Pak Ch’an-uk’s *Oldboy*:
A Film About Futile Violence and Revenge
Abstract

Pak Ch’an-uk is one of the most popular directors in Korea and his films have been successful both domestically and internationally. His films are known to contain a large amount of violence and other sensitive subjects, which has raised a lot of discussion and criticism. Pak Ch’an-uk’s most well-known film, Oldboy, is no exception. Oldboy has been discussed by film studies scholars from a variety of angles. This thesis discusses the film rather from the perspective of Korean Studies, taking the Korean cultural and historical context in mind. This study analyzes the meaning of the violence and revenge in Oldboy and explores how the themes and references in the film relate to non-diegetic events in Korea’s recent history, as well as how those references function as social criticism. The thesis also looks into the question why the film has received criticism for its violence and suggests cultural and linguistic barriers as a potential reason for this criticism.

Keywords: Pak Ch’an-uk, Korean film, film analysis, Oldboy, revenge, violence, greed

Swedish Abstract


Nyckelord: Pak Ch’an-uk, koreansk film, filmanalys, Oldboy, hämnd, våld, girighet
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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of study

Starting from the 1990s, Korean music, TV-shows, and movies started to gain an increasing amount of popularity internationally. While the initial spread of Korean culture was most prominent in neighboring countries such as China and Japan, it quickly spread all around the globe. Because of this wide-spread popularity, the audience of Korean cinema is no longer limited to a domestic one, but the stylistic traits of Korean filmmaking remain. In this thesis, I will focus on the “Asian violence” that is present in films such as Pak Ch’an-uk’s “Vengeance Trilogy” and Na Hong-jin’s *The Chaser* (2008). I try to investigate the differences between the violence in Western action movies and how the Western violence compares to the violence in Korean films as much as it is possible within the scope of a BA thesis. However, in order to do an adequately deep analysis, I choose to limit myself to the film *Oldboy* (2003), which is the second film in the “Vengeance Trilogy” by Pak Ch’an-uk. I choose this film for several reasons. One of the reasons is because despite of its violent and uncomfortable scenes, it still managed to find domestic and international success. While *The Chaser* also had great success, it is a film that is made several years later after films like “The Vengeance Trilogy” had already paved the way for violent cinema. Another motivation for my choice is Pak Ch’an-uk himself. Throughout his films, he has explored the violent and dark sides of humanity from many angles. He does so in a way that encourages thought and discussion regarding the validity of violence.

I will at times make comparisons between *Oldboy* and Pak’s other films. The purpose of the comparisons is to give a more precise context where it is necessary to do so. I will not, however, consider multiple films as one connected story and analyze them together.

This thesis aims to investigate why and how violence is used, as well as try to answer what the deeper meaning for the violence in *Oldboy* is. As the violence is heavily linked to the theme of revenge in *Oldboy*, I will also discuss and analyze the lust for revenge and its subsequent consequences.

The thesis also makes brief comments about the domestic audience and the international audience. I investigate potential cultural and language barriers and examine the foreign audience’s view on the more controversial scenes in the film. To map the opinions of the Western audience, I will make use of the website Imdb, a webpage where users can review and rate films. Additionally, I will discuss professional review(s) of the film, with a focus on review(s) that challenge or heavily critique the film. I do also, through a deep reading of the film, discuss how certain scenes and themes presented in the film relate to the socioeconomic situation in Korea during the years surrounding the Asian economic crisis of 1997.

I will attempt to answer these four questions in my thesis.

1. How is violence in *Oldboy* expressed?
2. What does the violence in this film mean?
3. How does the violence relate to problems or situations within and outside of the film?
4. Why use violence as a storytelling tool?

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1 Imdb closed their forums for film discussion in 2017 but users are still able to leave reviews about films.
The aim of these questions is to get a better understanding of violence as a storytelling technique as well as to figure out how the non-fictional societal or economical struggles within Korea came to be represented in *Oldboy*. The socioeconomical issues I discuss and relate are namely the Asian economic crisis and circumstances leading up to it, since that is the time frame in which the film takes place. All these questions open up various sub-questions that I will do my best to answer and elaborate upon in order to reach a more complete understanding of the film.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

I start my discussion from the knowledge and data collected from various researchers from several different fields. This data includes research on diegetic, non-diegetic violence and previous research done on Pak’s films. When it comes to analyzing the technical and cinematic techniques used in the film I make use of the techniques presented by Andrew Dix in his book *Beginning Film Studies*. The book speaks on various elements of the art of cinema, discussing mise-en-scène analysis as well as other aspects of film. In areas where the book is inadequate I turn to other film scholars whose work is more relevant. For example, while discussing lateral character movement I refer to a study conducted at Cleveland State University where they investigated how lateral character movement affects the audience's emotional response to the character and scene. Through their research and studies, I can make a more calculated and accurate analysis of the film.

When analyzing the violence and characters of the film I will look at them from a perspective both within and outside the world of film. To accurately address the violence in the film I refer to psychology and other fields that deal with researching violence to define the different forms of violence as accurately as possible. I also make use of film scholars writings about Korean cinema.

I draw information and ideas from a range of researchers, such as Steve Choe, who has investigated and done research on the violence in Korean cinema. Kim Se-young, much like Steve Choe has also discussed Asian cinema and its violence, but also relates the cinematic violence to socioeconomic struggles. Through the knowledge of these scholars I create a foundation that allows me to approach and analyze the violence and morals presented in the film. Not all these scholars or authors have been cited for this thesis, but they have still influenced the way I think about cinema and are therefore worth mentioning. For example, *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* (Kim Kyung-hyun) contains great insight about the Korean films of the 1990s and early 2000s, which helped me establish a good foundation of knowledge.

It is important to make a distinction between these scholars’ research and my own. The researchers mentioned above consider a broad range of different Korean films, and in some cases analyze them as a group of films rather than separate works. I will not discuss any other film other than *Oldboy* in detail.

But what exactly does violence mean? According to the World Health Organization violence is defined as:

"The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another
person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation."

As is made clear by this definition, violence covers a broad range of cases. In Oldboy the violence is not limited to physical violence. During the film the incentive for the imprisonment of O Tae-su is not because he has caused any physical harm to U-jin, but because he has caused psychological harm to U-jin and his sister. U-jin wants Tae-su to feel the same psychological pain that he felt, so his techniques revolve around psychological violence rather than physical. Tae-su has a different approach, he prefers physical violence. During a scene where Tae-su pulls out the make-shift prison's owner’s teeth, he makes the assertion that one year of imprisonment is equal to one of his teeth. Through the pain that he can inflict upon his foe, he is able to settle his debt. Nietzsche writes about this type of punishment technique in one of his works.

"[...] that any damage somehow has an equivalent and really can be paid off, even if this is through the pain of the culprit."2

Nietzsche credits this kind of punishment to the fact that there exists a contractual relationship between creditor and debtor. This can be applied to the violent desire for the cinematic revenge, or put in other words, the desire to get even.3 I try to address and discuss a range of different violence that the characters of Oldboy encounter during the film.

The way I will approach audience reception is through a few types of data. The way I approach the data is through a qualitative method. Qualitative method is defined by Fiona Devine as a technique(s) which seeks to understand the experiences and practices of key informants and to locate them firmly in context.4

The first type of data is box office numbers and sales. However, there is an issue with looking only at box office numbers. A Korean film is a lot more readily available and usually more attractive to a domestic audience than an international one. There are a few reasons for this. Foreign language films tend to be shown less in movie theaters than domestic or English language films. Because of that the ease of access is limited, but that is not the sole reason. Going to see a foreign film implies that you are going to have to read subtitles, which might be a turn-off for some viewers.5 With foreign language film comes a foreign culture and, therefore, a potential cultural barrier. Thus, it is necessary to find other means to qualify the popularity and success of a film. To do this I turn to the opinions of viewers who have seen it.

In his master’s thesis Cha Sung-taik investigated how a U.S audience views Oldboy, I will build on the information and conclusions he came to in his work and apply them to my own. Because my focus is potential barriers I will direct my focus towards the opinions of a foreign audience, but I will make comparisons between the foreign and domestic audience where it is necessary.

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3 Nietzsche, The Genealogy, 45.
1.3 Sources

For the film analysis part of the thesis the films themselves function as my primary sources. The secondary sources used consist of works in two different languages, Korean and English. Many of the sources are in English, the reason for this is because I found them to be the most valuable for my thesis. However, the Korean sources demonstrate a greater value when it comes to analyzing features of the film that might be either unique, or more prominent in Korean culture. Also, a large part of the English sources I use are written by Koreans or Korean speakers which ensures that they have some insight in the Korean culture. I supplement other scholars’ and my own analysis through interviews that Pak has given and where he comments on either the movie making process or parts of the plot.

When discussing audience reception box office numbers and movie-goers opinions on the film function as a primary source. The secondary sources I use are works like the one of Cha Sung-taik, where he compiled the opinions of a U.S audience and conducted interviews with selected IMDB users. I also include English and Korean reviews of the film to get the viewpoint of critics as well.

When addressing certain scenes, I make use of sources outside of the fields of film studies and Korean studies. Since I am not experienced in other fields I make sure that the authors are well respected within their fields and they have the proper expertise needed to speak on the relevant issue.

1.4 Structure and Scope

The first thing I did in researching for this thesis was re-watching all films made by Pak. I did this for two reasons. The first one was to choose which work I would dedicate this thesis to. The second reason was that I wanted to properly contextualize the film I chose by looking at Pak’s past works and stylistic traits that carry over from film to film. Since my focus is Oldboy, I took notes on patterns, characters’ walking directions, important plot points and other details I found important. I did this before anything else because I wanted to start off with a blank slate, so I could make my own observations rather than just confirming the observations that previous researchers have done. After the initial viewing I turned to the writings of scholars in film and Korean studies to get more insight on the themes presented in the film. Since I am not a film major I also put some extra focus into learning how to analyze a film. Since my focus was the violence, I tried to find as much information relating to violence in general, especially violence in film.

After developing a general base of knowledge revolving around Pak and Oldboy I moved on to investigating more detailed and perhaps obscure references in the movie. Some of these references include, adoption and the economic crisis of 1997, also known as the IMF crisis and what consequences it had on the people of Korea.

Finally, I investigated potential language and cultural barriers. I investigated which scenes foreign audiences found the most repulsing or difficult to understand and why that was the case.

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6 By Koreans I mean that they are of Korean descent, even thought they might live or be born abroad.
The way I organize this thesis is by first laying out a background about the director of *Oldboy*, Pak Ch’an-uk. I describe his past works and give a brief synopsis of the works. I highlight stylistic traits and commonalities that are shared through multiple films to put establish a context for the themes presented in *Oldboy*. In later chapters I reference back to these stylistics traits and discuss scenes with these traits in mind.

In the following chapter I give a general introduction of *Oldboy*. I introduce the film through a detailed synopsis, so that even people who have not seen the film are able to understand the coming chapters.

After the introduction of the film I move into a more specific analysis of *Oldboy* and the themes presented in it. The analysis is structured in such a way that broad topics of the film (say, violence or revenge) are brought up and discussed more and more in detail throughout the subchapters before moving on to the next subject. The chapters of analysis first address violence and its different forms, and then move on to discuss how these forms of violence present themselves in the film. Specific scenes are brought up to give a clearer picture.

The following chapter is dedicated to analyzing the more technical aspects of the film. In this chapter mise-en-scène and filmmaking techniques are discussed. This chapter highlight filmmaking techniques and how Pak has used them to enhance the story. I also attempt to explain why a certain angle or style of filming was used and what effect it has on the scene, and in turn, the audience.

After having discussed the technical aspects of Pak’s film I move on to discuss how the film connects to the real world. References and certain scenes are explained and analyzed in relation to events that took place in Korea around the time frame in which the film is depicted. Not all references are discussed in detail, instead the ones that I consider to be the most important are discussed in most detail, while others are mentioned only briefly.

The next chapter discusses audience reception. Within this chapter a focus is put on difficulties one may face while watching the film. These difficulties include language and cultural barriers a Western audience may experience while watching the film. Scenes that have proven to be difficult to understand or relate to are highlighted and I attempt to explain them, and why they might clash with the Western views. Comparisons are made to the Korean audience and I attempt to explain why a Korean audience might be more understanding of certain scenes or behaviors that take place in *Oldboy*.

Finally, in the conclusion I summarize my own discoveries and how they might be different from other researchers’ research and what caused me to arrive at them. I bring up areas where I felt my research was satisfactory, as well as the areas I was unable to include, or future research is needed.

1.5 Notes on Romanization and Translation

The system for romanization of Korean words that will be use it the McCune-Reischauer system. I choose this one because it is prominent in Korean studies and has a relatively accurate way of rendering Korean words in comparison to the other systems that have attempted to do so. In cases where an author has published an article or book in English under a name with another romanization other than the McCune-Reischauer one the version the author used will be preferred. In cases of actors, directors or other people who are more easily recognizable under another romanization the more well-known one will be preferred,
with the McCune-Reischauer within parenthesis. In the bibliography Korean titles and names are converted using McCune-Reischauer system.

Most of Pak’s films has English subtitles; therefore, the translation provided through the subtitles will be used in most cases. If the subtitled translation is inaccurate or fail to provide proper context I will do my own translation. Translations that are done by myself are marked with a footnote. This also concerns quotes from Korean writings, interviews or similar data that I translate by myself in case another translation is not available.

The Korean language has many levels of formality and nuances that are difficult to convey by simple translation. However, such nuances may be important to the story or dialogue of a scene. Whenever there is a shift in language that I consider to be vital to bring attention to, and it is not conveyed by the subtitles properly I will comment on it and attempt to explain the subtle implications of the language used.

2. Background

2.1 Pak Ch’an-uk

Park Chan-wook (Pak Ch’an-uk) is one of the biggest names in film to come out of South Korea. Through the ten feature films he has directed since his first one in 1992 he has gained great success in the world of cinema. Pak never attended any film school or had any formal training in film. He did not pass up on school necessarily only by choice. During the 1980s Korea did not have a lot of film schools or even a well-developed film culture so finding an education in film was not an easy task. His exposure to film was limited to the American Forces Korea Network and later his university’s film club. Pak comments on this lack of exposure and education and suggests that it might be part of the reason for his filmmaking style.

“When you say you go to a film school in America or France, you would probably go to a lecture where they teach you about German Expressionism and show you what these German Expressionist films are, but in Korea there was no systematic education I could be exposed to. It was sporadic, haphazard. And maybe that’s why my films have ended up in this strange form, where it feels like it’s a mishmash of everything.”

While studying at Sogang (Sŏgang) University located in Seoul, he majored in Philosophy

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This is according to Pak’s statement but starting from 1984 there existed educational programs for film production in Korea. However, that does not mean it was easily accessed.

8 American Forces Korea Network (AFN) was a TV station operated by US armed forces’ American Forces Radio and Television Service that was known for airing foreign films.

9 Chee, “Park Chan-wook.”
and during the 1990s he worked as a film critic to support himself.\textsuperscript{10} Although he made two feature films during the 1990s neither of them performed well.

2.1.1 Filmography

His first film *The Moon Is... The Sun’s Dream* (1992) only received one single review, which was ghost written by Pak himself.\textsuperscript{11} His next film was *Saminjo* (1997), which also performed poorly. Both films are very hard to access unless you speak Korean and live in Korea.

His next film *Joint Security Area* (2000) a film about the relations between South and North Korean soldiers stationed at the DMZ\textsuperscript{12} went on to achieve great success, even breaking records (at the time) at the box office.\textsuperscript{13} The next film he made was *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002) which is the first film out of what later came to be known as *The Vengeance Trilogy*. The deaf Ryu works in a factory so that he can support his sick sister who is in desperate need of a new kidney. Because Ryu and his sister do not share the same blood type he is not a suitable donor. Ryu gets laid off from his job and things progressively get worse for him and his sister. After being scammed by black market organ dealers and losing his sister to suicide Ryu’s life spirals into a destructive existence revolving around nothing but the lust for revenge. It is a very grim and distressing film that constantly gets more difficult to watch as we see Ryu’s life getting worse and worse.

The second film in the trilogy is the film largely credited for Pak’s international success, *Oldboy* (2003). The film is based on a Japanese manga with the same name. The manga and the film are similar in many ways, but Pak changed the narrative to fit modern Korea. Even though they share a lot of commonalities (some shots even mirroring the manga) the incestuous theme was not present in the manga. The story about O Tae-su starts off with his kidnapping and imprisonment in 1988. With no clue as to why he is locked up or for how long he will remain locked up, he turns into a monster yearning for revenge. Upon his release he focuses all his energy on finding his captor, so he can exert his revenge. During his quest for revenge he comes across Mi-do. The two quickly fall in love and Mi-do accompanies O Tae-su as he tries to puzzle together the mystery of his imprisonment. His captor U-jin, however, believes that O Tae-su is the reason for his sister’s suicide. Throughout the film we see a seemingly endless struggle of both parties trying to quench their thirst for revenge.

*Lady Vengeance* (2005), the third and final film in *The Vengeance Trilogy*, is a tale about a Kŭm-ja who spent 13 years in prison for the murder and kidnapping of a young boy. However, in fact, she did not commit the murder but was forced to take the blame for it. During her time in prison she plans her revenge. She is kind to her fellow inmates and because of her kindness, they are later willing to assist her in executing her plan. Upon her release Kŭm-ja sets out to find the person who was truly responsible for the murder and take revenge on him.

While *Oldboy* is the one that got the biggest following of the three films, they all share the


\textsuperscript{11} Chee, "Park Chan-wook."

\textsuperscript{12} DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) refers to the area that separates North and South Korea.

common theme of revenge and violence.\textsuperscript{14} It is because of these similarities that they commonly are referred to as a trilogy, even though they are not directly connected.

\textit{I'm a Cyborg, But That's OK} (2006) was the next film he made. It is a film about a girl and her time in a mental hospital, the girl is under the impression that she is a cyborg. In the mental hospital she comes across many different psychotics and ends up falling in love with one of the other patients. The film is very different from the films the auteur released prior to it. It is not a movie free from violence, but violence is never the focus of the film. Instead, the film is a lot easier to watch and is largely free from the bloodshed and grotesque scenes Pak has become known for.

After experimenting with different styles in \textit{I'm a Cyborg, But That's OK} Pak returned to a more dark and violent filmmaking style with the making of \textit{Thirst} (2009). \textit{Thirst} is loosely based on Émile Zola’s \textit{Thérèse Raquin}.\textsuperscript{15} It is a film about a priest who turns into a vampire because of a failed medical experiment. Because of his vampirism he is forced to turn away from his life as a priest and start a new life. It is a film that is filled with recurring themes of murder, love, betrayal, passion and guilt. Thus, Park returns to the tradition of making films that could be described as uncomfortable to watch.

The next feature film he made was another change from the rest of his films. The film \textit{Stoker} (2013) was his first English language film. Much like his previous films \textit{Stoker} has elements of eroticism, murder and violence but in a different form than his Korean films. The violence and murder in \textit{Stoker} feels toned down and more accommodating to an English-speaking audience, while the violence and eroticism in his Korean films feel more raw and uncensored.

His most recent film is \textit{The Handmaiden} (2016). It is a film inspired by the historical crime novel \textit{Fingersmith} by Sarah Waters. Although there have been a few exceptions such as in \textit{Lady Vengeance} and \textit{Stoker}, Pak’s prior films tend to feature males in majority of the roles and certainly in the more important ones. \textit{The Handmaiden} pushes the focus from male characters to female characters further than any of Pak’s previous films have done and instead of the violence that we are used to seeing in his films \textit{The Handmaiden} replaces the violence with eroticism.

In the novel the story takes place in Victorian era Britain, but for the film the setting was changed to take place in Korea under the Japanese colonial rule. The film tells a story about two female characters and their strong bond that they form throughout the film. It is through that bond and their combined strength that they manage to swindle and overthrow the malicious and tyrannical male characters featured in the film.

Pak commented on the film and the dynamics between the characters in an interview. “Overall, \textit{The Handmaiden} is a very simple film. It divides everything into two clear sides, and that’s to make a point. It pits man against woman, almost as a battle of the sexes, and you have the female characters forming an alliance to fight against the male oppressors and escaping from them. In this film, all the men are villains and all the men are pathetic. The only cool characters are women. And the only positive male characters in the film are one or two babies [Laughs].”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14}As of March 20, 2018 \textit{Oldboy}, currently holds place #67 on IMDB’s top rated movies list with a score of 8,4 and 418,699 voters. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364569/

\textsuperscript{15}Topalovic, “Interview.”

\textsuperscript{16}Topalovic, “Interview.”
Despite the large number of films Pak has directed he manages to put his mark on every one of them. Even in films where the violent and grotesque scenes he has become known for are largely omitted his intrinsic style manages to shine through.\textsuperscript{17}

2.1.2 Stylistic Traits

While watching Pak’s works of cinema it becomes clear that he has developed a unique style throughout the years. What makes him stand out is his ability to seamlessly blend genres while still maintaining a story that feels coherent. Despite his great success and high production value his films still manage to maintain the feeling of indie films. That is not to say that Pak does not pay attention to the visuals of his films. He makes great use of visual storytelling. Even though a scene may have very little or no dialogue at all, it might contain a lot of information crucial to the story. A great example of this occurs in the film \textit{The Handmaiden}. During the scene where Suk-hŭi and Lady Hideko are escaping the residence they come across a stone wall. The wall is not very high and would not be difficult to jump or climb over. But when they reach to wall Lady Hideko stops and stares at the wall. She does not climb over the wall until Sook-hee (Suk-hŭi) helps her do so. There is not a single line of dialogue during this scene, but it is an important scene with a deeper meaning behind it. Pak talked about this specific scene in an interview.

“My thing is, I don’t want to say with this film is probably in this one scene where the women are jumping over the stone wall—and notice how low this wall is. Had she ever wished, Lady Hideko could’ve always jumped over that wall. But the deep-rooted emotional trauma inside her was holding her back. And then this person [Sook-hee] enters her life and she is able to find love. Through that love, Hideko gains bravery that allows her to jump over that wall, in a single breath, toward freedom.”\textsuperscript{18}

Violence and revenge are both common themes in Pak’s films. Revenge is a common theme in general when it comes to Korean films, but no other Korean director has explored it to such a degree like Pak has in his films.\textsuperscript{19} Because of his deep exploration of revenge and its consequences, it is something he became known for. His way of making films that feel genuine and non-fictional seems to be something that his audience enjoys. A lot of films that touch on revenge and violence censor or tone it down, but in Pak’s films the violence and hunger for revenge feel very real and intimate. He uses violence to tell a story rather than to create entertaining action scenes (even though there is plenty of those too). Violence is common in Hollywood films too, but the violence is almost comical and does not feel real. It is violence without consequences. Just actors on a screen. However, in films like \textit{Oldboy} the violence is brutal, raw and consequential.

Even though Pak generally is not known for comedy, all his films have some type of comedic aspect to them. In many cases these comedic scenes are of a rather dark humor,

\textsuperscript{17} In addition to his feature films listed above he has been involved in various other projects like short films. However, I refrain from involving them in this thesis because it is beyond the scope of my subject.

\textsuperscript{18} Topalovic, “Interview.”

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{The Chaser} by Na Hong-jin, \textit{Ajeossi} by Yi Chŏng-bŏm and \textit{I Saw the Devil} by Kim Chi-un are other pieces of Korean cinema where revenge constitutes a large part of the story.
contrasting strongly to the light and giddy humor we are used to seeing in most Western films.

In Lady Vengeance there are two scenes where we get to see this kind of humor used. The first one is a scene where one of Kŭm-cha’s friends from her time in prison is telling a story about how Kŭm-ja helped her. While robbing a bank with her husband, they were caught and sent to prison, causing them to be separated for a long time. Because of this separation she suffered a lot.

“I felt like I was going to die because I couldn’t meet the person I loved. In reality it was because of kidney failure but...”

The second scene takes place later in the film. The families of the kidnapped and murdered children are lined up to go and exercise their revenge on the perpetrator Kŭm-ja has captured for them. We are presented with a shot showing all the family members sitting down on chairs holding some type of weapon. Most of the people are holding rather large knives, but one of the men is holding nothing but a stick in his hand. One of the others looks at him and asks if he would like to borrow his knife. The man with the stick starts pulling out a huge axehead and attaches it to the stick, making his weapon now the biggest weapon at all.

Small comedic moments like these are easy to overlook, but they give the audience a chance to relax, even if it is just for a moment. In movies where the subjects are as heavy and difficult as they are in Pak’s films, small moments like these are essential.

The researcher Chŏng Hyŏn-gyŏng considers grotesque to be an appropriate term to describe Pak’s films. His reasoning for this thesis is that there are a lot of scenes in Pak’s films that are simultaneously horrifying but also comedic in a sense. He brings up a scene from Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance. Four teenage boys with their ears towards a wall are listening to their female neighbor’s moans as they masturbate. The camera pans through the wall and we find out that it is not moans of pleasure, but instead groans of pain and agony coming from Ryu’s sister. While all of this is going on the hearing-impaired Ryu is eating noodles with a happy expression on his face while his sister is screaming and struggling behind him. Chŏng argues that such a situation creates conflicting emotions. The situation is simultaneously gruesome while still maintaining comical aspects.

Eroticism is prevalent in Pak’s films. However, the eroticism we see in his films is often quite abnormal. In Oldboy a father and his daughter, as well as two siblings engage in sexual acts. In Thirst, it is a priest and his friend’s wife, while in Stoker, a niece and an uncle. In Lady Vengeance, a student and a teacher, a woman and young man who was born the same year as the boy she kidnapped. The above examples are not the only ones, but I think, sufficient to clarify that the sexual relationships that occurs within Pak’s film universe are not completely (sometimes not even at all) normal or approved by social norms. I would speculate, this is grounded in Pak’s views on cinema. He has stated in an interview that he enjoys films that make the viewer feel something physically. He wants the viewer to leave the cinema tired, not relaxed. He believes that if you are looking for something relaxing, then you should not go to

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20 Translation done by me.
21 Chŏng Hyŏn-gyŏng, “Pak Ch’an-uk yŏnghwase-nat’anan kurot’esŭk’ŭ yŏn’gu” (A Study of the Grotesque Expressed in Pak Ch’an-uk’s Films), Han’guk kugyesul yŏn’gu (A Study of Korean Dramatic Arts) 38 (2012): 273-299.
There is a broad range of violence in all of Pak’s films, and Pak often turns normal items or tools into murderous weapons in his films. Pak has turned scissors into a deadly murder weapon in several of his films. In *Lady Vengeance* a lady stabs the murderer in the neck with a pair of scissors, but this is not a weapon exclusive to this film. Both in *Oldboy* and *Stoker* we see the use of scissors. In *Stoker*, the main character, India, uses a pair of scissors to murder a police officer and in *Oldboy* we see Tae-su cutting out his own tongue with a pair of scissors.

A recurring filmmaking technique in Pak’s films is close-ups. Of course, every director makes use of close-ups where it is proper to do so but Pak uses them to show fine details. In *Joint Security Area* there is a large number of close-ups of feet and legs but in *Oldboy* the focus is on hands. During the film we see various shots of hands that give us either details or have a symbolic meaning. To give a concrete example I will discuss scenes showing Tae-su’s tattooed hand. During his imprisonment he tattoos his hand with one line for each year that passes. In total he ends up with 14 lines spanning from his hand down to his forearm. Later, when he is on the hunt for revenge and finds the owner of the prison and kidnapping service he tells him that he will extract one of his teeth for each year he was locked up. Before he pulls the teeth out with a hammer we see close-up shot of his arm, where the lines are visible. One tooth per year, and, therefore, one tooth per line.

Pak is well-known for working with an actor more than on one occasion, and many of his movies share a similar cast. O Tal-su and Sin Ha-gyun even appeared in four of Pak’s movies. There are a lot more actors who have been characters in several of Pak’s films. Although their roles vary greatly in importance, Pak seems to make it a point to use actors he has worked with before. Song Kang-ho and Sin Ha-gyun have had the experience of playing major as well as minor roles.

In the two later films of *The Vengeance Trilogy* the recurring cast phenomenon is very prevalent. Most of the actors who had featured in the second film of the trilogy, *Oldboy*, also act in the last and third film, *Lady Vengeance*. I believe there are various reason for the role variance. Every actor may not be fit to play such exhaustive and violent roles and might need time off after playing an exhaustive role. However, I believe Pak scrambles up the roles because he does not want his films and characters to be predictable. If the same actor always plays the protagonist, the films may become more predictable since every actor has their own style.

Pak has stated that he likes the actors to get involved in the movie-making process and that he welcomes their input and notes. Perhaps this is another reason the recurring cast.

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22 “Park Chan-Wook: A conversation with the audience about OLDBOY” YouTube video, [4m 4s – 5m 8s]. Posted May 21, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DINt_TKf6LQ

23 He was imprisoned for 15 years; however, he never got the chance to add the last line prior to his release.

24 Song Kang-ho played Sergeant O Kyông-p’ il in *Joint Security Area*, Pak Tong-jin in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and Sang Hyôn in *Thirst* as well as making a cameo appearance as a hired assassin in *Lady Vengeance*. Ch’oe Min-sik, the actor who plays O Tae-su in *Oldboy* also appears as Mr. Paek in *Lady Vengeance*, the murderous English teacher who kidnaps children. O Tal-su played Pak Ch’ôr-ung in *Oldboy*, the man in charge of the imprisonment service. In *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* he plays Mr. Chang the baker, in *I’m a Cyborg, But That’s OK* he plays Sin Tôk-Ch’ôn and in *Thirst* he plays Yông-du. Sin Ha-gyun plays Chông U-jin in *Joint Security Area*, he is also the deaf factory worker Ryu in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. In *Lady Vengeance* he plays a small role as a hired assassin (cameo) and in *Thirst* he plays Kang-u.

25 Chee, “Park Chan-wook.”
3. Synopsis of *Oldboy*

In the film *Oldboy* we follow O Tae-su, an average Korean businessman with a wife and daughter. On his daughter’s birthday, O Tae-su is being held by the police on account of drunkenness and inappropriate behavior. After having spent some time at the police station he is bailed out by his long-time friend, Ju-hwan. They head outside and make their way to a phone booth and call Tae-su’s wife and daughter. While Ju-hwan is on the phone with Tae-su’s wife Tae-su gets kidnapped by an unidentified perpetrator. Tae-su is imprisoned in a cell resembling a low-grade motel room. Without knowing for how long, or why he has been imprisoned, his initial emotional reaction of desperation soon turns into a plotting of revenge and escape. While Tae-su is imprisoned he spends his time watching and learning martial arts from the television. He finds out through the TV-news that his wife has been murdered and that he is the prime subject.

15 years pass by and O Tae-su is finally released. As Tae-su wanders the streets of the modern city he comes across a sushi shop. In the restaurant he meets Mi-do, a sushi chef at the restaurant. While at the restaurant Tae-su receives a call from his mysterious captor, who tells Tae-su to come and find him. Tae-su later ends up passing out at the restaurant and Mi-do brings him to her house to nurse him back to health. Mi-do and Tae-su form a strong bond and he is assisted by her in his attempts to unveil the reason, and person behind his capture.

During his 15 years of imprisonment Tae-su has been served Chinese food from the same restaurant. He finds out which restaurant it is by tasting the dumplings of multiple Chinese restaurants. Eventually he finds the one that matches the taste that he so well remembers. He follows a delivery-boy to find out the location of his ex-prison. Once there he tortures the owner for any information regarding his capture, but the man does not have much information to offer.

His captor, U-jin, ends up giving him an ultimatum, where if he does not find out why he was imprisoned within five days he will kill Mi-do, however, if he manages to find out why, U-jin will instead take his own life. With the help of his friend Ju-hwan, aswell as the vague clues given by U-jin, he finds out that the reason for his imprisonment was that U-jin holds Tae-su responsible for the death of his sister who killed herself. Tae-su had witnessed U-jin and his sister engaging in a sexual incestuous relationship during their school years and after telling his high school classmate Ju-hwan, a rumor that eventually lead to the suicide of U-jin’s sister broke out.

Having learned why he was imprisoned Tae-su goes to confront U-jin in his penthouse where he discovers that Mi-do is in fact his own daughter and he too, has now engaged in an incestuous relationship. U-jin threatens to inform Mi-do that Tae-su is her long-lost father. Tae-su responds to the threats by vigorously and desperately begging for mercy and forgiveness. U-jin whose dissatisfaction with Tae-su’s apology is evident causes Tae-su to become more desperate and cuts of his own tongue as a token of forgiveness for the rumor that he started. U-jin accepts his plea and leaves the penthouse through the elevator, where he ends up taking his own life by shooting himself in the head.

Tae-su seeks out the hypnotist who hypnotized him during his imprisonment and begs her to erase the memories related to Mi-do being his daughter. After the hypnosis Mi-do finds
Tae-su in the snow and hugs him while confessing her love to him. Tae-su breaks in to a strange smile.

4. Film Analysis

4.1 Forms of Violence

4.1.1 Physical Violence

Violence has been part of human history long before it entered the cinematic world. Throughout human history violence has seen a broad range of uses. Violence has been used as a tool for punishment, manipulation and rise to power. However, there are many different types of violence, and many of them are present in Oldboy. When one hears the word violence, the most common correlation is to physical violence. Physical violence is the form of violence that we are most easily able to identify. It is distinct, it leaves visible bruises and marks for everyone to see.

During medieval times it was not only used for punishment, but also as an investigative torture tool to extract information. However, the torture was often found to produce many false confessions. The pain and fear that was caused by the torture devices was far too great for people to handle, so people confessed as a mean to escape the pain.26 As is evident from our history, humans are not only cruel when it comes to using violence, we are also creative. There is a broad range of inventive torture techniques that seem to not focus on being effective, but instead focus on theatrics.

The goal of ancient torture devices went beyond just inflicting pain, it was a way to display power.27 Through theatrical public execution and torture, those in power tried to scare criminals out of crime. While part of the purpose of the public executions might have been to teach criminals a lesson, it also served as a form of entertainment.28 In ancient times gladiators would fight in an arena for the pleasure of others. Spectators enjoyed watching the pain, and sometimes death of the fighters. Today we continue this tradition of exchanging other’s pain caused by physical violence for our entertainment. Although the fighting sports of today rarely result in death, the concept is still similar. It is then possible to view not only the violent fighting as entertainment, but perhaps the cruel and violent punishments of the past as a cruel form of entertainment as well.

There is however a difference between the examples I have given. In the world of fighting two people are facing each other with the common goal of victory. Therefore, it is not clear

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who is the victim and who is the perpetrator of violence, because both play both roles. It is in a way an equal exchange of violence. In the case of punishment, it is quite clear who is the victim. The victim of the punishment might have committed a gruesome crime, and at the time of committing the crime been the perpetrator. However, while being punished the perpetrator is now powerless and therefore, becomes a victim of the punishment (regardless if it is deserved or not).

I will return to the analogies of gladiators and punishment and how it relates to *Oldboy* later in the thesis but for now I will introduce different forms of violence other than physical violence, and how they manifest themselves.

### 4.1.2 Psychological Violence

While psychological violence can be equally or even more harmful than physical violence, it is not as easy to see the effects of it. Someone who has been the victim of psychological violence might look unharmed on the outside. So, what is psychological violence then? It can be defined as controlling and coercive behavior.²⁹ It is tough to pinpoint exactly what can be classified as psychological violence or abuse, but it is a type of violence (abuse) that result in psychological damage.³⁰ That damage can manifest itself in various ways like fearfulness and post-traumatic stress symptomology.³¹

Physical and psychological violence are related in many ways. Physical abuse may result in not only physical injuries, but also in trauma or other forms of psychological damage. The film *Sherlock Holmes* (2009, directed by Guy Ritchie) makes a reference to this phenomenon during one of the fight scenes. As Sherlock Holmes is beating up his opponent his thoughts are represented through a voice over.

“[…] In summary: ears ringing, jaw fractured, three ribs cracked, four broken, diaphragm hemorrhaging. Physical recovery: six weeks. Full psychological recovery: six months.”

Although be it a quote from a piece of fiction, it still demonstrates the relation between psychical violence and psychological trauma.

Psychological violence or abuse is often used to manipulate another person. Through physical or verbal threats or other intimidation methods the perpetrator can gain control over the victim. In the film *Lady Vengeance*, the main character, Kŭm-ja is forced to take the blame for a murder of a six-year-old boy. She is forced down this route because she is fearful for what will happen if she does not comply. The real murderer tells Kŭm-ja that unless she takes the blame for the murder, he will kill her daughter.

The above example has some relation to physical restrictions or violence. However, this is not a necessary factor for psychological abuse. There are instances of psychological abuse where there is no relation to physical entrapment or threats of physical abuse. It is bullying and rumor spreading that incites U-jin’s desire for revenge against Tae-su. Because of Tae-su,

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³¹ Gormley and Lopez, “Psychological Abuse,” 205.
a rumor is started about U-jin, his sister and their incestuous relationship. This rumor leads to trauma, stress and eventually the suicide of his sister.

4.1.3 Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is a group-term that refers to many different types of sexual abuse such as rape, sexual assault and other sexual crimes. Just like physical and psychological violence sexual violence is in many ways related to other forms of violence. There are instances of sexual violence where physical force is present, as well as there are instances where physical force is not present.32

In Oldboy this type of abuse is also present. After Mi-do has allowed Tae-su into his home and nursed him back to health Mi-do heads into the bathroom. Since the bathroom does not have a lock she brings a knife with her and tells Tae-su to not “try something”, out of fear for sexual assault. Next shot we see Tae-su storming in and attempting to rape Mi-do by physical force. Although she manages to fend him off this is still an example of sexual violence involving physical force.

There are examples of sexual violence that does not involve physical force in Pak’s films as well. In Pak’s most recent film, The Handmaiden, the concept of sexual violence hangs over the plot like a dark cloud. Lady Hideko is controlled by her authoritarian uncle Kouzuki who forces her to read and perform sexual scenes from erotic novels. Hideko who was been abused all her life by Kouzuki is controlled by the fear Kouzuki imposes on her. The threat of what Kouzuki could do to her if she does not obey him is enough for Hideko to comply. Through his use of psychological violence (backed up by past physical violence) he is able to manipulate and, therefore, essentially imprison and control Hideko.33

4.1.4 Self-harm

As demonstrated, all these types of violence are related to each other in one way or another. All of them can result in serious physical or psychological damage. This type of damage can lead to the last type of violence that I will discuss, self-directed violence. In the case of self-directed violence, the victim and perpetrator are the same person. Self-directed violence is generally divided into two major categories, the first one is self-abuse and the second one is the more extreme one, suicide.

During his imprisonment Tae-su is getting more and more desperate and falls into insanity and several times we see him engage in self-harm. He punches a mirror causing the glass shards to cut his hand severely. The tattoo he gives himself to represent the years he was locked up is also a type of self-harm. In the film we are also presented with multiple different suicides (U-jin and a businessman) and other forms of self-harm.

33 Kouzuki is a violent man. He has a basement filled with torture equipment and he also killed Hidekos aunt for not obeying him. Because Hideko is aware of this, he does not need to use physical violence to gain control over her. His capabilities for physical force has already been demonstrated and left psychological marks on Hideko.
4.2 Expression of Violence

It is mainly these four types of violence that are presented in the film. There are other types of violence present in the film, but they are not necessarily a main theme of the film. In most Western films the violence is expressed as a mean of achieving peace, like a world or time where violence is no longer necessary. The violence in *Oldboy* is expressed differently. Rather than violence being a mean to achieve peace, it seems that violence is the achievement itself. The fact that U-jin imprisons Tae-su without explaining why, or for how long gives us the impression that perhaps the appeal of domination through violence is greater than arriving at a settlement or moving on from the death of his sister.

There are a few instances in the film where it becomes extra clear that violence is the goal itself. Shortly after Tae-su is released he approaches a gang and incites a brawl. The motivation for this violence is simply because Tae-su is curious if the boxing and physical exercise that he so diligently practiced during his capture can be applied to actual fights. In order to test that theory, he beats up the entire gang ruthlessly and then concludes that it indeed can be applied to a real situation. The brawl is without any real purpose other than gaging his capability to harm others. There is no quest for peace, just a quest for further violence.

Violence and power struggles are two things that are constantly visible throughout the film. Starting from the very first shot we can see it. The very first scene is Tae-su holding the suicidal businessman’s tie so that he will not fall off the roof. Tae-su is in control of his life. The man looks at Tae-su and asks who he is. The very next shot we see a drunken Tae-su being held by the police in the police station. O Tae-su introduces himself and explains the meaning of his name.³⁴

“Let’s at least today have the control in hand”³⁵

He then comments on that despite his name having this meaning, he is not able to be in control of the situation. This gives us a few clues about Tae-su and his life. He has trouble getting along with people, even if it is just for one day. He is trapped long before getting kidnapped, this is further symbolized by the fact that we first get to know him in a police station. Even during the flashbacks to his childhood, we see that he has trouble following the rules and that he is quite the troublemaker. Tae-su is trapped in a world that is not made for him. After Tae-su’s release U-jin asks him if he enjoys life in the bigger prison. This question could be interpreted as if modern society is a kind of prison, but it is also an accurate description of Tae-su’s current circumstance. Both inside and outside of the cell his life is not only being surveilled, but also directed by U-jin. Even if he is no longer stuck in a tiny room with nothing but a television, he is still trapped. Tae-su struggles for power throughout the film, his attempts to escape his entrapment are fueled by his capability for violence. However, the fight is never-ending, and he continuously ends up suffering.

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³⁴ The meaning of Sino-Korean (not Korean ones) names is derived from Hanja (Chinese-korean characters) but the meaning Tae-su claims is not based on Hanja characters. The meaning he proposes is a backronym. 오늘만 대충 수습하며 살자 (Onŭlman taech’ung susŭphamyŏ salja) is the sentence the meaning is derived from.
³⁵ Translated by me.
So, if the violence in *Oldboy* is not a quest for peace or settlement, then what is its purpose? The answer is revenge. U-jin feels that Tae-su has wronged him and his sister, but he is not ready to forgive and forget. Instead he dedicates his entire life to getting even with Tae-su. He even refers to himself as a scholar, someone who studies Tae-su. Tae-su, who is unaware of the reasoning behind his capture, starts to resent his captor and prepare his revenge. And for the remaining portion of the film we see these two hyper-violent men track each other down and fight. Tae-su and U-jin are much like the ancient gladiators. Two gladiators enter the arena, but both might not leave, in fact, sometimes neither leaves alive.

During the time Tae-su was locked up he changed in more than one way. Not only did he become filled with hatred and lust for revenge, he also became cold towards others. We can see this during his first human interaction after his release.

O Tae-su who has just been released from his 15-year imprisonment is still affected by the hypnosis he was subjugated to earlier. We see him break out from the effects of hypnosis through an extreme close-up of his contracting pupil, followed by a medium close-up of his face as he is gasping for air and trying to figure out his unfamiliar surroundings. As he is investigating his brand-new attire consisting of an expensive looking S.T. Dupont suit and a new wrist watch the camera transitions so that we are seeing through O Tae-su’s eyes. He looks down at the suitcase he just came out of and sees his journals, in which he wrote down his thoughts and past sins during his imprisonment. We suddenly hear a dog barking from behind and O Tae-su turns around and sees the barking dog being held by a man sitting at the edge of the roof. It is evident that the man, who judging by his suit is a businessman, is planning to commit suicide by jumping off the roof. O Tae-su, who has not seen a human being in 15 years, approaches the man and starts to smell and touch him to verify that it is indeed a real human. The businessman, who is clearly experiencing a lot of turmoil asks O Tae-su “Even though I’m no better than a beast don’t I have the right to live?” O Tae-su responds by repeating the phrase back to him, which causes the businessman to sob frantically while he leans back and falls over the edge of the roof. O Tae-su grabs the businessman by the tie and saves him from the fall. O Tae-su stares the businessman down as he says, “I want to tell you my story. Die a bit later.”

After O Tae-su has finished telling his story the businessman tells him that now he will share his own story. O Tae-su never responds vocally to this, instead he gets up and walks away. It is clear he has no interest in listening to the businessman’s story.

Why does O Tae-su not want to hear the businessman’s story? Even though the film never directly addresses the question we can still figure out the answer from the indirect clues presented throughout the film. The answer is that O Tae-su is already familiar with the story. The story of the businessman is not an uncommon one, he is one of many affected by the Asian economic crisis. The year of O Tae-su’s release is 2003. During that time people were still facing hardships because of the crisis of 1997. During the crisis unemployment rates rose significantly and a lot of employees lost their jobs. Business owners also suffered great loses. Even large chaebols (chaebŏl[^36]) had to face bankruptcy.[^37] Because of the high unemployment rates during the 1997 Asian economic crisis Korea also saw a big spike in suicide rates. While female suicide rates also saw an increase, the increase was especially large in working age

[^36]: Chaebol (chaebŏl) is a Korean word that refers to a large family-owned business conglomerate. Some examples of such large companies are Samsung, LG, SK Group and Hyundai.

males (35-64). In 1998 the suicide rates spiked significantly and in 2003-2004 the suicide rates were even higher. If we take the time frame and circumstances into consideration we can understand why O Tae-su does not feel the need to hear the 35+ year-old businessman out. Tae-su has no interest in preventing the businessman from killing himself, this becomes clear during their dialogue. Tae-su only asked him to delay his death, not to cancel it altogether. Tae-su is already familiar with many stories just like the businessman’s story through his avid TV watching during his imprisonment. The businessman’s death is just one of many to him. Therefore, he finds no reason to listen to the story and leaves the building promptly. As he is walking away from the building we see the businessman come crashing down from the rooftop and land on top of a car, killing himself and his dog. Tae-su does not even look back at the scene. He was already expecting it. Tae-su continues to walk away while his face turns into a forced grin while he thinks to himself “Laugh and the world laughs with you. Weep, and you weep alone.”

4.3 Revenge

Even though violence is a big part of the film, it is a subtheme of the film’s main theme, which is revenge. The two men facing each other in the film have both become obsessed with revenge. They are desperate to satisfy their desire for revenge.

To understand why U-jin loathes Tae-su we must return to their high school days. Through a flashback the film brings us back to a time when U-jin and Tae-su were attending the same high school. The present-day Tae-su ends up going back to his old high school in order to refresh his memories of what happened between him and U-jin. As he is walking around the school grounds he starts to remember what happened that day. We as the audience are shown alternating shots of Tae-su of the past, and Tae-su of the present. He is following the memories of his high school self, who is in turn following a young U-jin.

After a while Tae-su arrives at a vacant classroom. The classroom’s windows are so dirty that it is difficult to see anything inside, however, one of the glass panes is shattered and has a relatively small hole in it. The hole is just big enough to see what is going on inside the classroom. In present day the classroom is empty but as the perspective shifts to the one of a young Tae-su we see U-jin and his sister inside. U-jin is chasing his sister around with a camera and taking pictures of her. She is trying to run away to avoid getting her picture taken but he finally convinces her to sit and pose for him. Their photo session soon turns into a sexual exchange. U-jin removes his sister’s underwear and exposes her breasts. While U-jin is kissing his sister’s chest she is happily looking at herself and U-jin through a mirror. She angles the mirror and catches sight of the broken glass and Tae-su who is staring right at her. As she spots Tae-su she gasps for air which causes U-jin to also turn around and spot Tae-su. The camera cuts away and in the next scene we see an adolescent Tae-su telling his friend, Ju-hwan about what he saw. He tells his friend to not tell anyone, but despite that, a rumor about U-jin and his incestuous relationship with his sister is started.

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39 Chang et al., “Suicide rates in East/Southeast Asia.”
The rumor greatly affects U-jin’s sister, it affects her to degree that she develops pseudocyesis.\textsuperscript{40} Because of the negative rumors circulating around her, she eventually loses the will to live. When present day Ju-hwan tells Tae-su about what happened to U-jin’s sister, he explains that she fell into the dam and died alone. However, we find out towards the end of the film that U-jin was present during her death. In another flashback a young U-jin is holding his sister’s hand while she is suspended from the edge of the dam. She tells him that she has no regrets and that he should let go of her hand. After a while of struggling and resisting U-jin ends up releasing her hand, causing her to fall to her death.

Since the rumor was (unintentionally) initiated by Tae-su, U-jin holds him accountable for the death of his sister and, thus, his suffering. So, it is because of this that U-jin ends up imprisoning Tae-su 18 years after their graduation. The imprisonment is merely the beginning of an elaborate revenge scheme.

As Nietzsche wrote, the goal of this type of revenge is not based on a direct compensation for the damage done. Instead, the repayment and recompensation the creditor (in this case, U-jin) receives is through pleasure from being able to dominate and violate the powerless debtor (Tae-su).\textsuperscript{41} Upon exiting his prison, Tae-su is no longer the same man that he was when he first entered it. Everything he once knew has been taken away from him and the only thing that remains is an intense lust for revenge. The result of this change is that Tae-su is no longer the only debtor. U-jin and Tae-su are from this stage on simultaneously the debtors and the creditors of the dispute. While Tae-su is on his quest to find and kill U-jin, so that he can satisfy his need for revenge, U-jin is still conducting his revenge against Tae-su. U-jin through his manipulation of Tae-su and his surroundings causes Tae-su to unknowingly commit the same incestuous sin that started the entire conflict.

During much of the film it seems to Tae-su, and perhaps at first glance to the audience too, that Tae-su is doing a good job in avoiding the grasp of U-jin. Tae-su is after all getting closer and closer to answering the questions that U-jin has posed, but in doing so Tae-su underestimated the complexity of U-jin’s revenge. In the final scenes of the film when U-jin tells Tae-su about his elaborate plan and it becomes clear to even Tae-su that he never was in control. Tae-su found out that he had committed incest by opening a box with a purple pattern that was given to him by U-jin. Inside the box was proof that Tae-su and Mi-do are related by blood. While Tae-su and U-jin are having their altercation, the prison owner is presenting Mi-do, who was placed in the prison by Tae-su in order to protect her, with an identical box. Upon finding out the truth Tae-su changes from someone who is determined to hurt U-jin and get his revenge to someone who is willing to do anything to receive mercy from U-jin. He begs U-jin to not tell Mi-do about the sins they have committed. He even goes as far as to cut out his own tongue as a symbolic sacrifice for his sin. According to U-jin, Tae-su murdered his sister and the murder weapon was Tae-su’s tongue; therefore, the sacrifice of the tongue is the perfect one. But even after all of this, U-jin’s plan is still not finished, and Tae-su has still not suffered enough.

U-jin picks up the phone and tells the prison owner to leave the box with the purple colored pattern closed, sparing Mi-do from the information that Tae-su was just exposed to. As Tae-su hears this he lets out a sigh of relief, thinking that this action is a merciful one and that U-jin has decided to spare him of further suffering. Tae-su is sitting half-collapsed in a pool of his own blood when U-jin says his farewells and head towards the elevator.

\textsuperscript{40} Pseudocyesis is a false pregnancy, often mimicking every sign and symptom of a real pregnancy except for the fact that there is no fetus.

\textsuperscript{41} Nietzsche, The Genealogy, 45.
Tae-su lies the device that we earlier in the film learned controls U-jin’s heart. Tae-su, despite his condition reaches out and grabs the device. As he is considering whether to press the button or not, he is trembling from the damage he has suffered. After some hesitation he presses the button that is supposed to stop U-jin’s heart, but that is not what happens. Instead, the real last phase of U-jin’s revenge starts and an audio recording starts to play. The recording is the sounds of Tae-su and Mi-do’s sexual moans, along with the conversation they had while they were copulating. U-jin turns and looks at Tae-su and ask him one final thing, “Me and my sister loved each other even though we knew everything. Can you two do the same?” With this line of dialogue, it is clear that the real test and suffering Tae-su will have to go through is not what he has experienced up to this point, it is the remaining part of his life. Will he and Mi-do be able to live happily together even though Tae-su is now aware of the fact that Mi-do is not only his lover, but also his daughter?

U-jin who dedicated his entire life to revenge has finally accomplished what he sought out to do, yet he cannot get over the death of his sister. As he is riding the elevator we see him having a mixture of a flashback and a hallucination of the day his sister died at the dam. The outstretched hand that he was holding onto his sister with slowly changes into the shape of a gun and he shoots himself in the head, ending his own life.

As U-jin is now dead that also means that Tae-su reached his goal. His desire was to see U-jin dead and free himself from his grasp. Both things have now come true, and the only thing that remain is for him to return to a normal life. A life free of violence and free of revenge. He seeks out the hypnotist who U-jin used on him and Mi-do to cause them to be more compelled to fall in love with each other. Tae-su meets up with the hypnotist on a snowy winter day in a forest. She initiates the hypnosis that is supposed to separate the so-called monster Tae-su became, and the Tae-su of the past. After the hypnosis is finished he wakes up a few steps away from the chairs where they were sitting earlier. This scene is in stark contrast to the first time he woke up after hypnosis. The first time appeared to be a green grass field, this time the scenery has shifted from grass to snow. Mi-do, who is wearing a red hat and a red coat approaches Tae-su, who is almost completely covered by snow because of the heavy snowfall. He gets up and Mi-do tries to warm him and embraces him and tells him that she loves him. We see an extreme close-up on Tae-su, who bursts into a big happy smile. But it does not take long for the smile to turn into a wretched and distorted facial expression just vaguely resembling a smile.

Though both U-jin and Tae-su were able to accomplish their respective goals of revenge, it did not make them happy. U-jin is not able to move on after his revenge, instead, the only thing that kept him alive is now gone. Since his entire life was dedicated to revenge, he had a motivation to continue living, but as his desire for revenge is exhausted, so is his will to live. Tae-su’s situation is a bit more complicated since he does not resort to ending his own life. But in the last scenes there are a lot of clues that indicate his unhappiness and seemingly endless feeling of despair.

During the hypnosis Tae-su returns to U-jin’s penthouse apartment where he walks up to the glass windows. It is dark outside, so he is able to see his own reflection clearly. The hypnotist tells him that one of the images is the real Tae-su, and the other one is the monster who Tae-su became. She continues by explaining how the monster will turn around and keep walking, and for each step the monster takes it will age by one year and once it reaches the age of 70 it will die. We see the monster, who is inside the penthouse turning around and walking away while the reflection of Tae-su remains in the window. When Tae-su in the hypostasis of the monster walks away from the windows, the lights gradually turn off,
implying the death of the monster. After the hypnosis Tae-su is with Mi-do in the snow, and she asks him if he was with someone earlier. At first, it is unclear what made her believe that he was not alone, but then the camera shows us the footsteps in the snow. The camera follows the single pair of footsteps (Tae-su’s footsteps) all the way back to the two chairs where Tae-su and the hypnotist had their meeting. This shot, along with some foreshadowing contains a lot of essential clues. If the monster was the one who turned around and walked away, then why did Tae-su walk away from the chair and collapse in the snow?

There are two main ways of interpretation available here. The first one is that the monster was not able to separate from Tae-su as they are too intertwined at this point and, therefore, unable to go separate ways. The second way of looking at it is that Tae-su is reborn a new man in the snow. It is easy to make arguments for both. The snow could symbolize a blank slate and a Tae-su who is free from sin and ready to start a new life. However, while both may be valid assumptions I find that the first one is more compelling for a number of reasons. Throughout the film there are moments where we see Tae-su and other characters question if he will be able to let go of the monster once he gets his revenge. During a scene where he is walking the streets of modern Korea he even asks himself whether he will be able to return to the old Tae-su or not. After Tae-su finds out why U-jin hates him, Mi-do pleads to Tae-su that they should run away and hide from U-jin instead of further pursuing violence and revenge. Tae-su responds by saying that it is too late for that, since revenge has become a part of him. This foreshadowing gives some support to the hypothesis but the greatest reason for my reasoning is the ending scene where Mi-do hugs Tae-su. When he is hugged by Mi-do, Tae-su smiles a fake and desperate smile, however, this smile he started to practice during his imprisonment. He puts on this smile every time he experiences hardships as a kind of mantra to deal with the pain. The fact that he once again breaks into this horrifying smile when Mi-do tells him that she loves him, is a strong indication that the monster, and the pain is still within him.

Looking at the outcomes it is apparent that this film is not a glorification of revenge or violence. It is a film that pushes the logic of revenge to its very extreme. Once we reach that limit within the film, we face nothing but negative emotion. Both U-jin and Tae-su achieved what they sought after, but neither of them was able to continue living in a happy manner. In fact, U-jin was not able to continue living at all. The consequences of revenge are clearly displayed on the film screen for the audience to see. It is not only the conductor and direct victim who has to face the consequences of revenge. During the two men’s quest for revenge they cause a lot of collateral damage to the people they encounter. Mi-do is faced with tremendous trauma and is even used as leverage by U-jin and suffers great emotional damage when Tae-su persists to continue his pursuit for revenge, despite her disagreeing with it. Once someone has taken the path of revenge, there is no turning back from it. The damage is already done, both sides suffer great damage not from only the act of revenge, but also the obsessive nature of it that engulfs Tae-su and U-jin’s entire being.

In his paper, Chŏng Hyŏn-gyŏng describes parts of Park’s films as grotesque. I would like to extend that comparison further and say that revenge itself has inherent elements of grotesque. It is extremely repulsive what people are able to do, but it can also be humorous to see how far people are able to go. For example, Tae-su commits several horrendously violent and despicable crimes during the film, this is the part that is repulsive. But during his search

42 This kind of white color symbolism is present in Lady Vengeance as well, just in a different form. Towards the end of the film Kŭm-ja bakes a white cake that has a similar symbolic meaning.
43 Chŏng, “Pak Ch’an-uk yŏnghwa” (Park Chanwook’s films).
for the Chinese delivery place he takes on a behavior that is almost humorous. He seeks out every Chinese restaurant and proceeds to eat so many different dumplings that he throws up, yet he continues his quest to find the right one. It is with a mixture of repulsion and curiosity that we look at Tae-su as he is behaving in this obsessive, yet somehow silly way.

Pak has investigated the idea of revenge through many of his films and he has also been quite outspoken about revenge in interviews. When asked about his opinion on revenge and why it is so prevalent in his films he stated the following during an interview.

“Revenge is about something that has already happened, and when you are trying to achieve vengeance, you are investing your everything into a venture that will lead you to no benefit at the end.”

He also mentions that even a child is able to see that revenge is futile, yet we as the audience become engaged in the story and we cheer for the protagonist to be successful in his revengeful quest. The audience also does not question why the protagonist seeks revenge rather than seeking happiness. Through his films and his interviews, we can see that Pak has put some thought into the concept of revenge and developed his own methods of invoking (perhaps even provoking) thought in the audience.

Violence and rawness is what Pak has become known for, and his films definitely are violent and raw in many ways. But in *Oldboy* violence is not the focus of the film. It is revenge that is the focus, and violence is the tool that allows revenge. However, it is not always that the audience understands Pak’s vision. Sometimes his films are mistaken for a glorification of violence. The infamous review by Manohla Dargis44 is an example of such a misunderstanding. The film *Oldboy* uses violent and repulsive scenes as a storytelling device because it is relevant to the concept of revenge. Revenge should not be viewed as a positive thing, yet it is often viewed as positive when it takes place on the movie screen. In contrast to most directors, Pak displays the irrationality of revenge clearly in his film, instead of trying to hide the fact that seeking revenge is a poor choice. Violence falls in the same category as revenge. Both violence and revenge are generally glorified in film, but what Pak does in *Oldboy* is that he pushes both the violence and the concept of revenge to an extreme, where it loses all its positive aspects, and instead appears uncomfortable and repulsive.45 What remains then is the raw, problematic and true form of violence and revenge: a reality filled with negative consequences and unhappiness; a reality where the idea of getting even is accompanied with nothing but further suffering and inability to move on from past traumas.

In *Oldboy* there are a lot of shots of clocks and other time related things. The introduction shots are even mostly composed of clocks ticking. Just after the kidnapping of Tae-su we see a red arrow on the ground with a cross in the middle of it. On the commentary track Pak tells us that this is to represent time. We cannot reverse or control time. This concept of time relates back to the meaninglessness of revenge. No matter how hard Tae-su and U-jin try to get even by the means of revenge, they are unable to change the past. The actions and consequences of their past are still with them and seeking revenge does not change their past. Instead, it just perpetuates a circle of suffering and lust for revenge that leads to extended anguish.

44 Manohla Dargis is a co-chief film critic for The New York Times. She wrote the review “The Violence (and the Seafood)- Is More Than Raw,” on March 25, 2005 about the film *Oldboy* where she heavily criticized Pak and his audience.

45 This is not to say that *Oldboy* is not enjoyable. Even though it is an uncomfortable watch, it is engaging and therefore manages to captivate and entertain the audience.
5. Mise-en-scène

Pak’s films have become known for excellent mise-en-scène. But what exactly is mise-en-scène, and why is it even important? Mise-en-scène is a term that is derived from the world of theatre and it refers to the things that make up the stage, such as the lighting, set design and more. However, when the term is used in the world of film, it takes on a broader meaning that extends beyond just the set. Although the world of cinema and theatre share a lot of commonalities, the camera adds some extra variables to the term. Everything that appears in the frame falls under mise-en-scène. This includes things like the setting, lighting, costume design, acting, movement, etc. but in the world of cinema the camera is an important element and things like cinematography, distance, focus, shooting angle, etc. further add to the scene. In film, the director can control exactly what the audience sees, that control extends all the way from the things in front of the camera to the aspect ratio and the graininess of the film.

Mise-en-scène is a very important part of film. Making correct choices about how to construct a scene can intensify the feeling the audience experiences while they are watching. However, a poor decision might also have the opposite effect. For example, the way a character moves across the screen can have an impact on the audience. A character who moves from the left to right side of the screen is viewed as natural, while a character moving from right to left can feel unnatural. This type of technique can be used to convey that a character is progressing towards a goal, or the opposite, that the character is struggling. Different genres of film generally have some similarities in how the mise-en-scène is used to enhance the scene. Horror films, for example, use low-key lighting (strong contrast between light and dark), while a lighter genre like romantic comedy tend to use high-key lighting (even lighting, no dark areas).

The controlling of the camera can help a director convey a broad range of feelings to the audience. This can be done by a pan, by the angle of the camera, by the focus and many other techniques. While these techniques have more than one usage and may not always convey a similar message in each scene, there are commonly used techniques that are often related to a specific feeling. For example, if a character is filmed from a low-angle, it might imply that he or she is in power, while the usage of a high-angle might imply that the character is not in control.

There are many different techniques and tricks available to the director that can be advantageous when trying to control the audience’s experience and emotion. In Oldboy Pak makes use of many of these filmmaking techniques but as in the case of every auteur he has his preferred techniques. I will go over a few of those techniques in this chapter.

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47 Dix, “Mise-en-scène.”
49 Dix, “Mise-en-scène.”
5.1 Camera

In the opening shot of the scene we can see an excellent example of how angles are used to represent power. The opening scene features Tae-su preventing the suicidal businessman from falling by having a tight grasp around his tie. In this scene the camera is always looking up at Tae-su and always looking down on the businessman. As Tae-su is in full control of the businessman’s life in this scene, this is a great usage of camera angles to show that control. This is a technique we see multiple times throughout Oldboy but the thing that sets Pak apart from other directors is his clever usage of these techniques to display a shift in control or power. He also often uses a pan, or a dolly shot instead of cuts, to make the scene longer and more intimate. For example; in the scene where Mi-do is taking care of an injured Tae-su, Pak uses one of these shots. The shot starts with Tae-su in the right third of the frame, and to his left is a blanket, creating balance in the shot. The camera starts to move to the right, at the same time he wakes up and looks to the right. After a few seconds we see a sleeping Mi-do lying next to him. In between them are the bloody bandages she used to take care of his wounds. Tae-su grab the scissors from Mi-do’s hands. As the shot progresses, it changes from having Tae-su in the left of the frame, the scissors in the middle and Mi-do in the right, to Mi-do in the left third, and the eerie purple patterned handkerchief in the right third. The camera movement then comes to a stop, and we see Tae-su’s scarred hand coming down from the top of the frame and grabbing the handkerchief.

This one shot is composed of various images that could have been separated by cutting, and it would have been easier to do so. But thanks to the excellent set design and composition of the scene, the movement of the shots adds to the scene in a superb way. It is possible to pause the scene at almost any moment and still be faced with a perfectly balanced and composed frame. This is a testament to Pak’s attention to detail and well-developed understanding of composition.

In the scenes when U-jin and Tae-su face each other there is a constant battle of who is controlling the encounter and who is being controlled. During their face-off in the apartment next to Mi-do’s home, there is a great display of camera work to indicate a shift in power between the two. Tae-su holds a hammer to the side of U-jin’s head, who has just explained that his heart is weak and that he had a device installed that allows him to stop his own heart. In this shot we have an extreme closeup of U-jin’s face that is placed in the middle of the frame with the hammer being in the right third of the frame. But as Tae-su brings the hammer closer, U-jin raises the remote-control for his heart so that it enters the frame. Now, the left third is occupied by the remote-control in the foreground, leaving U-jin and the hammer further back in frame. This indicates that, despite Tae-su threatening U-jin’s life, it is not Tae-su and his hammer who is in control of the scene but U-jin with his ability to control his heart who dominates the interaction. As U-jin gets up from his chair, the camera that was shooting over Tae-su’s shoulder does a circular pan, putting U-jin in the left third of the foreground, and Tae-su who is looking down at the ground is in the right third of the frame further away from the camera. The pan confirms that U-jin has taken control of a situation that Tae-su was sure to have control of. The pan indicates that Tae-su, too, has realized his own weaker position.

Pak often opts to use handheld camera shots to give a more intimate feeling. Handheld shooting is most commonly used in documentaries and is therefore strongly related to
realistic depictions. However, it is a technique that is also used in contemporary cinema, and if done correctly, it can help the scene in many ways. In Oldboy a handheld camera is used for several different situations, and they have a few different meanings. During the scene where Tae-su is being held in the police station the handheld camera conveys a documentary feel. The shots do not seem to be planned, instead the camera follows Tae-su and his actions, much like in a documentary. The handheld camera also enhances Tae-su’s drunkenness in this scene. But most of the handheld shots (rather than stable shots) are shots where a character is experiencing anxiety or loss of control. In the penthouse scene the usage of handheld shots is very prominent. During the scene Tae-su is exposed to a lot of traumatizing information, the scene is a nerve-wrecking one and the shaky handheld camera adds to the uncertainty and discomfort. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, Oldboy is a film where the violence and story feel more intimate and raw compared to a lot of other films that have reached similar commercial success. The excellent incision of handheld camera shots in the film enhances that feeling in an exemplary way.

5.2 Movement and Placement

In film, a character can move on three different axes, right and left, up and down, and forward and backward. All the different kinds of movements can be used to convey a different feeling. Lateral movement is a rather straightforward type of movement with great ability to convey a message. In Oldboy Tae-su is constantly moving towards his goal of revenge, and during that path he sets out to find the Chinese delivery place that delivered to his prison. Once he finds out where it is, he follows the delivery motorcycle, and we see him crossing the screen by running from the right to the left up a very steep hill. Thanks to not only the lateral movement, but also the hill we can see Tae-su’s struggle and misdirection. The entire premise of Oldboy is that revenge is not worth fighting for, that revenge is a meaningless struggle. Running up a steep hill and crossing the screen from the right to the left is symbolic for that. However, later in the film we see an example of progressive lateral movement. After Tae-su finds his way to the prison and receives the tape-recording of U-jin ordering his imprisonment, he is met with a large group of men armed with various blunt weapons trying to prevent him from leaving. During the extremely well-choreographed and long fight scene we see Tae-su slowly making lateral progress from the left to the right, indicating not only his victory in the brawl, but also that he is getting closer to escaping that place.

Movement can help the audience understand the psychological state or the situation a character is in. If we pay attention to it, we can notice the subtle choices that Pak has made regarding movement in Oldboy. But it is not only movement that has an impact on how we see a character. The positioning of a character also has a similar impact. Characters who are placed on the left side of the screen tend to be evil or weaker characters, while the right side of the screen is usually reserved for good or (temporarily) dominant characters. This is also something we can see in Oldboy. In most shots that show Mi-do and Tae-su; Tae-su is placed on the left, while Mi-do is placed on the right. Mi-do is innocent in the conflict and, therefore,

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51 Egizii et al., “Which Way Did He Go?”
52 Egizii et al., “Which Way Did He Go?”
we can consider her to be good or innocent. However, Tae-su is actively seeking revenge, and by doing so he is not putting only himself at risk, but he is also jeopardizing Mi-do’s safety and comfort, thus he can be considered as evil.

5.3 Lighting

The goal of lighting a scene in film is to add to the scene but remain as an invisible addition (most of the time). There are many different techniques to lighting a scene, but as mentioned earlier there are namely two distinguished forms of how a scene is lit, high-key and low-key lighting.\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Oldboy} is a film that uses low-key lighting. Even though it is not a horror film, low-key lighting is also used to convey anxiety, moral ambiguity and other emotions generally considered unpleasant or negative (although this is not always the case).\textsuperscript{54} During the scenes of Tae-su’s imprisonment the lighting is always weak, adding to the feeling that he is going insane. The dim lighting used in the scenes helps set the mood for the scenario that Tae-su is in.

While Tae-su is watching TV he sees a broadcast that labels him as the killer of his wife. The following scene shows ants crawling out of his skin and all over his body along with the lights in the back flickering, creating a haunting effect that conveys to the audience that Tae-su is approaching insanity. Even though this lighting effect might be done in post-production, it still functions as a great demonstrative example of the effect that different lighting techniques can have on a scene.\textsuperscript{55} Even when Tae-su is released, the lighting continues to be low-key lighting which gives the film its gritty and contrast filled look. Pak also does a great job of having visible light sources in many of the scenes. Whether or not these lights are the actual light source or not, does not matter so much, because they still give the viewer the impression that the light is coming from within the scene and, therefore, they make the lighting seem natural. This goes back to the concept that lighting should be (most of the time) an invisible addition to the scene. The combination of all these cinematic elements is what makes \textit{Oldboy} such an aesthetically pleasing film.

6. References and Their Symbolic Meaning

6.1 Television Broadcasts

In \textit{Oldboy} there are a lot of references to non-diegetic events throughout the film. These references are often not in plain sight and often require the viewer to have some understanding of the Korean language and culture. Because of this they are easily overlooked by the foreign audience. I will try to explain the significance of some of these references and symbolic meanings that are in the film, and why they are important to the narrative of the film.

\textsuperscript{53} Dix, “Mise-en-scène.”
\textsuperscript{54} Dix, “Mise-en-scène.”
\textsuperscript{55} I am unable to judge if it is done as an edit, or if it was indeed part of the lighting setup.
On his daughter’s birthday Tae-su got drunk and as a result of this drunkenness he is being held in the police station. While he is sitting at the bench in the room we see an announcement board behind him. On this announcement board we see a poster of the 1988 Seoul Olympics mascot, Hodori. Thanks to this poster we get to know in which time the film takes place, and if we make further investigations, we can more accurately review Oldboy in the context of the depicted time. However, it is in the scenes of Tae-su’s imprisonment that we can most clearly see the non-diegetic Korea and how it relates to the film.

In the scenes of Tae-su’s imprisonment there are sometimes shots of the television in his room. What is broadcasted on the television are events that took place during his imprisonment, but the broadcasts have more than one function. Through the television we are able to keep track of the passing of time, but we also see the difficulties and struggles that Korea was facing. The film shows the passing of time through a split-screen view of the television and Tae-su digging his way through the wall. On the screen various important events (economical, political, societal, etc.) are broadcasted. The events are not only limited to domestic ones, the airplanes flying into the World Trade Center in New York are also shown. However, even before we are shown the broadcasts, we are able to pick up some information about what is going on in the country through listening. Kim Se-young does a great job in addressing the issue of broadcasts, but he does not go into details about most of them. He points out in his dissertation that there is news coverage of two collapsing structures that shocked South Koreans in the 1990s. The Seongsu (Sŏngsu) bridge (1994) and Sampoong (Samp’ung) Department Store (1995). 56 Up to that time Korea had great economic success and saw a rapid urbanization. However, in the shadows of the success there was the downside of greed and irresponsible construction and these two collapses seem like a bad omen for the financial crisis of 1997 that was just around the corner.

The Sŏngsu bridge collapsed early in the morning while people were making their way to work and school. A bus and several cars were on the section of the bridge that collapsed, and the collapse resulted in 32 dead and 17 injured.57 The case of Sampoong Department Store is an even more tragic one. Many poor decisions were made because of greed and irresponsibility, that eventually led to the air-condition units come crashing down through the roof. There were already cracks and weaknesses found in the building prior to the collapse but the owner, Lee (Yi) (despite being aware of the dangers) opted not to evacuate the building since there was such a big shopping crowd he wanted to capitalize on. This decision resulted in the death of more than 500 people as the building collapsed.58

I chose to comment on the collapsing of the bridge and building for their symbolic

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56 Kim Se-young, “Crisis in neoliberal Asia: violence in contemporary Korean and Japanese cinema” (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2016)
58 Marshall, “Sampoong Department Store.” It was not intended to be a department store in the original plan, instead, the original plan was to make an apartment complex. But after work had already begun the decision was made to turn it into a commercial project instead. As a result of this call, some of the support columns had to be removed to make room for escalators. The construction company was opposed to the design, and for that they were fired and replaced with a more obedient company. During construction there were a bunch of dangerous issues and mistakes but what seemed to be the biggest mistake of all was the air-conditioning units installed on the roof. They were way too heavy for the design of the building, and when they had to be moved due to noise complaints the move caused cracks in the building. On the day of the crash if 1995 the building had visible cracks and a decision was made to turn of the air-conditioning (the vibrations of the air-condition cause the cracks to widen faster) but keep the department store open. (see Marshall, “Sampoong Department Store.”)
meaning. These two events can be viewed as early signs that the economic growth Korea had experienced was coming to an end. Also, they are a clear display of what greed can result in. When it comes to Samp'ung the greed and corruption is even more evident, since there were a lot of instances of (illegally) avoiding safety regulations in exchange for a bigger profit. In my opinion, the collapsing of the two structures as well as the Korean economy are significant to the story of Oldboy in a greater way than the other things referenced. As the buildings and economy fall, so does Tae-su’s life. Everything that he once had seizes to exist and he is left with nothing but the rubbles of his past life. It also raises the question of who the bigger criminal is, people like Tae-su that cause pain through his violence or people who sacrifice the safety of others because of their own greed?59

The economic crisis is important to take note of. As I discussed in the chapter about the businessman who killed himself because of the crisis, the economic crisis had a great impact on South Korea and its people. I imagine part of the reason for Tae-su’s blind focus on revenge has to do with the broadcasts he is exposed to during his imprisonment. Because he has no real contact with the world, he is never able to see a realistic or even a positive viewpoint of the world. Perhaps because of the television broadcasts his goal of revenge becomes accentuated. From his point of view, the Korea that he will be released to might seem like a place unfit for living a happy life and, therefore, his lust for revenge becomes the focus, rather than trying to create a new and happy life. After all, the things he had in the past are all gone, including his wife and child.

6.2 Adoption

After Tae-su is released, Mi-do helps him find out what happened to his supposed daughter. They find out that she was adopted to Sweden and is now living there under the name Eva. Mi-do asks if Tae-su wants her to call the family that adopted Eva, but he says that he needs to get his revenge first. 60 The issue that his daughter was adopted does not play a large role in the film, after all it turns out that it is not even true. But, actually the film relates to real facts in Korean history. Adoption has been part of Korea’s history for quite long time and it is a subject that has been discussed a lot within and outside of Korea. 61 If Pak chose to inject the element of adoption in the film as a criticism or comment on the high adoption numbers in Korea’s past (and present) is not fully clear. During the years 1956 – 1994 Korea was the country that supplied the most international adoptees. 62 Most of the Korean adoptees ended up in the U.S, but a lot of adoptees also came to Scandinavian countries. There are roughly 9000 adopted Koreans in Sweden and, therefore, it makes sense the film shows Tae-su’s supposed daughter in Sweden. 63 Tae-su was locked up 1988 – 2003, which means that his

59 The issue of greed could even be applied to Tae-su and U-jin. Except instead of money they are greedy for revenge.
60 The address and phone number listed on the note in the film are real, or at least somewhat real. The address (although it contains a spelling mistake) is the address of a hotel in Stockholm. When the number is called, you get asked to call another number instead, and that phone number leads to the Korean Embassy in Stockholm.
63 Hüb invente, “Comforting an Orphaned Nation.”
Gabriel Nielsen Soldati

daughter would have been adopted within that timeframe. Adoption is also referenced in *Lady Vengeance* as Kŭm-ja’s daughter is also put up for adoption when Kŭm-ja goes to prison, but she does not end up in Sweden instead, she is adopted by an Australian couple.

### 6.3 Time

Time is referenced to many times during *Oldboy*. Right after Tae-su is kidnapped we see a red arrow on the street as I mentioned in the previous chapter. As this scene plays out, the cast’s names of the film appear on the screen. The names appear with a fade in effect, starting off as numbers (like on a digital watch) before they turn into letters. The sequence transitions into the title sequence. The title sequence follows the theme of clocks and time, using an analog clock as a backdrop while the actors’ and cast members’ names continue the theme of numbers turning into letters. The analog clock starts to fade and the hour hand and the minute hand transition into the letter “y” while the frame of the clock becomes the letter “o.” The rest of letters that are needed to spell “Oldboy” appear while various clock sounds can be heard.

Pak uses clocks to transition between shots several times throughout the film. Scenes where characters look at their watch are present at a few different points in the film. The constant reminder of clocks and time is strongly related to revenge. As mentioned in the previous chapter, no matter how hard one tries one cannot beat time itself. Even if Tae-su gets his revenge, it will not bring back the 15 years he lost nor, will it bring back his family. The same goes for U-jin and his sister. Rather than battling each other, U-jin and Tae-su are trying to win an impossible fight against time itself. Because they are unable to reverse time, they will not be able to change their circumstances through revenge. Their loss and pain are caused by an unchangeable past. The clocks demonstrate that, no matter what, time will continue to move forward, and no matter how hard the characters of *Oldboy* try to fight, it is futile.

### 6.4 Purple Dyed Pattern

In *Oldboy* there are a few recurring objects. Among them the recurring purple dyed pattern is perhaps the most frequent recurrence. The purple dyed pattern makes regular appearances throughout the film. After Tae-su’s kidnapping we see someone holding an umbrella that has this pattern. Presumable the person under the umbrella is U-jin. Another scene where the pattern appears is when Tae-su collapses in the middle of the street and U-jin, who is disguised as a normal citizen, helps Tae-su. During the scene U-jin dries Tae-su’s blood with a handkerchief that has the purple dyed pattern. All the boxes that U-jin hands over to Tae-su or Mi-do are decorated with this pattern. Therefore, this pattern is heavily associated with U-jin. In my opinion, this pattern is a representation of the chaos that U-jin injects into Tae-su’s life. It is a constant reminder that U-jin is always watching and always present in Tae-su’s life.

In film, colors sometimes take on symbolic meaning. The color purple has a broad range of symbolic meanings. It can be symbolic for mystery, cruelty and power. Although it has more

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64 Tae-su’s wife was killed roughly one year after he was captured. So, we can then assume that his daughter was supposed to have been adopted in 1989.
symbolic meanings than this, these meanings seem to fit the film quite well. During most of the film Tae-su is unaware who U-jin is. In Tae-su’s eyes U-jin is just a mysterious and cruel kidnapper without any apparent motivation.

7. Criticism and Cultural and Linguistic Barriers

Although *Oldboy* is one of the highest rated films on IMDB there are still parts of the film that do not seem to translate well to an English-speaking audience. 65 Cha Sung-taik compiled a large number of the international audience’s (U.S viewers) views and opinion on *Oldboy*. In his MA thesis Cha discusses some of the remarks made about the film by U.S viewers, but never adequately explains why the audience feels a certain way. I will try to fill that gap of information, using his work as a basis to build on top of.

Even though the Western audience liked the movie as whole, there seem to be a few scenes that most of them find difficult to understand or difficult to watch. The film contains many gruesome and unpleasant scenes but one scene that seemed to strike the nerves of Western viewers in particular is the scene where Tae-su is eating a live octopus. 66 Eating live octopus is not something that Western cultures typically do, and therefore it is a practice that can be very shocking. But in Korea it is something that is well-known, so even Korean people who never tried live octopus may not find it as shocking because they are already familiar with the food custom.

When dealing with a foreign audience, it is normal to expect that there might be some cultural and language barriers, but as was shown through Cha’s research, the majority of the U.S audience seems to be of the opinion that they are free from such barriers while watching *Oldboy*. 67 In my opinion, the notion of being free from cultural and linguistic barriers despite being unfamiliar with the culture is false. There are plenty of cultural and linguistic barriers, regardless if there is a dubbed or subtitled version of the film. For example, there are scenes during Tae-su’s imprisonment where we hear the television broadcast, but it is not subtitled or even visually shown. Therefore, someone who lacks the ability to understand Korean would not be able to fully understand the scene, as the television broadcasts provide us with additional details. It is not only the lack of subtitles that cause linguistic barriers. The Korean language has many different verb endings and levels of politeness that all have different nuances and implications attached to them. At several points throughout the film other characters ask Tae-su why he speaks in such a strange way, but if we only read the subtitles, his speech never strikes us as strange or out of the ordinary, as it is not easily conveyed in translation.

Another scene that received criticism from the U.S audience is the scene where Tae-su is acting like a dog in front of U-jin in an attempt to ask for forgiveness. Korea is a country where social hierarchy systems are a lot more important than they are in most Western countries. Thus, the idea of bowing down to another person might seem alien. In Western societies people generally have a higher view of dogs than Korean society does. Dogs are generally held

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to a lower standard in Korea and are viewed as being a lot more inferior to humans than what they are in Western societies. So, acting like a dog conveys that Tae-su is lowering his own value to something that is less than a human, and that he is viewing U-jin as his owner and master.

As the general notion of the U.S. audience in regard to *Oldboy* is positive, I choose to focus on the negative reviews because that is where we find topics of discussion. Regardless if one understands the reason and purpose of the violent scenes of *Oldboy*, one may still find them uncomfortable and unnecessary. I would suggest that such an opposition can be partly due to cultural differences. South Korea is a nation that has a violent and difficult past. Because their history is a violent and traumatic one, perhaps traces of that trauma and violence seep into Korean film as well. It is not only Pak who makes violent films. Violence is portrayed in different ways in different cultures and in South Korea the way violence is portrayed may not necessarily be compatible with a Western audience that is used to Western standards of violence. As Kwak Han-ju explains in his paper, post IMF crisis films touching on negative and depressing subjects saw an upswing in popularity as well as an increased production. As the Western film scene and the Korean film scene developed during different times and in different directions, there may be some differences in what the respective audiences are used to see, and able to handle. People who make films are artists. Even if the story told in *Oldboy* is a fictional one, it may still be affected by the history of Korea. Artists pour their emotion into their art, therefore, their struggles (personal as well as non-personal) might be reflected in their work.

8. Conclusion

*Oldboy* is a very violent and repulsive film in many ways. The violence is uncensored and so are the consequences. Even though the story of violence is so vividly expressed within the film, the takeaway message is not that violence is desirable. Instead of making a film that glorifies peace or directly stating that violence is bad, Pak Ch’an-uk allows the audience to arrive at this conclusion on their own. His method of storytelling may be uncomfortable to watch but it is at the same time effective. By showing violent and egoistic behaviors so intimately as *Oldboy* does, the negative sides of violence become undeniably clear.

Although a number of references and symbolism that appear in Pak’s film have been discussed by previous researchers, through my research I was able to add more details and information to that discussion. Thanks to knowledge of Korean culture as well as the Korean language I was able to study the film in the context of Korea’s history and culture, which is more difficult to do within Film Studies. Although it is not possible to draw direct connections between Korea’s recent history and the scenes depicted in the film, there seems to be a few allusions to present-day Korea in the film. To which degree the references are meant as an act of criticism from the director’s side is hard to tell without speaking to Pak himself. However, the allusions to tragic events were deliberately included in the film and can thus be considered as a form of social criticism. I drew the connection between the rapid urbanization and greed, and how that greed eventually leads to tragedy, like in the case of the Sampoong (Samp’ung) Department Store collapse. The references regarding adoption are vague and

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difficult to read into but even so, they relate to real facts in Korean history. In *Oldboy* colors and clothing seem to have a strong symbolic meaning. This is a question has yet to be explored. I discussed why I believe that the recurring purple dyed pattern symbolizes chaos and why it is shown so often, but there are also other recurrences that should be discussed in future works.\(^69\)

In this thesis I pointed out several elements of mise-en-scène in *Oldboy* and how they enhance the story. I also, explained which stylistic filmmaking traits Pak Ch’an-uk has. In my opinion, those stylistic traits contribute to the film’s success. Because the mise-en-scène and the story work in symbiosis, the film becomes more impactful.

In this thesis I focused on the critical part of the Western audience and discussed that potential cultural and language barriers may have been partly responsible for the criticism against the film. Not being familiar with a particular society may cause the viewer to be more easily affected by scenes that depict unfamiliar behavior. In future research it would be desirable to conduct interviews with the viewers of the film. This concerns both people who enjoy the film and people who are highly critical to its methods.

\(^{69}\) In *Oldboy* there are a lot of shots that are similar in many ways. There are shots of Tae-su and U-jin that are almost compositionally identical but occur at different points in the film.

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