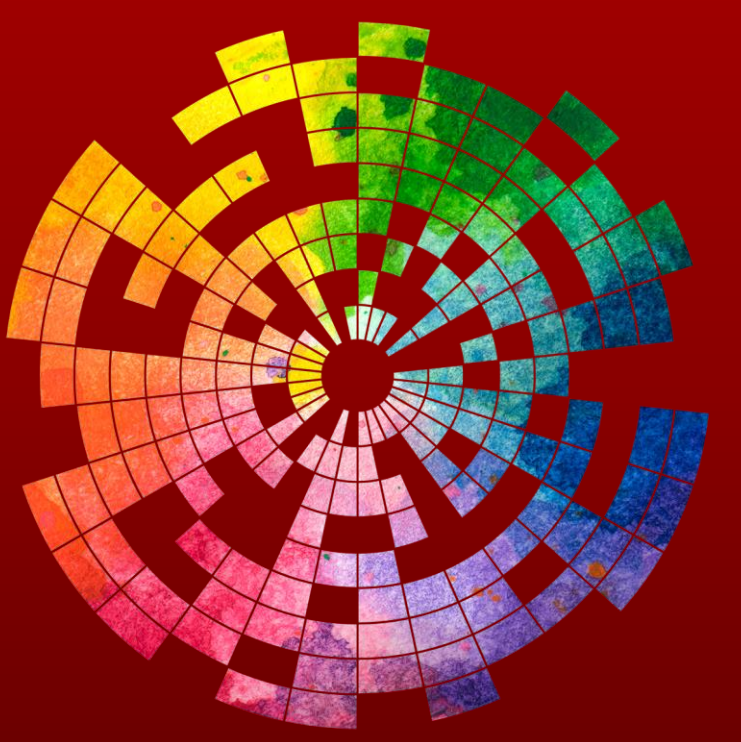


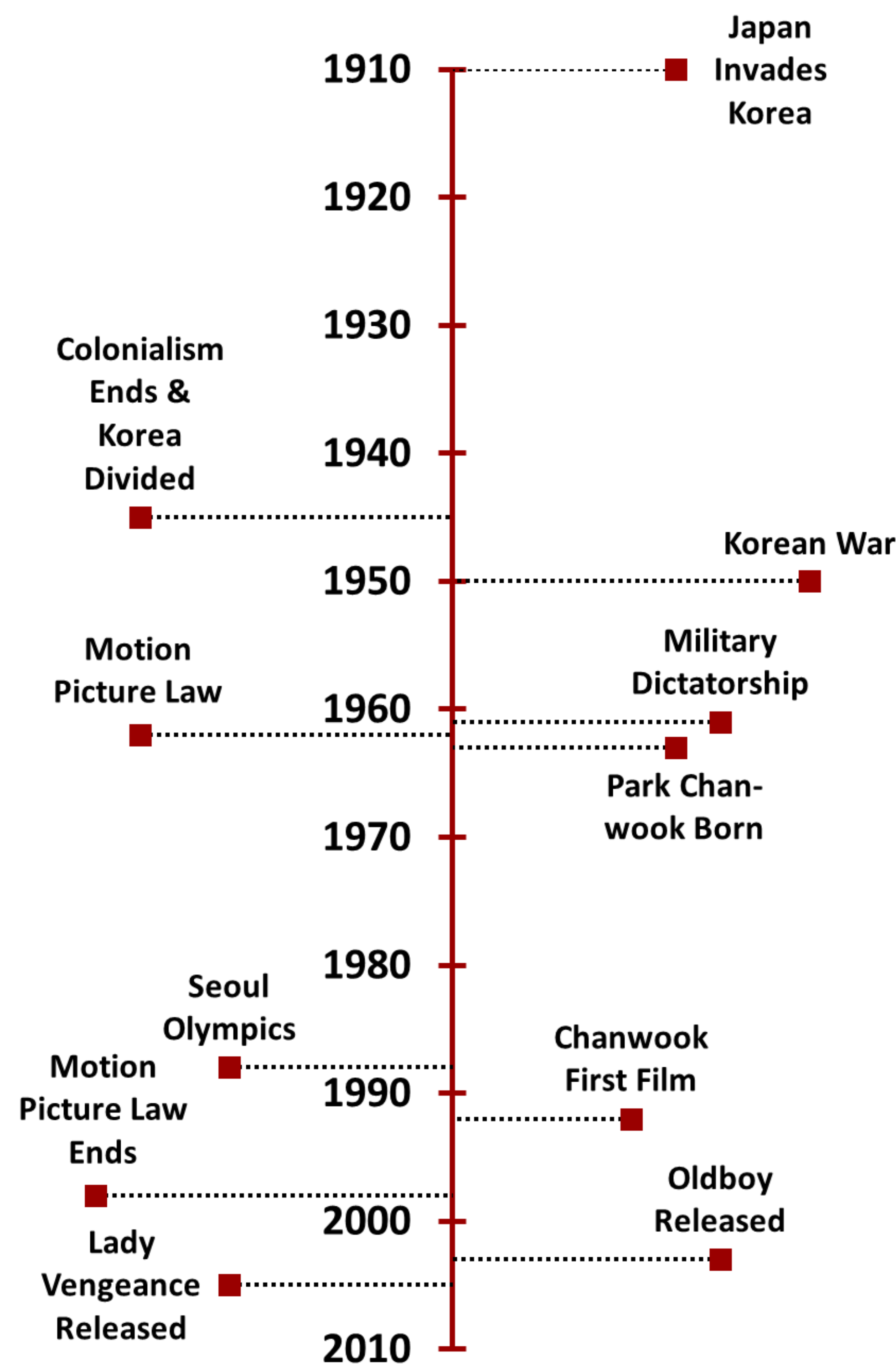
Reopening Wounds: Processing Korean Cultural Trauma in Park Chan-wook's Revenge Trilogy

Emma Koontz^{1,2}, Ulrick Casimir^{1,2,3}

¹University of Oregon, ²Clark Honors College, ³Department of English



Background



Methods

This project combined a psychological and historical approach with a genre lens to examine **한** in Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* and *Lady Vengeance*. Literature on South Korea's history and film industry, trauma, revenge and film analysis combined to interpret the film characters as processing their trauma through revenge, ignorance, and mourning.



Figure 1: Mi-do and Dae-su embrace in the snow.

Analysis

- **한** loosely translates to emotional pain that is endured because it is beyond the individual's capacity to process. **한** is similar to the Indigenous concept of soul wounds or the psychological concept of intergenerational trauma.
- Guem-ja and Dae-su personify **한**.
- Revenge unifies the past, present, and future as Dae-su, Geum-ja, drive their unresolved **한** from the past through the present and into their children, the future generation (Figures 2 and 3)
- Chan-wook uses graphic violence and genre subversion to critique vengeance as an ineffective method of processing trauma by leaving the worst violence to the viewer's imagination.
- Chan-wook subverts the genre also by removing tension in *Lady Vengeance*. The undramatic portrayal shows revenge only turns characters into the monsters they seek to destroy.



Figure 2: Jenny witnessing Guem-ja hold Beak at gun point

Figure 3: Mi-do kidnapped by a gang

Results

- Healing from **한** requires acknowledge its roots and reconstructing an understanding of the self and the world that fits with the events.
- After their trauma, Guem-ja and Dae-su can't return to who they were, but that doesn't mean they're unredeemable. Healing does not mean returning to purity, it means learning to live with the scars.
- Guem-ja's acceptance of the cake rather than the tofu (Figure 4 and 6) is a refusal of the notion that someone must be pure or free from sin to move forward. It demonstrates that healing and must come from the self.
- Guem-ja's tears represent the most essential part of healing: mourning. She lost thirteen years of her life, her children and caught up in revenge, herself. Through mourning she starts the processes of healing and rebuilding her identity.



Figure 4: Guem-ja crying into a white cake after Jenny offers the cake back to her

Conclusions

- Chan-wook's films critique Korean's inability to confront the **한** left over from decades of traumatic events.
- While **한** is specific to Koreans, cultural trauma is not. The ubiquity of cultural trauma makes the lessons in Chan-wook's works of paramount importance.
- The roots of the culture of trauma must be reconstructed and mourned, or they will continue to drive us and future generations to violence and despair.
- Resolution of trauma is never final, but Chan-wook's films are guidelines for cultures can begin to heal.



Figure 6: Guem-ja refusing the tofu from a priest

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Casimir for mentoring me throughout this project and Elizabeth Peterson for being a wealth of knowledge and helping me source material for this project.

References

- Chan-wook, Park. "Lady Vengeance." CJ Entertainment, 2005, p. 155. general editor, Jo Yeong-wook and Lee Tae-hun. —. "Oldboy." Show East 2003, p. 200. general editor, Lim Seung-yong.
- Choe, Steve. "Love Your Enemies: Revenge and Forgiveness in Films by Park Chan-wook." *Korean Studies*, vol. 33, 2009, pp. 29-51. doi:10.1353/ks.0.0026.
- Choi, Aryong. "S. Korean Filmmaker Park Chan-wook: Interview and Reflections for Lady Vengeance." *Para-doxa*, vol. 22, 2010. Cieccko, Anne and Hunju Lee. "Park Chan-wook." *Fifty Contemporary Film Directors*, edited by Yvonne Tasker, 2nd ed., 2010, pp. 320-28.
- Fincher, David. "Vair." *Ethics of Revenge*. Eds. Ramos, Taylor and Tony Zhou: Netflix, 2021. Vol. 1. Print.
- Gollin, Richard M. *A Viewer's Guide to Film*. McGraw Hill, 1992. Print.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1997. Print.
- Jeon, Joseph Jonghyun. "Residual Selves: Trauma and Forgetting in Park Chan-wook's Oldboy." *Duke University Press*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2009, pp. 713-40. doi:10.1215/10679847-2009-021.
- Jeong, Kelly Y. "Towards Humanity and Redemption: The World of Park Chan-wook's Revenge Film Trilogy." *Journal of Japanese & Korean Cinema*, vol. 4, 2012, pp. 169-83.
- Kim, Mi-Ok. "A Study on the Movie 'Sympathy for Lady Vengeance' and 'Old Boy' -About the Meaning of Space and Symbolism in the Movie-." *The Treatise on the Plastic Media*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2021, pp. 255-64.
- Lee, Eunah. "Trauma, Excess, and the Aesthetics of Affect: The Extreme Cinemas of Chan-wook Park." *Post Script*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2014.
- Lee, Hyon-u. "Shamanism in Korean Hamlet S since 1990: Exorcising Han." *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 28, 2011, pp. 104-28. doi:10.1353/atj.2011.0015.
- Paquet, Darcy. *New Korean Cinema Breaking the Waves*. Wallflower Press, 2009.
- "Post-Conflict Hauntings Transforming Memories of Historical Trauma." Ed. Brewer, John D. Belfast, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. Print.
- Shim, Ae-Gyung, and Brian Yecies. *The Changing Face of Korean Cinema: 1960 to 2015*. Routledge, 2015. Print.
- Young-jin, Kim. "Korean Film Directors: Park Chan-wook." Seoul Selection USA. Print.



Figure 5: Parallel shots of the unnamed man (top) and Su-ah (bottom)

- The parallel suicides of Soo-ah and the man on the roof (Figure 5) demonstrate ignoring **한** existence is just as lethal as vengeance. Dae-su, too caught up in his revenge plot, forgets about Soo-ah and the viewer, too caught up in the revenge plot, forgets about the man on the roof.
- *Oldboy's* ending where Dae-su's is hypnotize to forget his incest mirrors the post-traumatic amnesia experienced by survivors of trauma. While they live without conscious remembrance of the events, **한** is still trapped within the body. Dae-su's ambiguous expression at the end of the film, a mixture of pain and joy, performs this.
- The unresolved trauma is visually performed when Mi-do and Dae-su embrace at the end of the film (Figure 1). Mi-do's all-red outfit is a stain amongst the white snow that forgetting could not wipe away.