's muted scream which is depicted by his enigmatic smile. If Woo-jin's long, agonizing struggles to "get even" with Dae-su totally ruined his life, paradoxically what we—not merely as distant witnesses but also as participants in (Dae-su's) spectatorial violence—come to see at the end of the film is Dae-su's ambiguous face caught between laughter and weeping, like in figure 6, which is to be read as another muted scream responding to Woo-jin's.

We may want to turn away or stand back from their catastrophe in a spectatorial attitude. However, in witnessing what happened to them, we must neither shift our obligations nor project our own ethical faults onto the characters. Even while observing the results of "an eye for an eye" at a bearable level owing to Park's narrative elaboration, we must acknowledge

our implication in the situation and our responsibility to confront it as best as possible. Park's *Oldboy* definitely includes the presence of the film spectator within the frame, and we—the ones who are implicated in the transgression, along with Dae-su, but safely avoid punishment—are responsible for the production of the film's "meaning" and for that meaning's moral implications. At the very least, we are obliged to *re-member* Lee Woo-jin and Oh Dae-su, who have been *dis-membered* by our judgmental eyes, not merely to "otherize" them.

If "forgiveness" has the power to break the cycle of revenge and initiate a new beginning, as Park's *Oldboy* suggests, what is at stake is not the erasure of memory but an act of memory. Thus, regarding our spectatorial "response-ability," another crucial point is that if one of the themes of *Oldboy* is an ethical awakening through "remembering," we are obligated to take on some of the burdens of remembering; that is to say, director Park offers to the film audience an exhortation to and demonstration of collective memory work, which can, at least partly, help to liberate the sufferers from the endless renewal of their trauma. Indeed, at the end of the film, we recognize that it is our responsibility to "remember" their grief and pain. Park's cinema technique arouses the empathetic pathos that would implicate us in what we see, in a very sophisticated way. As Woo-jin places Dae-su in exactly the same position that he was in to force Dae-su to respond with empathy, director Park's camera deliberately places us into the other's emotional state.

Until the end credits, *Oldboy* does not provide us with a cathartic experience. Rather, its frustrated and abrasive contents are painful to watch and hear, and its images and sounds disturb our spectatorial pleasure. Nonetheless, the visual shock caused by the excessive brutality of the film is significant, as it is interwoven with the revenge motif and thus induces discomfort and revulsion in the spectator, and paradoxically, leads us to an awakening to the ethics of "forgiveness." In *Oldboy*, the excessive violence that Western critics have generally discussed does not show an "uncivilized" or "savage" Korea in the local context; rather, it reworks ethical issues relating to films or film spectatorship by linking "ethically looking" toward the other with "ethically looking" in the cinema. In the ways that the film

spectators' horror and disgust work against the repetitive logic and form of vengeance, Park's cinematic rhetoric in *Oldboy* are not any less congruent in addressing such issues. Even though moral indignation cannot dictate a course of action, when the horror or abomination is made vivid enough, the audience will stand back and rethink the insanity of retaliation that diverts us from truly "being-for-others," or "forgiving-others."

Dae-su was so blindly self-centered and self-righteous that he was unable to see his own faults. In order to redefine his "self" and re-establish the ethical relationship with "the other," when he escapes victimhood by abandoning resentment and revenge, he will be able to march into a new life of love and forgiveness. This is exactly what we can call "liberation" and "redemption." Concerning these ethical terms, Park's *Oldboy* places particular emphasis on the role of the film viewers in its closing scenes.

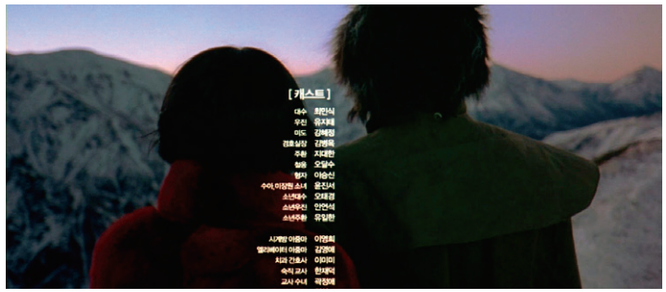

Figure 7. The end credits sequence of *Oldboy*

After the entire story unfolds, we see a vast landscape covered with pure-white snow, like in figure 7. When the ending credits start to roll, the camera focuses on Dae-su and Mi-do's backs, and then pans over their heads to display the spectacle of the white landscape. With the film's open ending, we are left to imagine what may happen in the future. We may hope their future is positive and thus may feel disappointed that the film director does not provide a more explicitly hopeful conclusion. Here

the role of the spectator comes to the forefront, because it becomes our responsibility to construct some kind of meaning out of what seems to be a hopeless situation; when we decide to the characters' suffering, death, and destitution should not be the last word in the film, the words "love" and "forgiveness" come to life; that is to say, the film's aesthetic and ethical potential is meant to be realized outside textual boundaries.

If Mi-do and Dae-su are the representations of *was*, what they demand of us is to remember the *was* rightly and thoroughly. We have witnessed what Dae-su experienced due to his irresponsible voyeurism. In the final scene of the film, we see Mi-do and Dae-su only from behind; these ending credit shots suggest an unknown truth, subverting the dogma of the frontality. A character's back view suspends the face to face communication between the audience and the character. However, this device makes the audience participate in the film in a stronger way, and also reveals new things. The characters' back view embodies the weight of the pain that cannot be seen from the front. It is not enough to determine what emotions are read from facial expressions. Meanwhile, the back view hides the character's feelings and at the same time expresses more things. The uncertainty caused by indeterminacy and by incompleteness is filled through the audience's imagination. Watching the character's back, we can guess and imagine the character's inhibited feelings. Moreover, the "back to the camera" shot makes us, the audience, look in the same direction as the characters. Figuratively, this enables us to stand in the same space with the characters. Through this device, we can take a deeper look at ourselves by exposing ourselves to the possibility of being seen in ways unfamiliar to ourselves. In this regard, we may say that Park's *Oldboy* is a mirror which reflects back to us our own viewpoints, ideologies, and sense of identity.

If, in the final scene, Mi-do and Dae-su's being-together suggests an alternative to the unresponsiveness and ir-responsibility toward "the other," it reminds us of our own responsibilities and obligations to the other. Now the question is, considering our ethical obligations to the other, how should we look at them? Once Oh Dae-su, Park's Oedipus, has decided not to die, we have to think through how to spare him shame and let him be as who he is in his own way so that he will not become another Lee Woo-jin.

The past is not a series of fixed and unchanging events but an object of constant interpretation and re-interpretation of meanings. Today's past is seen from a particular perspective of our own. Therefore, the word "memory" alone cannot express the pain that someone has to experience in its entirety when the bitter truth about the past has so far been immensely influential. In order to solve this problem, the director Park uses the plot that corresponds to the word "re-memory" in *Oldboy*. Oh Dae-su attempted to erase his memory which is so painful that he could not speak out of his mouth. However, the past imprinted throughout Dae-su's mind and body cannot be easily erased. Thus, Park may try to "heal" the wounds of the sufferers—both Oh Dae-su and Lee Woo-jin—by sharing their tragic memories with the audience, that is, by making their stories into a collective memory, via his cinema. Here, this healing does not mean that the sufferers become completely free from the past. But it can help the sufferers to redefine their past as what they can remember; by separating their past from their present it may enable them to live again.

When we follow Dae-su's memory (the film's narrative itself), we come to acknowledge that we need a process of "re-memory," not a mere "suture" of the past wound, in order to remember and (re)-interpret the traumatic past properly, to make peace with the past, and to reset the future perspectives. And, in order to make such "re-memory" function right, we can see via Woo-jin's tragedy, the sufferers need good companions who fully listen to and trust their stories. Listening to the tragic stories of someone, listening to someone's terrible memories, is a good starting point for understanding the other's life. This process of re-memory can begin upon the premise of hospitality between storyteller and listener. Not limited to the character in the movie, when the director and the audience act together for this, it becomes a matter of saving life. This can be a redemption not only for the main characters in the movie but also for the readers who read the text. In this regard, in *Oldboy*, the director Park himself is the storyteller who narrates Oh Dae-su's and Lee Woo-jin's stories to audience. Park's *Oldboy* that utilizes Hitchcockian "*suspense*" eventually expands the process healing and redemption to the level of social solidarity.

The story that nobody wants to tell, but that someone needs to know, has now been told and told very well. The final scene of the film is not a conclusion of the work but a raising of the questions of how to look at, how to listen to, and how to be with others. How to answer the questions is the individual audience's share. In conclusion, the narrative that Park wants to say through *Oldboy* is completed only when we, the film audience, decide what to do with what we have seen and heard. Therefore, the meaning of *Oldboy* is born when it is embodied in our ways of being "now and here," not from the representation of what already exists. If cinema must be about "looking back on the past" and also "looking into the future," at the same time, Park's *Oldboy* provokes us to "look" in different ways via fleeting images and sounds; when our act of looking responds appropriately to them, in the final scene of the film, we all come to engage in creating new possibilities for the future. Hence I will say that the meaning of the film is located in the future, in our practice what we decide now as it points to the future.

Conclusion

This article has examined ethical issues in "our times" by reading director Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* in connection with Hitchcock's cinematic languages, one of the forerunners of the film industry and one of the classics of English academia, which provided a highly formalized model for cinema storytelling. Contrary to the western criticisms which have regarded Park's cinema as cult movies by reason of the use of excessive violence, I have tried to raise Park's *Oldboy* to a level of classicality that shares Hitchcockian issues. Both director Park and Hitchcock strategically explore ethical questions of "our time" in the context of the world community by enabling the ethical awakening of movie audiences through visual shock. It is to be hoped that comparative cultural studies on how the twenty-first century Korean films meet American classical films will serve as an opportunity to open up a wide range of perspectives for reading Korean films at a global level.

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