

Behind the Unlimited Revenge: A Review on the Narrative Style of Park Chan-wook - Focusing on the "revenge trilogy"

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Abstract. The development of Korean films is tortuous, and a number of outstanding films have emerged in the 21st century. Among them, the "revenge trilogy" are famous, while they also made the director Park Chan-wook become world-renowned. His films break through the restriction of film genre and set up the complicated revenge structure, the carefully constructed space-time setting and the role-building of morally ambiguous characters. The elements of blood, violence, and eroticism are all direct in his films, but beneath these dark elements, there are reflections and discussions on human nature, destiny, and the rules of society. Ultimately, this paper will take the films of the "revenge trilogy" as the main cases and analyze the narrative style from three aspects: narrative structure, narrative space and characterization, and trace how these elements worked in Park Chan-wook's films.

1 Introduction

South Korea's national culture is quite complex, and it has embraced the spread of many civilizations in the long history. In contemporary Korean history, the Korean peninsula was just liberated from Japanese Occupation after World War II and established an independent government, but as a matter of fact, the reconstruction for the next three years was still under control of the victorious country in World War II.

After the Korean War, South Korean society has been strongly influenced by Western culture. While the mainstream ideology was actively moving closer to the United States, the long-term influence of Eastern culture was not disappeared. As a result, Eastern and Western cultures are intricately gathered together.

Korean films have also gone through a tortuous development course along with the history of the country.

Since the beginning of the new century, South Korea has produced a number of excellent films, especially crime films, vigorously writing national experiences and contemporary Korean plights, expressing values that contain the national spirit, and quickly gaining public praise and winning markets around the world.

Among them, <Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance>, <Old boy> and <Sympathy For Lady Vengeance> are really famous. These films are also well-known as the "revenge trilogy", directed by Park Chan-wook. Perhaps closely related to his major in philosophy, Park Chan-wook's films always reflect critical thinking. Under the extremely explicit visual effects of violence and eroticism, there are reflections and discussions of human nature, destiny and the rules of society.



Figure 1 the Posters of the "Revenge Trilogy" (Non-Commercial Use)

2 Narrative Structure - The Revenge Structure of "Fight Fire with Fire"

Greimas divides the actantial model into four stages: generating desires, possessing capabilities, achieving goals, and obtaining rewards, thus sorting out the film's superficial narrative.

The narrative mode of Park Chan-wook's "revenge trilogy" is basically as follows: Firstly, the main role of the film is in desperation.

Secondly, the desire for revenge arose in his or her seemingly endless trough. In order to achieve the goal of revenge, the protagonist begins to plan and strengthen themselves. Thirdly, after acquiring abilities, the character produces action, which creates the climax in the narrative. How the protagonist revenge has become the highlight and suspense of the film.

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And last but not the least, the revenge will receive a "reward", while this stage is to confirm the authenticity of the relationship between the main roles and their goals.

To be more precise, it is to determine whether the achievement of the role's purpose of revenge is effective.

The most important element of crime films is suspense. The suspense set by Park Chan-wook has never been used to increase the film's hot spots, but to effectively reveal the theme [1,2]. Through the preparation of suspense, he intuitively explained that hatred causes violence, and one revenge brings another revenge.

In the first half of <Old Boy>, the question that has been lingering in audiences' mind is: Why did Dae-su be imprisoned for fifteen years?



Figure 2 Imprisoned Dae-su (Non-Commercial Use)

Who on earth did imprison Dae-su? The director cleverly explained the path of Dae-su's revenge against Woo-jin, and at the same time, he also laid the path of Woo-jin's revenge against Dae-su, so that audiences gradually became clear that the vengeance resulted from the actions of another person's revenge.

In the movie <Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance>, Ryu was deceived in order to treat his elderly sister.

To raise money, he figured out a way to kidnap Dong-jin's young daughter Yu-sun. However, his sister chose to commit suicide so as not to be a burden on her younger brother. The angry Ryu initiated revenge against the organ trafficking gang.

And his kidnapping indirectly killed Dong-jin's daughter, so Dong-jin killed Ryu's girlfriend Yeong-mi to get revenge, and the death of Yeong-mi brought new revenge on Dong-jin from Ryu and Yeong-mi's organization.

Whether it is the interweaving of light and dark lines in <Old Boy> or the interlocking actions of revenge in <Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance>, they show that hatred is like an endless abyss, and one hatred drives the generation of new hatred.

In contrast, in <Sympathy For Lady Vengeance> the act of vengeance of Geum-ja was not the result of others' revenge, but Geum-ja finally took all the guardians whose children were slain by the teacher Mr. Baek to revenge on the teacher, which rose to collective violence from individual revenge.

However, when she was done with the revenge and removed her scarlet eye shadow in the washroom, she saw the boy that she kidnapped and finally was slain by Mr. Baek thirteen years ago became a man and stared at her silently and sympathetically without words of forgiveness and gratitude. Like other revenge stories, <Sympathy For Lady Vengeance> also reveals the fact that revenge does not bring relief.

3 Narrative Space - Dark and Enclosed Narrative Space

There are a lot of enclosed spaces in Park Chan-wook's films. In <Old Boy>, Dae-su was under house arrest in a closed room for fifteen years, while in <Sympathy For Lady Vengeance>, Geum-ja suffered thirteen years in prison which is also a closed space.

As the actantial model of Greimas mentioned above, the lowness including the long time and the enclosed space has laid the foundation for the role's revenge.

The abilities of the revenger continue to be strengthened, and the role's desire for revenge continues to expand over time in a small space, which is finally released like a full bow when the character walks out of the enclosed space.

In addition, violent incidents that occur in such enclosed spaces are often more depressive than those occur in vast spaces [3]. While enhancing the visual effect, it also metaphors the concealment of revenge and magnifies the concept of "tragic". In <Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance>, the future of Ryu and Dong-jin was full of hope. The kind-hearted Ryu cried for the death of his sister, felt pain for the death of Dong-jin's daughter, and suffered from the death of his girlfriend.

And at the same time, Dong-jin was going to live a life on the right track with his daughter. If it were not helpless and forced into the desperate situation of life, how could it be easy to embark on the road on desperation.

Every violent incident that took place in an enclosed space, including Ryu killing liars and Dong-jin killing Yeong-mi, keeps audiences looking back on characters' life paths that should have been at least under the sun.

Similarly, the sister-brother love and the father-daughter love in <Old Boy> both happened in enclosed spaces, which means incestuous loves are required and destined to be covered up in secular life.

The enclosed space gives audiences a sense of peeping and repression, and more importantly it also indicates that these loves in the film would end in tragedy.

In <Sympathy For Lady Vengeance>, the plot of Mr. Baek being hacked to death in the classroom is manifested as collective anger exploding in a small space.

What's worth mentioning is that normally classrooms are regarded as places with sublimity. To be more accurate, classrooms are supposed to be a sacred place to impart knowledge, rationality and civilization, while teachers are the dominant presence in the special environment of the classroom.



Figure 3 the Classroom as a Court (Non-Commercial Use)

However, the sublimity of classrooms and the ascendancy of teachers were completely deconstructed in <Sympathy For Lady Vengeance>, and the classroom became a court where a primitive and brutal trial of Mr. Baek took place instead.

It symbolizes that this collective violence is a ritual criminal trial and represents the director's regret and criticism of the legal loopholes in society. When the film reveals that Mr. Baek killed children just for his own ridiculous and selfish desires, it adds a feeling of powerlessness and despair to the revengers and the film.

4 Characterization – Anti-heroic Figures

Characters of Park Chan-wook's films are not like those of the Hollywood movies commonly with clear opposites of justice or evil, but often have extremely complex and three-dimensional personalities. The anti-heroic feature means that they have both the advantages of a hero and the characteristics of a negative character.

Their actions show both good and evil, sometimes they even go against traditional values. Figures with heroic features normally are role models for people to learn from or look up to.

They fight for justice and ideal for the majority, and their actions will bring positive energy to audiences. In contrast, figures with anti-heroic features may be humble and trivial, often take a cold, angry and indifferent attitude towards social politics and morality, and they may even be cruel, but their motives are not evil [4].

Compared with heroes and heroines, anti-heroes and anti-heroines symbolize the publicity of individualism, the decline of traditional values and people's questioning of ideal and belief.

These features can be seen in protagonists of Park Chan-wook's "revenge trilogy". The prime proof is that all of them had original sin. In <Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance>, although Ryu had hardship and didn't mean to kill Yu-sun, his behaviour finally caused Yu-sun's death. Dae-su in <Old Boy> also didn't keep the secret that Woo-jin slept with Soo-ah, resulting in the gossip and Soo-ah's suicide, even though he didn't know that they were brother and sister. And in <Sympathy For Lady Vengeance>, Geum-ja wasn't a good student in the secular sense, for she went astray and got pregnant, and she helped Mr. Baek to kidnap a boy for ransom.

More importantly, these figures fight the negative characters in brutal and unconventional means. Taking <Sympathy For Lady Vengeance> as a precise example to illustrate Park Chan-wook's way of characterization, Geum-ja was like an angel to the inmates, but she immediately transformed into an envoy of revenge and showed her cruelty when she was released.

Through the cross-montage explanation, it turns out that all the hidden clues had already been laid in her thirteen years of jail life. In the end, she did not kill Mr. Baek in person, but chose to give every guardian who lost their children the opportunity to stab or hack the real murderer, while she was standing by and quietly watching, thus

shaping Geum-ja a both good and evil avenger with calm heart.

And the guardians could choose to take legal action, but they all opted for lynching, which made them also anti-heroic.



Figure 4 Avenging Guardians (Non-Commercial Use)

On top of that, Geum-ja is also a unique existence in the "revenge trilogy". As the only female avenger in three films, women became subjects rather than objects. In comparison, women just acted as the fuses that were harmed and elicited revenge story in other films, resembling Yeong-mi and Soo-ah.

Different from other male avengers, Geum-ja has strong femininity. She is cold, gloomy, and crazy, but also elegant, beautiful and motherly. In the long history of mankind, women have always been in a secondary position, and women in movies have been under the gaze of men, satisfying the visual pleasure of male audiences.

However, Park Chan-wook's ability to create non-conventional and aggressive women further proves that his films have rich connotations under the bloody film language.

The director spared no effort to show this female character. At the end of the revenge, Park Chan-wook focused the camera on Geum-ja's face and used a 42-second long frame to show that Geum-ja stared straight at the lens, and her face was extremely ferocious due to years of hard hatred and the thrill of vengeance [5]. In comparison, regular movies would emphasize the beauty of women.



Figure 5 Geum-ja's Face (Non-Commercial Use)

In order to better characterize the figure, Park Chan-wook also took advantage of the power of colour. In <Sympathy For Lady Vengeance>, the director used red images to decorate Geum-ja, such as the red eye shadow, the red heel and the red wallpaper of her place.

Red itself is a warm colour, but in this film, it gives audiences with a deep chill instead. Apart from that, red, as a visual element, quietly released Geum-ja's unspoken

anger and perfectly matches to her image - a cruel female avenger with full of anger.

5 Conclusion

The reason why Park Chan-wook's films can stand out and become famous is that his crime films not only express revenge and violence, but also criticize the judicial system, the negative image of the public security law and the social system. The abyss of human nature hidden in modern society is also exposed in a centralized and magnified manner.

His films are also full of contradictions and reflect critical thinking. The two avengers in <Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance> died in the ending, while the criminals who had the original sin survived instead. Also, the revenger Dae-su finally apologized by cutting off his tongue and gave up revenge.

Compared with him, it seems that another revenger Woo-jin succeeded in revenge at last, but actually he lived in the shadow of revenge all his life and ended his twisted life by suicide.

As a result, according to the actantial model, the "reward" may not be authentic. To be more precise, on the face of it, Woo-jin succeeded, but he may also be the loser of his life in terms of the film's connotation. Geum-ja woke up laughing because of the thrill of killing her enemy, while in reality she just buried her face in the cake. And this provides the possibility of self-examination for avengers.

Compared with conveying positive energy, these films provide a perspective to re-examine the "social model". Behind the seemingly unrestricted revenge actions, lies the director's reflection on the dark side of human nature, social injustice and reincarnation of destiny.

Park Chan-wook persists in showing the destruction and redemption of complex human nature in sin and then reveals that redemption can only be achieved by self. His films are like the mirror of social problems. While pointing out the pain points in society, they also sow the seeds of thinking and guide people to make continuous improvements.

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