



ECHOES IN TIME: KOREAN FILMS OF THE GOLDEN AGE AND NEW CINEMA

Oldboy

Oldboy (Oldeuboi)

Director: Park Chan-wook
©/Production Company/Presented by: ShowEast
International Sales: Cineclick Asia
Executive Producer: Kim Jang-wook
Producer: Kim Dong-joo
Marketing Producer: Kim Yuki
Co-producer: Syd Lim
Line Producer: Han Jae-duk
Line Producer (New Zealand Crew): Jeong In-hee
Associate Producer: Ji Young-joon
Unit Manager (New Zealand Crew): Gordon Fawcett
Production Manager: Kook Soo-ran
Production Accountant: Choi Eun-young
Assistant Directors: Han Jang-hyuk, Jeong Sik, Choi Moon-suk, Suk Min-woo
Script Supervisor: Lee Gye-byuk
Casting: Seo Ho, Park Hwan-soo
Screenplay: Hwang Jo-yoon, Im Joon-hyung, Park Chan-wook
Original Story: Garon Tsuchiya, Nobuaki Minegishi
Director of Photography: Jung Jung-hoon
Location Photography: Han Se-joon, Lee Ji-yun
Lighting: Park Hyun-won
Steadicam Operators: Song Sun-dae, Han Sang-geun
Visual Effects Technical Director: Jung Sung-jin
Visual Effects Art Director: Han Young-woo
Visual Effects 3D Director: Choi Jae-chun
Visual Effects Designer: Lee Su-hwan, Lee Ju-won, Na Il-hwan
Special Effects: Lee Jung-soo
Special Effects Supervisor: Lee Jun-hyung
Editors: Kim Sang-bum, Kim Jae-bum
Location Editing: Kwak Jung-ah
Art Director: Yoo Seong-hee
Art Director (New Zealand Crew): Scott Garlick
Set Decorator: Yang Hong-san
Storyboard Supervisor: Jung Sang-yong
Storyboard Co-ordinator: Kim Sung-hoon
Props: Robin Jeon
Costumes: Cho Sang-kyung
Make-up/Hair: Son Chong-hee
Special Make-up: Shin Jae-ho
Title Sequence Design: Baek Jong-yul, Yong E
Title Sequence: Seoul Vision
Colour Timer: Lee Yong-gi
Opticals: Koala Production
Score: Shim Hyun-jung, Lee Ji-soo
Music Supervisor: Cho Young-wuk
Sound Design: Lee Sung-jin
Sound Supervisor: Lee Seong-chul
Production Sound Mixer: Lee Sang-wook
Boom Operator: Lee Eun-joo
Sound Editor: Han Myung-hwan
Sound Effects Supervisor: Park Joon-oh
Sound Effects: Song Yoon-jae
ADR Editor: Han Myung-hwan
Foley Artist: Park Joon-oh
Foley Recordist: Song Yoon-jae
Medical Consultant: Dr Kim Jung-il
Martial Arts Director: Yang Gil-young
Cast:
Choi Min-sik (*Oh Dae-Su*)
Yoo Ji-tae (*Lee Woo-Jin*)
Gang Hye-jung (*Mido*)
Kim Byoung-ok (*Mr Han, chief guard*)
Chi Dae-han (*No Joo-Hwan*)
Oh Dal-su (*Park Cheol-Woong*)
Lee Seung-shin (*Yoo Hyung-Ja*)
Yoon Jin-seo (*Lee Soo-Ah*)
Oh Tae-gyung (*young Dae-Su*)
Ahn Yeon-suk (*young Woo-Jin*)

When he released *Oldboy* in 2003, Park Chan-wook was a mainstream filmmaker in his native South Korea, having broken box-office records with his 2000 political thriller *Joint Security Area*. To international cineastes, he was more of an emerging name, notable alongside Takashi Miike, Hideo Nakata and Kim Ki-duk as a proponent of fashionably 'extreme' East Asian cinema. This dual reputation – popular at home, esoteric abroad – reflects the cultural microclimate of South Korea, where domestic product is not inevitably trounced by American juggernauts. But it also accounts in part for the particular type of cinema that *Oldboy* exemplifies and that Park has continued to make: work of scale, spectacle and glamour, which is nonetheless not blunted or neutered for international acceptability.

That is not to say that *Oldboy* – Park's fifth film, and the title that firmly established him as an internationally significant auteur – is pure of outside influence. Its story, of a man who is incarcerated by a mysterious adversary and trawls his own past for an explanation, originates in a Japanese manga of 1996 by Garon Tsuchiya and Nobuaki Minegishi. Its themes of erotic obsession, manipulation and complicity, meanwhile, channel Park's oft-cited favourite, Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). *Se7en* (1995) and *Memento* (2000), the breakout films of his fellow Hitchcockians Christopher Nolan and David Fincher, are also in its DNA.

Its flashes back and forth in time, its visual dynamism, its unabashed embrace of the fantastical and its morbid sense of humour all glance back at Hollywood's favourite 1990s son Quentin Tarantino (who presided over the 2004 Cannes jury that gave *Oldboy* the Grand Prize), and forward at the variably 'dark' comic book adaptations that would very soon proliferate enough to claim multiplexes for their own. But *Oldboy*'s strangeness and sincerity are its own – and are embodied in a performance by Choi Min-sik that absolutely astonishes with its range and bravado. A 2013 remake by Spike Lee gave Josh Brolin the role, but failed to eclipse Park's original in receipts or reputation.

Oldboy triumphed, and endures, by turning preoccupations of the time – the growing ubiquity of surveillance; the unseen impacts of our casually taken pleasures upon other lives; our frightening uniqueness and no less frightening anonymity – into art that is at once shocking, heartfelt, and intensely funny. Its famous single-shot corridor fight sequence, in which our long-incarcerated hero – antihero? semi-hero? – sees off dozens of adversaries, provides a triumphant metaphor for Park's ability to fight on all artistic fronts at once.

Hannah McGill, *Sight and Sound*, July 2024

Kidnapped, locked up for 15 years and then released for no apparent reason, businessman Oh Dae-Su (Choi Min-sik) goes on the rampage, eating live octopus straight from the sushi bar, extracting vengeance from the jaws of his jailer with a claw hammer and cutting out his own tongue with a pair of scissors. With Quentin Tarantino presiding over the jury at Cannes, it's easy to see how South Korean revenge fest *Oldboy* scooped the [2004] Grand Jury prize.

But to focus solely on the film's violence or sick and twisted plot is to sell it short, because *Oldboy* also features virtuoso direction and editing,

Yoo Il-han (*young Joo-Hwan*)
 Lee Young-hui (*madam at clock shop*)
 Kim Young-ae (*madam in elevator*)
 Lee Mimi (*nurse at dental clinic*)
 Han Jae-duk (*teacher*)
 Kwak Jeong-ae (*nun teacher*)
 Kim San (*owner of electronic equipment shop*)
 Jang Chae-soo (*Lee Woo-Jin's private doctor*)
 Im Seol-ah (*nurse*)
 Im Seung-yong (*man who fights with Dae-Su*)
 Choi Chang-hak (*1988 makeshift prison guard*)
 Shin Bi-jun (*1988 makeshift prison guard*)
 Sung Suk-je (*1996 makeshift prison guard*)
 Choi Jae-sub (*2003 makeshift prison guard*)
 Yoon Jin-yool (*Lee Woo-Jin bodyguard*)
 Moon Sung-bok (*Lee Woo-Jin bodyguard*)
 Park Jae-woong, Oh Soon-tae, Lee Hong-pyo,
 Park Geun-suk, Hur Myung-haeng, Kim Won-joong,
 Park Sung-gyu, Lee Jung-pil, Han Sun-rang,
 Shin Bum-shik, Han Jung-ok, Baek Dong-hyun
 (*Cheol-Woong men*)
 Joo Myung-chul, Park Ji-hoon, Choi Choon-bum,
 Seo Myung-suk, Jeon Kyum-soo (*scamps on street*)
 Cho Sang-kyung (*Dae-Su's wife*)
 Oh Young-joo, Lee Ji-hye (*young Mido*)
 Oh Gwang-rok (*suicide*)
 Lee Dae-yun (*beggar*)
 Park Myung-shin (*Young-Ja*)
 Kim Soo-hyun (*secretary*)
 Yong E (*delivery guy*)
 South Korea 2003©
 121 mins
 Digital (remastered)

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**SIGHT
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mesmerising performances and a relentlessly creative exploration of the
 revenge motif its director Park Chan-wook terms 'the most dramatic subject in
 the world'. No wonder Cannes jury member Tilda Swinton warned Park that
 Tarantino would 'steal a lot' from the film.

Half Greek tragedy, half existential thriller, *Oldboy* skips and slices between
 horror and action, thriller and absurdist comedy as its shock-haired everyman
 plays cat-and-mouse with an enigmatic persecutor. As in *Kill Bill*, the tone
 balances on a knife-edge between danger and dark comedy, though unlike
 that film *Oldboy* poses as many philosophical questions as it severs limbs.
 'When my vengeance is over, can I return to the old Dae-Su?' asks our
 hammer-happy hero, expressing just one of the many metaphysical dilemmas
 philosophy graduate Park crams into his high-concept screenplay.

South Korea is one of the few places in the world where homegrown films
 outsell Hollywood product, the country's current creative and commercial
 boom following the end of military dictatorship – and censorship – in 1992.
 Park's career began in the same year, though it wasn't until 2000 that he made
 the thriller *Joint Security Area*, the nation's most successful film ever, set
 against the escalating tension between North and South Korea. A disaster at
 the box office, Park's next film *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002) also
 touched on political themes – such as the country's economic crash.

The second instalment of this revenge trilogy, *Oldboy* is very different in both its
 style and the way it treats its subject. If the hardboiled and minimalist
Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance described the ultimate destructiveness of
 revenge, *Oldboy*, says Park, 'explores the positive side that brings people
 catharsis'. Here the lush score, rich art direction and flashy cinematic
 techniques describe a much more abstract story: the surreal guessing game
 between the bestial Oh Dae-Su and his omnipotent kidnapper Lee Woo-Jin
 (Yoo Ji-tae). Still, even without the overt politics of Park's previous work it's
 tempting to see *Oldboy* as representing the return of the repressed on a
 national as well as a universal level: an acting out of violent fantasies that was
 impossible under the old regime.

Much of the new cinema coming out of South Korea seems to have *Oldboy's*
 unsettling mix of graphic violence and absurdist humour. But ask Park Chan-
 wook why he thinks there are so many hyperviolent films made in South Korea,
 and he replies: 'I think it's down to what western distributors choose to show
 the west.'

Liese Spencer, *Sight and Sound*, October 2004