

Park Chan-wook by Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc



One of the key figures in South Korean cinema, writer and director Park Chan-wook has created a body of work that is uncompromising in its depiction of violence, yet engrossing in its art-house sensibilities and tight scripting. Although commentators have often focused on the transgressive and visceral nature of his films, this belies the wider themes of alienation, fracture (social, mental, temporal and political) and morality that pervade his work. Time, perception and memory all play key roles in his often tragic tales of misunderstanding and retribution where characters tread a fine line between redemption and damnation. Park tempers his grim premises with dark humour, even as he shows that anyone, no matter how good, can be capable of terrible, horrific deeds and that humanity is something fragile and ultimately ephemeral.

Park was born in 1963. He grew up in Seoul, studying philosophy and aesthetics at Sogang University, where he was an active member of the photography club. A cinephile, he spent a large part of his student life watching films

and was particularly influenced by Alfred Hitchcock. Indeed it was viewing *Vertigo* that convinced Park that he wanted to become a filmmaker. After graduation Park found himself a job on the production crew of Yu Young-jin's *Ggam-dong* and also began working as a film critic. He made his feature debut writing and directing *The Moon is What the Sun Dreams Of* (1992), a melodramatic gangster film. It was not a success, so Park reverted to film criticism, publishing a book of reviews, *Videodrome: The Discret Charm of Watching Films*, which reflected his passion for all things cinematic. After a five-year hiatus he returned to filmmaking, directing his second feature *Threesome* (*Samminjo*), a road film about a dysfunctional trio who travel around the country robbing houses. It carried many of the themes that would typify Park's later work, combining social issues with black humour. Again, the critical response was generally negative.

1999 was a pivotal year for the Korean film industry, a time when investment resulted in a series of impressive films that rivalled the increasingly popular US blockbusters. While filmgoers were flocking to see the political action thriller *Shiri*, the manga-noir of *Nowhere to Hide* or the controversial comedy *Attack the Gas Station*, Park produced a claustrophobic short film, *Judgement* (*Simpan*), which used mixed media to question the nature of identity and memory. Set in a mortuary, it follows the autopsy and identification of an unknown victim who has been recovered from the rubble of a collapsed department store. Shocked parents are convinced the deceased girl is theirs. Bizarrely, though, the overworked, beer-swilling mortuary attendant (who keeps his drinks nice and chilled in the body drawers) is convinced that the victim is actually his estranged daughter. The whole sorry situation is filmed by a TV crew to

show the human side of the disaster. Park takes this premise and increases its macabre elements to the point of pitch-black comedy. The characters' motivations become more apparent and less pleasant when it becomes clear that the girl's identification could lead to financial remuneration. In many ways this is Park's most cynical and nihilistic film – one that doesn't offer redemption for any of its characters. It implicates not only the perpetrators but also the filmmakers and viewing audience – voyeurs sucked into other people's misery and moribund moralities. This questioning of morality provides the backbone not only to Park's films as a director but also as a screenwriter. Occasionally collaborating with Lee Mu-yeong, Park has written screenplays for various projects such as *Anarchists* (2000), the brutal kidnapping farce *The Humanist* (2001), the quirky Taekwondo sci-fi romance *A Bizarre Love Triangle* (2002), the drama *A Boy Who Went to Heaven* (2005) and the black comedy *Crush and Blush* (2008).

Park's first major feature-film release in Korea's new climate of cinematic strength was *Joint Security Area* (2000), a combination of thriller, mystery and political drama set around the DMZ, the demilitarised zone that divides North and South Korea in an uneasy truce. Two North Korean soldiers have been killed and one wounded in an incident at an outpost close to the zone. A South Korean soldier has confessed to the crime and the situation threatens to spiral into a major international incident. Sophie, working for the Neutral



Joint Security Area

Nations Supervisory Committee, seeks to find the truth – 'not who, but why'. Her investigations reveal a complicated situation because the men involved had secretly become friends, sharing evenings together following a series of chance encounters that led each to realise that there was genuine humanity on both sides of the border. The poignancy of these platonic relationships lies in the bonding between brothers, of a desire for Korea to be whole again. Ultimately, yearning is not enough and the tragedy in *Joint Security Area* lies in the inability of those in the present to forget the past. Park plays with time, through flashbacks and slow revelations, to paint a picture that, even as the pieces of the puzzle fall into place, creates a more complex situation rather than a simplistic one. With its assured performances and exemplary direction *Joint Security Area* became the highest-grossing film of 2000.



Sympathy for Mr Vengeance

Sympathy for Mr Vengeance marked the start of Park's 'Vengeance Trilogy', an almost Jacobean exploration of tragedy and revenge that offers a bleak insight into the human condition. Ryu, a deaf-mute with a loving temperament and pale-green hair, needs to find money to save his sister so that she can have a kidney transplant. Desperate, he turns to an underworld surgeon who agrees to remove one of Ryu's kidneys for a fee and give him one that's compatible to his sister. It's a con. He recovers consciousness with a kidney missing and his money gone. In order to raise the funds, Ryu hatches a plan with his politically active girlfriend, Young-mi, to engage

in the 'good kidnapping' of the daughter of Dong-jin, the man who sacked him from his day job. The plan goes horribly wrong despite their best intentions and the stage is set for acts of retribution from which no one can emerge unscathed.

Sympathy for Mr Vengeance paints a picture of society where the rich have no concept of the plight of the ordinary person, but it avoids painting its characters in broad Marxist strokes. Instead, the powerful backbone of Sympathy for Mr Vengeance is precisely that both Ryu and Dong-jin are good men, if misguided, hemmed in by their social status. Their need to exact vengeance on the people that have taken loved ones from them sets them on a path to damnation that taints not just them, but society as a whole. Park treats his viewers with intelligence; much of the action occurs between scenes so that key elements need to be pieced together to understand the whole. The barrage of inexorable tragedy, irredeemable characters, rape, torture and violence led to a mixed critical reaction in South Korea but raised Park's profile internationally.

In 2003, Park contributed to *If You Were Me*, a portmanteau of six short films commissioned by South Korea's National Human Rights Commission, tackling the theme of discrimination. Park's segment, N.E.P.A.L. Never Ending Peace and Love, tells the true story of a Nepalese immigrant, Chandra, who finds herself incarcerated in a Korean mental institution when she fails to pay for a bowl of noodles. Her lack of Korean language skills, coupled with well-meaning but ignorant police and medical staff, leads to over six years of imprisonment. Filmed mainly in black and white, the film implicates the viewer in Chandra's plight by alternating between documentary-style interviews with those involved, and claustrophobic point-of-view shots that leave the central character largely absent from the screen; a woman made invisible by others' incorrect perceptions. Many of the issues explored in this film resurfaced in

Park's later films, particularly *Oldboy* and *I'm a Cyborg, but That's OK*.

Returning to retribution, the flamboyant and controversial *Oldboy* offered a different take on vengeance, eschewing prompt action for brooding and calculated planning, arguing that revenge is a dish not only best served cold but kept in the freezer well beyond its sell-by date. Oh Dae-su's plans to deliver a present to his daughter are put on hold when he is kidnapped and locked in a room for 15 years. His release is similarly abrupt. Emerging from a suitcase on top of a tower block at exactly the point he was kidnapped, Dae-su finds himself in a changed world. Sushi chef Mi-do provides some grounding in reality as Dae-su attempts to find the person responsible for taking his daughter and 15 years of his life. Adapted from the Japanese manga, the baroque nature of the premise helps temper some of the film's more extreme scenes (live octopus eating, tooth extraction by claw-hammer) with a plot about time and memory, of action and consequence. The mystery that is key to the film is spelled out by one of the characters when he states, 'It's not about why you were incarcerated for 15 years, it's about why you were released.' The final revelation is shocking, compounded by the fact that Dae-su's actions that led to his incarceration were so mundane that he had simply forgotten about them and was unaware of the dire consequences that had resulted. This twisted tale won the Grand Prix at Cannes and continues to have a broad following worldwide.



Oldboy



Cut

Park next turned his hand to *Cut*, a short film made as part of the *Three... Extremes* (2004) project that also featured entries from Fruit Chan and Miike Takashi. In *Cut*, a director making a vampire film finds himself bound by the waist with a ribbon that extends throughout a studio set. His pianist wife is strung like a human puppet, her fingers glued to the piano keys. Their captor gives the director an ultimatum – kill a helpless child or he'll chop the wife's fingers off, one by one. The fluid and ostentatious camerawork, coupled with the primary colour-design, emphasises the deliberate artifice of the film industry, but again Park sees this environment as a means of expressing mirrors and divides, of providing structure that is shattered by fate and action. The director's captor, a disgruntled extra, has placed his boss in this predicament because he sees the director not only as intelligent, rich and talented but also as a good person. This is Park's most postmodern and self-reflexive film. He would later tackle the vampire genre itself with *Thirst*.

The final part of the 'Vengeance Trilogy', *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005), shifted the emphasis to someone who knows exactly why she has been incarcerated and schemes her terrible revenge on that basis. Lee Guem-ja is a pious woman who uses her 13-year prison sentence to aid needy prisoners while serving time for the brutal murder of a child. Rehabilitation? Not quite. Guem-ja is innocent of the crime and her actions are anything but altruistic. The film also shows that the public

can become complicit in the crimes that are committed and that ordinary people are capable of becoming monsters, a theme that resonates in much of Park's work. In filming his star as a Catholic icon (backlit halo, head cocked sideways, a single tear trickling down her face), Park is not being ironic. Whatever the levels of cruelty and violence her retribution finally entails, she has made a sacrifice for her own daughter, putting duty above herself. The public desire for blood, money and power is seen as tainting society – Guem-ja's mockery of religious piety paradoxically makes her a more enlightened figure of self-sacrifice.



Sympathy for Lady Vengeance

I'm a Cyborg, but That's OK (2006) takes the themes of physical and mental disability shown in *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance* and *Never Ending Peace and Love* and weaves a complex blend of romance, comedy, science fiction and social commentary in its story of an ex-electronics factory worker, Cha Young-goon, who is admitted to a psychiatric hospital following an attempt to plug herself into the mains. Young-goon believes she is a cyborg and, as a result, refuses to eat, relying instead upon electrical batteries, her toes lighting up as her power levels increase. Her mission is to eradicate the hospital orderlies who were responsible for incarcerating her grandmother. When powered up she will unleash a stream of bullets from her fingers, the spent cartridge cases spilling from her mouth. Park's affinity with even the minor characters of the piece means that *I'm a Cyborg* never strays into mean-spirited mockery but instead uses



I'm a Cyborg, But That's OK

its cast to examine social conditions at a microcosmic level, exploring themes of fracture and dislocation. Memory and perception play multiple roles in the film through many of the characters, particularly a woman who has been given electro-shock therapy so often that she creates new stories for each of her fellow inmates due to amnesia – stories that do, however, have grains of truth. In what is set up as a bizarre romantic comedy (*Amelie* meets *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* meets *The Terminator*), *I'm a Cyborg* proves to be a rebuke of the social-care system and, despite its heroine's quest to dehumanise herself, a life-affirming story. It may be fantasy but Park's whimsical and imaginative candyfloss dream images emphasise the struggle to be human rather than trivialise it.

With the recent surge of interest in vampires, Park's latest feature, *Thirst*, offers an alternative perspective on the silver screen's



Thirst

most malleable monster. When priest Sang-hyan survives the deadly Emmanuel virus after receiving a blood transfusion, he becomes a vampire, drinking blood and lusting after sinful pleasures. He begins a passionate affair with Tae-ju, the downtrodden wife of an old friend, and together they indulge in a life of hedonism. But Sang-hyan cannot completely dispel his former life and his nagging conscience knows that this cannot continue forever. *Thirst* is a vampiric love story bursting with erotic sex and lashings of violence, an antidote to the chaste teen vampire films that are currently all the rage. Again, Park plays with the audience's expectations of how characters are supposed to behave. Sang-hyan, dressed in his priestly attire, comforts patients in hospital but later secretly drinks their blood. He is riddled with guilt but cannot help himself. When he falls for Tae-ju he doesn't realise how manipulative she is and eventually gives in to his dark desires – his innocence leading to his damnation. There is less social commentary in *Thirst* than in Park's other films. It is more an exploration of human desire and conscience. Park takes his time in telling this story and laces many of the scenes with his usual brand of wickedly black humour. He lays on plenty of gore as befits a horror film, and the sex scenes are languid and steamy – filled with lust and affection. The film picked up the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

Park Chan-wook continues to provide thought-provoking genre cinema that questions the nature of morality and humanity. His unflinching depiction of violence is often tempered with dark comedy and strong visual stylisation.

COLIN ODELL and **MICHELLE LE BLANC**

are authors, broadcasters and film journalists. They have written on David Lynch, Tim Burton, John Carpenter and horror and vampire films, among others. Their most recent book, *Studio Ghibli* (2009), explores the films of Miyazaki Hayao and Takahata Isao.

Park Chan-wook filmography

[feature film directing credits only]

1992

MOON IS THE SUN'S DREAM

Script: Park Chan-wook. Players: Bang Eun-hee, Lee Seung-chul, Nah Hyun-hee, Song Seung-hwan. 103 mins

1997

SAMINJO (Threesome)

Script: Park Chan-wook. Production Manager: Joh Neung-yeon. Players: Jeong Seon-kyeong (Maria), Kim Min-jong (Moon), Lee Kyun-young (Ahn), Kim Bu-seon. 100 mins

2000

GONGDONG GYEONGBI GUYEOK JSA

(J.S.A.: Joint Security Area)
Script: Park Chan-wook, Jeong Seong-san, Kim Hyeon-seok, Lee Mu-yeong. Photography: Kim Sung-bok. Editing: Kim Sang-beom. Music: Bang Jun-Seok, Jo Yeong-wook. Players: Lee Yeong-ae (Maj. Sophie E. Jean), Lee Byung-hun (Sgt. Lee Soo-hyeok), Song Kang-ho (Sgt. Oh Kyeong-pil), Kim Tae-woo (Nam Sung-shik), Shin Ha-kyun (Jeong Woo-jin). Produced by Eun Soo Lee. 110 mins

2002

BOKSUNEUN NAUI GEOT

(Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance)
Script: Park Chan-wook, Lee Jae-sun, Lee Jong-yong, Lee Mu-yeong. Photography: Kim Byeong-Il. Production Design: Choe Jung-hwa. Editing: Kim Sang-beom. Players: Song Kang-ho (Park Dong-jin), Shin Ha-kyun (Ryu), Bae Du-na (Cha Yeong-mi), Lim Ji-Eun (Cha Yeong-mi), Lim Ji-Eun (Ryu's sister), Han Bo-bae (Yun-sun), Kim Se-dong (Chief of Staff), Lee Dae-yeon (Choe). Produced by Lee Jae-sun, Lim Jin-gyu. 121 mins

2003

OLDBOY

Script: Park Chan-wook, Lim chun-hyeong, Hwang Jo-yun. Photography: Chung Chung-hoon. Production Design: Ryu Seong-hie. Editing: Kim Sang-beom. Music: Shim Hyun-jung. Players: Choi Min-sik (Oh Dae-su), Yu Ji-tae (Lee Woo-jin), Kang Hye-jeong (Mi-do), Ji Dae-han (No Joo-hwan), Oh Dal-su (Park Cheol-woong), Kim Byeong-ok (Mr Han), Lee Seung-shin (Yoo Hyung-ja), Yun Jin-seo (Lee Soo-ah). Produced by Lim Seung-young. 120 mins

2005

CHINJEOLHAN GEUMJASSI (Sympathy for Lady Vengeance)

Script: Park Chan-wook, Jeong Seo-Gyeong. Photography: Chung Chung-hoon. Production Design: Jo Hwa-seong. Editing: Kim Jae-beom, Kim Sang-beom. Music: Choi Seung-hyun. Players: Lee Yeong-ae (Lee Geum-ja), Choi Min-sik (Mr Baek), Tony Barry (Stepfather, Australian), Anne Cordiner (Stepmother, Australian), Go Su-hee (Ma-nyeo), Kang Hye-jeong (TV Announcer), Kim Bu-seon (Woo So-young), Kim Byeong-ok (Preacher), Kim Shi-hoo (Geun-shik), Kwon Yea-young (Jenny), Lee Dae-yeon (Prison Head), Lee Seung-shin (Park yi-jeong). Produced by Cho Young-wuk, Lee Chun-yeong, Lee Tae-hun. 112 mins



2006

SAIBOGUJIMAN KWENCHANA (I'm a Cyborg, but That's OK)

Script: Park Chan-wook, Jeong Seo-Gyeong. Photography: Chung Chung-hoon. Visual Effects: Lee Jeon-hyeong. Editing: Kim Jae-beom, Kim Sang-beom. Music: Jo Yeong-wook. Players: Lim Su-jeong (Cha Young-goon), Rain (Park Il-sun), Choi Hie-jin (Choi Seul-gi), Kim Byeong-ok (Judge), Lee Yong-nyeo (Young-goon's mother), Oh Dal-su (Shin Duk-cheon), Yu Ho-jeong (Il-sun's mother). Produced by Park Chan-wook, Lee Chun-yeong. 105 mins

2009

BAKJWI (Thirst)

Script: Park Chan-wook, Jeong Seo-Gyeong. Photography: Chung Chung-hoon. Production Design: Ryu Seong-hie. Editing: Kim Jae-beom, Kim Sang-beom. Music: Cho Young-ook. Players: Song Kang-ho (Priest Sang-hyeon), Kim Ok-bin (Tae-ju), Kim Hae-sook (Lady Ra), Shin Ha-kyun (Kang-woo), Park In-hwan (Priest Noh), Oh Dal-su (Yeong-doo), Song Young-chang (Seung-dae), Mercedes Cabral (Evelyn), Eriq Ebouaney (Immanuel). Produced by Park Chan-wook, Ahn Soo-Hyun. 133 mins