# Violence In Korean Cinema

In this thesis I shall be examining how violence is portrayed in South Korean cinema and how it is a reflection and reaction to the current state of the country, following years of political disdain towards occupation and military dictatorship from Japan and their own military with US support. I will be exploring the use of violence and its significance particularly in how it is used in different ways by varying directors, and specifically will be looking at Kim Jee-Woon's I Saw the Devil, Bong Joon-Ho's Parasite, and Park Chan-Wook's Lady Vengeance. I believe each film uses violence in different ways from outright gore to more hidden and reserved moments, sharing elements of realism while attaining different emotions from the viewer depending on the desired effect and reaction sought from the director. To achieve this my thesis structure shall first contextualize the Japanese and US militarian rule over South Korea, it's violent and bloody history, the political turmoil between the powers and the people, and its effect on cinema and the film industry in the country; leading on to the use of graphic violence seen in I Saw The Devil, where violence is portrayed as leading one down a path of insanity which shows the philosophical implications of becoming a killer to catch one. Compared with the more sparing used and off-screen violence demonstrated in Lady Vengeance, where Park Chan-Wook uses violence as a path to interrogate the nature of atonement and redemption, with each film having violence and revenge deep rooted in their story but explored and used in different ways. Similarly Bong Joon-Ho's Parasite also uses violence in an important and explosive way while straying from the revenge plots found in the aforementioned films, keeping the film grounded in the reality of the class divide in South Korea, but not losing touch with what makes their films so attention-grabbing.

South Korean film is interesting and very unique, making it hard to describe what exactly makes a South Korean film carry that signature title and flare. They are an assortment of genres, tropes, styles and techniques that are mismatched and transformed into something entirely distinctive. This description is arguably synonymous with their culture, with South Korea having a tumultuous past with its identity, thanks to years of ruling and cultural annihilation from Japan. After years of war, Japan annexed South Korea in 1910, leading to 35 years of occupational ruling with the country being a part of Japan. Part of their control over the country was completing wiping out their culture, with the Korean language being banned from schools and universities, and over 200,000 Korean historical documents with the intention of essentially wiping out their history. At the time film was fairly new to South Korea, after the first movie theatre opened in 1903 (Kim and James, 2002) film became a popular medium in the country, but when the Japanese occupation began it saw the introduction of censorship laws meant to project the image of Japan, and brought in new regulations which required all films, domestic and foreign, requiring approval for screening aswell as having Japanese police present during all screenings (Film censorship in South Korea, 2020). The Japanese knew that film was an effective way of influencing its viewers, and by making sure no filmmakers criticised their regime it would strengthen their image and dominance over the people. The colonial period came to an end in 1945 with Japan surrendering in World War 2, leading to films directly after which mainly celebrated Koreas liberation, such as Jeon Chang-geun's My liberated Hometown, and Choi In-kyu's Innocent Prisoner, and box office success, Free Manse. After a boom in the Korean film industry referred to as the Heyday, the fall of Korean films began slowly in the mid 70s, with a new censorship under the military regime by Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-Hwan, with new

laws and regulations brought in that allowed the government complete control over the South Korean film industry, such as the Korean Motion Picture Promotion corporation, which promoted political correctness and support for government principles and set limits on how many films could be produced. The KMPPC alongside the First Motion Picture Law which set criteria's that films must meet to be produced led to a drastic decrease of the film business and productions being made; with many producers and directors feeling defeated by the state's censorship, realist or socially conscious films became non-existent leaving predominantly apolitical escapist films such as dramas, martial arts and action films and government funded propaganda films (Hyo J. Kim, 2014). Eventually in the 1980's, the South Korean government started to relax its censorship laws, allowing independent filmmakers to begin producing films again aswell as lifting all restriction on foreign film, bringing American companies to the country, albeit with a enforced screen quota on cinemas to show domestic films for at least 146 days of the year. Although some authors argue what period the term defines, in the late 80s to early 90s the term New Korean Cinema was born, bringing on a new wave of creative genre films (Choi, 2010). Now with the censorships removed and creative freedom and expression brought back to filmmakers, many new young directors were making waves with films that started to receive attention internationally, with South Korean films eventually becoming synonymous with violence, revenge, political criticism and social issues. These themes and topics are so central to South Korean film as they are so pivotal to their history and culture. Their identity issues have led to a new identity being forged in recent years now they are free from the occupation of Japan, leaving modern South Korean films using their past as inspiration and muse to furnace films that lash out vociferously taking control of what was once used against them. An example of this is how South Korean films are typically so violent, a product of carrying the weight of its bloody past on its shoulders, it's clear that some of this violent history is manifesting itself and being expressed now it is no longer under any restriction or censorship.

The violence seen in South Korean cinema could be a reaction to the countries turbulent and violent past which has been prominent and defining in its history, especially between the state powers, police, and military versus its people. There are many horrendous examples of massacres occurring on its people, for instance, the 1950 Bodo League massacre, in which an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 people were killed for being suspected communists or sympathizers, many of whom were civilians who had nothing to do with communism. For four decades the South Korean government concealed the massacre, with survivors forbidden to reveal the horrors under threat of torture and death. Only when mass graves were discovered in the 90's was the public aware of what had happened (Newsis, 2014). Or the Sancheong-Hamyang massacre, where the South Korean army killed 705 unarmed citizens in the Sancheon and Hanyang districts, which occurred just 2 days before the Geochang massacre, with another 719 unarmed citizens killed (Sancheong–Hamyang massacre, 2020). These massacres show the blatant disregard for their people the government possessed, and many similar massacres have occurred over the years. The citizens famously stood up against their government in the Gwangju uprising, after Chonnam University students who were demonstrating against their martial law government, were shot at, raped, killed and beaten. On May 18th, around 600 students gathered outside the university to protest the suppression of academic freedom, with the approval of the US who had operational control over US and Korean forces, Army Major Chun Doo-Hwan who had seized power in a military coup 5 months prior, authorized elite paratroopers from the Special Forces to Gwanju. Once the soldiers arrived and began beating the protestors, more citizens joined the movement, and many residents retaliated by robbing local armories and police stations leading to a lethal conflict between protestors against 18,000 police and 3,000 paratroopers (Chong-Suk, 2020). The

death toll for the uprising is argued but the official figures state 144 civilians, 22 troops and 4 police officers, but these figures have been ridiculed by some as too low, with different reports varying from 1000 up to 2000 (Plunk, 1985). The uprising was a turning point for South Korean history, with Chun Doo-Hwan already viewed unfavorably by his people due to coming into power through a military coup, but being responsible for the authorization of his military to act this way tarnished his reputation even further, with him becoming known as 'The Butcher of Gwangju" by many, especially students (Namgung, Cho and Kim, 2017).

Years later the effects from the uprising instigated huge changes for South Korea. Due to the US military's role in the uprising there was a large anti-American sentiment held by many people, particularly students and activists (Chonk-Suk, 2020), and by the late 1980s public demand led to a new direct election law, a new press law guaranteeing freedom of speech, and a number of other concessions. These changes led to a more open public domain that created room for more diverse and creative cultural production in Korea, bringing on a newfound freedom to explore ideas and themes had previously been banned, such as Jang Sun-woo's A Petal (Kknonnip, 1996) about a 15 year old girl experiencing the Gwanju uprising. (Shin and Stringer, 2013).