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INTERVIEW

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‘You Can’t Help But Feel Uncomfortable, Even Though You’re Smiling’: An interview with Park Chan-wook

A key through-line in Korean auteur Park Chan-wook’s films is the shocking, explicit display of his protagonists’ bodies – all desperately seeking integrity and purpose – suffering through unspeakable pain and degradation. A scissored off tongue, slashed and seeping Achilles heels, flesh blistering and burning into ash in the sunlight: fans and critics alike of Park’s work are left with these visual, visceral imprints of his characters’ corporeal and moral failures. All good people doing bad things for reasons out of their own control, driven by hopeless desire and/or vengeance, Park’s characters never get what they want, and are left dead or either stripped of all self-dignity by the time they reach their narrative’s conclusions. Perhaps allegories of South Korea in the era of global capitalism or meta-commentaries on human insignificance in this age of post-humanism, Park’s characters’ bodies are thrilling to watch, even though they inspire tremendous discomfort and fear in those doing the watching.

Yet despite or more likely because of the uncomfortable feelings his films engender, Park remains one of South Korea's most artistically and commercially successful film-makers to date. While his films have found their greatest success in South Korea, similar to the work of fellow 'hallyu' (i.e. 'Korean New Wave') auteurs Bong Joon-ho and Kim Ji-woon, Park's cinema has earned him both prestigious international acclaim at top film festivals and a legion of die-hard fan-boys across Asia, Europe, and the United States. For example, at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, where he was championed by his most famous fan-boy, Quentin Tarantino, Park's *Oldboy* won the Grand Prix (second prize), and in 2009 at Cannes, his vampire film *Thirst* earned the Jury Prize (third place).

Within the past twenty years, Park has directed several short films and eight feature films, the most recent, *Stoker* (released by Fox Searchlight in March 2013, and starring Nicole Kidman), marks his English-language and Hollywood debut. Park first found success in 2000 with *Joint Security Area* (J.S.A.), a political drama with equal parts comedy that treats the North-South Korean divide with extraordinary humour and intelligence. That year *J.S.A.* also became South Korea's highest grossing film, a key swell in the nation's growing entertainment hallyu. Park followed *J.S.A.* with his 'vengeance trilogy': *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Oldboy* (2003) and *Lady Vengeance* (2005), vivid character portraits of marginalized men and women scorned to the point of monstrosity. With this trilogy, Park fixes on the abject impulses of a deaf factory worker, a middle-aged drunk, and a female ex-con, respectively, each seeking revenge on those who have abused and violated them. These films, when taken together, exemplify Park's signature combination of restrained form with 'extreme', violent content, an aesthetic fusion that engages, first, spectatorial shock, but then allows enough time and room for critical contemplation of that mediated violence. With his next feature film, *I'm a Cyborg, but That's OK* (2006), a quirky romance set inside a mental hospital, Park took on questions of emotional transference and existential validation, positing that 'love' means accepting another's delusions and neuroses as one's own. Park's 2009 film, *Thirst*, an adaptation of Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, continues his perverse exploration of love and attachment. By far his most erotic and sensually titillating film, *Thirst* centres on a priest-turned-vampire and his affair with an equally monstrous, and miserable housewife. A visual and sonic feast of blood, sex and yearning, Park's *Thirst* persists in pairing the desire for moral and bodily integrity with unimaginable suffering and inevitable failure.

On 24 June 2012, Park screened *Thirst* at the Look East Film Festival in Hollywood, CA. I interviewed him after the screening with translation assistance from Wonjo Jeong.

Alison Hoffman-Han: *Your films to me are total experiences in that they engage all of the senses – so much so that they feel like sensual assaults, leaving me, as a spectator, exhausted and enthralled. Thirst, in particular, is highly sensual. Where does your desire to create such sensually arresting work come from?*

Park Chan-wook: I think your question might actually have the answer within it. When I make films, what I want my audience to walk out of the theatre feeling is literally *physical*. I don't want to make a film that an audience will just accept intellectually or through the mind. I want and try to make films that an audience can physically react to. You said that the experience of watching my films is exhausting, and that's *exactly* how I want my audience to feel.



Figure 1: From left to right: Wonjo Jeong, Park Chan-wook, and Alison Hoffman-Han.

It's always been my philosophy that simply watching and hearing a film is the most basic way to experience a film as a spectator, but, as a director, if you're able to make your audience smell, touch, taste, and to make the experience a very tactile one, that really elevates the experience for the audience. That's what I consider to be a great movie-going experience for an audience.

I think I would have made an ideal film if I was successful in making my audience tense up through its entirety – without one moment of relaxing – with the audience constricting themselves and getting to a point where they feel completely exhausted. This, to me, is the greatest achievement in film-making.

Speaking of this coupling of tension and exhaustion, I'm particularly impressed with and fond of the hospital sex scene in Thirst. It's a long one – over six minutes in fact – and it lingers and feels even longer. I've never seen a sex scene quite like it. What was your experience like in shooting this scene, and what did you hope to achieve with it?

There are two sex scenes in the film. One at the Korean traditional costume shop and the other one at the hospital. Both the scenes were very difficult for me to shoot, but they're crucial to the film, and equally important. One scene cannot exist without the other. They're very much intertwined. The first sex scene escalates to a very intense moment, but it gets interrupted, and it's abruptly stopped. In the following scene which is at the mahjong table, having



Figure 2: Tae-ju fondles the mahjong piece.



Figure 3: At the mahjong table, Tae-ju steals a secret glance at her lover, the priest, Sang-hyun.

had the physical sex which is interrupted, Sang-hyun (Song Kang-ho), the priest, and Tae-ju (Kim Ok-bin) start caressing and fondling the mahjong pieces, and they carry on a conversation that is filled with sexual innuendoes and double entendres as they steal secret glances at each other. So really, the sexual moment hasn't actually stopped, but rather, it lingers on. That scene is an extension of the physical sex that was interrupted just the moment before.

When I was filming these scenes, I was taking great care to express those exchanges of secret glances and to capture those breaths. For instance, I would spend the whole day on the recording stage just to get those breaths right at the mahjong table. So, you say you timed the scene as being six minutes, but for me it's not just the one scene or even the two, but it's the *three scenes* (the hanbok shop, mahjong table and hospital) because to me it's all one and the same. I've painstakingly created this 30-minute sex scene. Ultimately, it was my goal to create the longest sex scene in narrative cinema.

And I really wanted the audience to be on the edge of their seat. Since the couple's first sex scene was interrupted, I was hoping for the audience to



Figure 4: Tae-ju's pleasure is emphasized and prolonged during the final movement of Thirst's 'thirty-minute sex scene'.

be extra tense, and to totally identify with the characters, feeling like 'please, don't let anything interrupt this moment or this sex'.

In the hospital room sex scene you mentioned, I was trying to amalgamate a lot of different elements. It has to have sexual excitement, but not only that – as you rightly point out – you do feel quite uncomfortable, especially so once you find the coma patient next door lying on the bed. You can't help but feel uncomfortable, even though you're smiling. So, I wanted to create a scene that's all at the same time funny, sad, exciting and sensual. And there's also an element of danger, too. When you witness Sang-hyun biting into Tae-ju's neck, you're also scared for her. It's quite horrific. You're wondering, 'Is he going to kill her now?' Ultimately though, what I really wanted out of that scene was a feeling of *liberation*. This is a very important moment for Tae-ju, the female character. She's liberating herself from the hellish household she's existed in for most of her life. She steps out of that house to have this secret encounter, so she's getting away from the house and her husband. So it's not just sex or sexual liberation, but on a deeper level, it's this one woman's personal liberation. She's moving towards fulfilling her own desire.

And also, after Tae-ju and Sang-hyun have intercourse, she steals the Easter egg from the coma patient next door. I wanted that to be a metaphor for her life being resurrected. Tae-ju coming to life, as it were.

Kim Ok-bin, the actress who plays Tae-ju in Thirst, is mesmerizing to watch. She's one of the most engaging femme fatales I've seen in cinema within the past decade. It's refreshing to see such a perverse, yet compelling Korean woman on-screen who demands both pleasure and power. I've also appreciated this about your female characters in Lady Vengeance (2005) and even Bae Doo-na's character in Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance (2002). I'd like to know more about the thought process behind and conceptualizing of your female characters, and in general, what it is you like to see in your leading women on-screen.

The type of films that I like to watch, and the films that I've made, tend not to have very strong female characters at the core. Up until *Lady Vengeance*, I think that my films weren't depicting female characters in any significant, strong way. At one point, I actually really thought about this, and felt, 'I can't keep making films like this'. This point came after having made *Oldboy* (2003), which – and I'm sure you'll agree – was full of machismo. After making that film, I got to thinking about the daughter character, Mi-do (Kang Hye-jeong). She is not privy to the most important reveal in this film, and of course, she cannot be privy to it in order for the drama of the film to succeed. However, I felt quite frustrated that she was so isolated from the truth.

You mentioned Doona Bae's character in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002) as well, but also in that film, it's mainly about the conflict between two men. Going back even further to *Joint Security Area* (2000), it's about friendship between men, and the female character in that film is only an observer. So, after making *Oldboy*, and having this moment of realization about the gendered dynamics in my films, I reflected on this. I thought about how my female characters weren't as significant as the male characters, and also, how my female characters weren't very complex or sophisticated even when they deserved to be. So, when it came to *Lady Vengeance* (2005), I wanted to make up for all of that. That's my first film with a female protagonist, and ever since then, I've tried to depict female characters in as rich a way as possible. And my efforts have continued with *I'm A Cyborg, but That's Okay* (2006), *Thirst*

and *Stoker* (2012), my most recent film which I'm finishing up at the moment here in Los Angeles. The female characters in *Stoker* are at the film's centre, and they're incredibly important.

If, in a word, I could sum up what I think about now when conceptualizing and creating my female characters it would be this: 'desire'. It's their desire that I hope to *describe* in my films – an unwavering and honest look at their desires. When it comes to films that set out to be commercially viable, I find that they tend to treat female desire as something that is dangerous. Of course, I admit that in my films, I do sometimes treat women's desire as something that is dangerous, but I would hope that I've done a good job at doing this in the most frank, honest and mesmerizing manner possible. It is when you reveal the hidden desire, when you peel one layer to find another layer of desire underneath, as it were, that you get the most surprising and exquisite results.

I've found that one of the ways desire is expressed and felt in your films – in both the female and male characters – is through music, and the choreography of the camera. I'm interested in your approach to music and cinematography, and of course, the collaborative process with both your composer, Jo Yeong-wook, and cinematographer, Chung Chung-hoon.

Actually, Jo Yeong-wook, my composer, happens to be my best friend – someone I've known most of my life, since I was a child, even before I became a film director. He also literally lives next door to me. We're next door neighbours in Korea. So it is that we would often get together to talk about films and music while chatting over the fence in our backyards. You can't really separate work and play between the two of us. Being such a good friend, and someone who has similar taste to mine when it comes to films, I find this collaboration quite satisfying.

Generally speaking, I've found that when you are making music for a film, one key aspect of the process tends to be underestimated. Not only is it important to choose carefully *what* music to use at specific moments, but just as important is *when to start* a particular cue and *when to end it*.

Often, after I've finished cutting a film, and then have a first look at it, I've found that people will say things like 'how about we start a piece of music



Figure 5: Tae-ju coming to life as a vampire with a gaze expressive of her unleashed, carnal desires.

here and end it here'. And they will all have very similar ideas. I'm suspicious of that because I don't believe that one's initial instincts are always the right ones. When people have those similar first responses, it could often mean that such usage of music could be conventional or cliché. So, I try to get in the habit of trying to disregard these first instincts about music upon viewing the first cut. It's better to try to always stay fresh and come up with something that is not conventional. So, in that aspect, my friend and I are very good at stimulating each other and thinking outside of the box.

In *Thirst*, there's a lot of source music used compared to my other films. One example could be the recorder played by the protagonist, and another being the music from the record player. So compared with my other films, there aren't as many original pieces of music, but more source music. What I was trying to focus more on compared to the other films, was to try and bring alive each texture of the individual instruments. Another thing I wanted to try was to make the music and the sound effects come together – to fuse them as if they were one. For instance, when you take one of the last scenes, when Tae-ju's walking past the corner and pulling the door off the frame, I tried to experiment with how that can become part of the music cue. The footsteps, the door crack all provide the beats of the music. In collaborating with my friend, I tried to do as much of this technique as possible. But it's fine if the audience doesn't readily notice this technique, since I was aiming to make it more subconscious. They can *feel* that there's something different, something unique in those moments. If that's the case, then I feel very satisfied with our choices.

In terms of the cinematography in my films, ever since *Oldboy*, all of my films have been collaborations with Chung Chung-hoon. You would imagine that having worked together for ten years that by now we would be thinking along similar lines – that when we take a scene and come up with a shot plan, that we would think of the same thing, right? However, that's never the case. Always, when we look at a shot and talk about how to shoot it, we are talking about completely different things. Sometimes this is very bewildering. We have such contrasting ideas about shot composition, camera movement – so much so that the more and more I get to know Chung Chung-hoon, and the more time we spend together, the more I realize how people *really are different*.

With that being said, when I begin a film, I begin collaborating with Chung-hoon *very early* in the process. I collaborate with him right from the beginning in the pre-production stage, and even during the script development stage. I storyboard all of my films very thoroughly from the beginning to end, so the entire film is very thought out. The way I collaborate with my DP, and this is very similar to how I collaborate with my scriptwriter, is I connect two sets of monitors and two sets of keyboards to one computer, and we each write away, suggesting and typing up ideas simultaneously. So we're very much writing together, as it were. You could compare it to having one brain, but having two sets of limbs. So this is how I create the shot plans which are then handed over to the storyboard artist to draw the pictures up. But before it gets to this stage, in terms of coming up with the text for the shot plans, this is how I work with my DP.

One thing that excited me about coming to the US is that there are so many wonderful DPs here, and of course, I love and admire much of their work, so I thought it would be a great opportunity to work with an American DP. But to implement this process of bringing in a DP so early on, it would

have meant that the weekly wages going out to a DP would be horrendously high, and prohibitively so, so I ended up having to go with Chung-hoon, who was very cheap. [Laughs]

Let's talk about you working here in the US and becoming an 'international film-maker'. Similar to you, several Korean film-makers and actors are now key figures in international film productions. What are your thoughts about this growing phenomenon and your place within it?

I haven't really thought about it in that big of a perspective before. Personally, as a film-maker, I think my answer is so simple that you might find it quite boring. It really all depends on where the good story comes from. If it happens to be a Korean producer or a Korean scriptwriter sending me a great script, then that would make a great Korean film, or if it's American, then that would make a great American film. That's the only difference really. With *Stoker*, for instance, it just so happened that this great script came my way from the US, so that's why I came here to make this film. I never really thought of it from the perspective like, 'it's about time that I go international' or 'it's about time that I look at working in the overseas market'. It has more to do with where the script comes from. I myself cannot ever tell where the stories I conjure up might take me – where they might take place. It could be anywhere. It really all depends.

But one thing that I do think is quite a bit of coincidence, and this is one of the things that a junior film-maker in the Korean industry just reminded me of recently, is that in 2003, director Kim Ji-woon released *Tale of Two Sisters*, and I directed and released *Oldboy*. It was also that year when director Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder* was released in Korea. So in one year, these three films were all released in Korea. And exactly ten years later we all find ourselves overseas out of Korea. Director Bong Joon-ho is shooting *Snowpiercer* in Prague at the moment, Kim Ji-woon is doing *Last Stand* here in the US, and I find myself in the last stretches of post-production on *Stoker*. So it looks like 2013 – exactly ten years later – will be the year when we'll all have films released again in the same year. It is a bit of coincidence when I think about it. There may be something you could call fate moving behind the scenes, or maybe it's just something that's common for film-makers of my generation, but in any case, it's quite a bit of a coincidence.

My students requested that I ask you this last question: how do you achieve such uniqueness and individuality as a film-maker?

Well, establishing or creating individuality and maintaining it, is not at all that difficult. I think it's easier to be very individual because every person comes from different backgrounds, and the influences that effect one person will be different from the next person. So, if anything, you cannot help but be different and individual, but it's all about being honest with yourself, and if you're able to do this, then individuality comes along very naturally. But you might wonder, then 'why are there so many films out there that you can't tell apart, you can't see any traces of individuality?' My answer to that would simply be, the film-makers were not being honest with themselves.

Wonderful advice. Thank you for speaking with me today.

Thank you.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Alison Hoffman-Han is Assistant Professor of Cinema Studies at Oakland University where she teaches courses on East Asian cinema, minoritarian media practices, and experimental film.

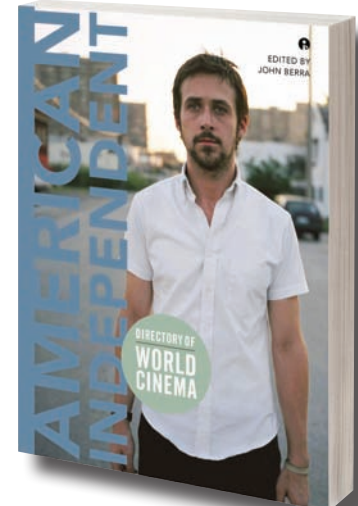
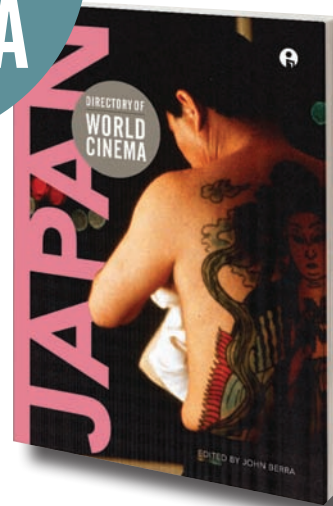
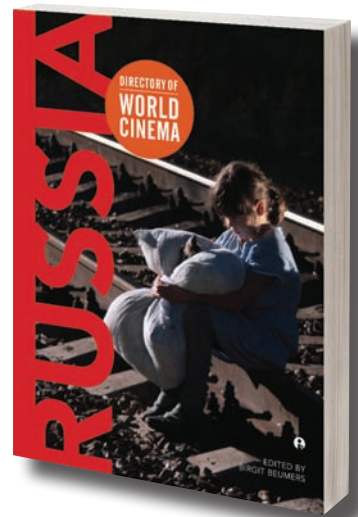
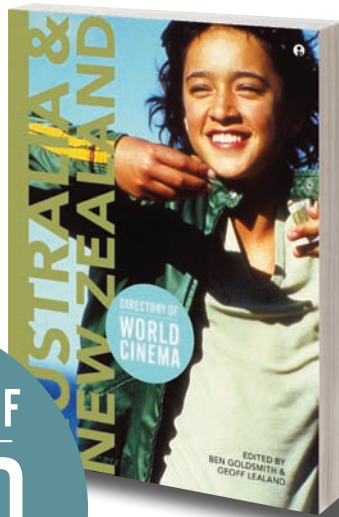
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