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Double Take on Vengeance: Journey Through the Syncopic Editing Style of Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance

Brian M. Yecies
University of Wollongong, byecies@uow.edu.au

D. Chambers
University of Wollongong, uow_chambersd@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Yecies, B with Chambers, D, Double Take on Vengeance: Journey Through the Syncopic Editing Style of Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, in Moonim Baek (ed.), Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, New Korean Cinema Series Vol. 10, Yonsei Institute of Media Arts, Seoul, 2006, 135-158.

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This document is the English translation of the following book chapter published in Korean language: Brian Yecies with Damien Chambers. **2006**. "Double Take on Vengeance: Journey Through the Syncopic Editing Style of *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*". In *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance, New Korean Cinema Series*. Vol. 10. Ed. Moonim Baek. Seoul : Yonsei Institute of Media Arts. 135-158. ISBN: 89-5559-210-8

Abstract
For foreigners who did not grow up speaking the Korean language, filmic images in contemporary Korean cinema texts speak louder than words. Visiting the "land of morning calm" in person and floating on the surface of Korean society has inspired our desire to gain a deeper understanding of these images and their puzzling place in Korean culture. Truly experiencing the Korean cinema revolves around heart-felt journeys into solving some of these puzzles. We have begun another sojourn with this reading of the editing style in Park Chan-wook's *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002).

The Sojourn
Park Chan-wook's recent international acclaim for his 2004 feature *Old Boy* – the second series in his trilogy in production at the time of writing – offers a great opportunity to re-examine the film that started it all: *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* is one of our favourite films, though we didn't exactly love it from the start. Our initial screening of the film bothered us as it has done for many other people who have seen it. Watching the film was strange because we didn't feel as if we should or could enjoy such a violent, blood-soaked text. However, there is something more intelligent and sophisticated about Lee Moo-young, Lee Jong-yong and Park Ridame's original screenplay than meets the eye. The more we think about it and discuss it, the more we are intrigued by the film's style and implicit meanings, which are brought to life through Kim Byung-il's cinematography. We are compelled to see the film again and again, giving it a double take. There is something beneath the film's surface, trying to claw its way out. The film builds an orgasmic tension that finally crescendos in between Park Chan-wook and Kim Sang-beom's elliptical editing style. It is only by seeing this highly-stylized art film multiple times that one can begin to appreciate its complexities and grasp all that it has to offer.

Editing, above all of the film's other elements and techniques, opens the doorway to the mind's eye and leads us on our spectatorial journey. In this chapter we share our journey by analyzing key narrative elements that unravel in a dialectical fashion closely related to the montage editing tradition of Sergei Mikailovitch Eisenstein. We have attempted to read the gaps between the collision of perforations held together by what Eisenstein calls "attractions" as the character's spiral toward violent endings – many endings of which are unexpected outcomes. We interpret meaning in the film's syncopic editing style as highly-electrified "lures" that invite us deep into the psyche of the text in order to gain a better understanding of pain, suffering and of course vengeance in Korean society.

"Syncope" can be defined a shortening of a scene by the loss of visual and auditory cues from its middle. Syncopic editing style is a highly-evolved elliptical technique of telling a story. Visual and auditory cues may be missing from the text. However, an attentive audience can still understand the overall context. For instance, one doesn't need to see Dong-jin kill the Chinese noodle-delivery boy, but we can piece this black comic moment together from what happens after the event. The reader may or may not agree with us, but that is the beauty of

cinema – to share the sublime experience with as many people as possible. It is only our hope that the following thoughts and comments will shed a different ray of light on a confronting film that takes the audience on an otherwise incredible journey.

Our analysis concentrates on three key narrative binaries which drive the plot's representative themes. First, we discuss how caring for a sick and needy family member shows the desire to address the hardships and problems of Korean society. Ryu's efforts to save his suffering sister and Dong-jin's efforts to get Yoosun back from the kidnappers illustrate this best. Interactions with opportunist organ traders, as well as class struggle, are intimate parts of this theme. Second, we analyse the overall torment of the kidnapping event as a metaphor for a society that has been held "hostage" by the dictatorial regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The fusing of Ryu and Dong-jin as a single entity held hostage by their own vengeance also reflects this sentiment. Third, we read the film's portrayal of the characters' apathy toward others as a coping mechanism Koreans have developed in order to deal with ongoing social, economic and cultural pressures. There is a symptomatic numbness to the scars that both the working and upper classes have formed as a result of Korea's rapid industrialization and modernization. Dong-jin's reactions at the autopsy of Ryu's sister, and his murder of Ryu, illustrate his blindness to the suffering of the working class. The masturbation scene involving four young boys accentuates the idea of a numb generation trying to escape their class conditions. Each of these plot elements, and the ways in which they are portrayed in a syncopic editing tradition, serve to captivate the viewer, luring us in to the dark depths of the character's journey through vengeance.

Caring for the Ill Family, Class and Nation

The story begins with a female radio announcer reading a personal letter live on air. The letter is from Ryu, a deaf mute, who sends letters to the radio station as a way of communicating with his sick sister. Ryu is part of a large working class that makes a living by working manual labor jobs. The film's engagement with class issues are unmistakably embedded throughout the text. When Park was asked about his inspiration for *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* he replied:

> … in this film I focused on the class struggles within South Korea. I wanted to show the animosity between the classes. Blue-collar workers always think that they are being taken advantage of, but owners aren't always bad people. However, there is an impossible gap between being a good person and a good businessman in a Capitalist system. If a company isn't doing well, the good person will try to lay-off only a few people instead of closing down and putting many out of work. In the film this action backfires. One of the men commits suicide because of the lay-offs and then his family kill themselves. This happens in Korean society and we need to be aware of it.[1]

Ryu's lower socio-economic position is dictated by the fact that he doesn't have the advanced knowledge and technical skills required in a post-industrial society. With his factory job, he is involved in the direct production of commodities. Ryu has little chance of specializing in information technology and communications – key industries of the future.

[1] Seana Sperling. "An Interview with Chan-wook Park." *Acid Logic* 16 January 2004. http://www.acidlogic.com/chan_wook_park.htm. Accessed 16 March 2004.

The film slowly untangles all of the pieces of its puzzle. It takes at least five minutes for the audience to get a full view of Ryu. Sitting in a doctor's office, Ryu is introduced, through a series of blurred shots looking through a rain-soaked window, and extreme close-ups framed from behind him, suggesting that the working class is not often noticed by members of the higher socio-economic class. In contrast, the shot of the doctor is clear, showing his power over Ryu as well as his well-defined career path and place in society.

Ryu's ill sister and her circumstance become one of the film's central focal points. Her need for a new kidney – and perhaps Korea's need to heal its social and economic ills – launches and continues to drive Ryu's primary motivation throughout the narrative. The film's fast pace at the beginning suggests that Ryu's sister's time and life are dwindling. The audience is acutely aware of the urgency and desperation required to save the sick sister. Ryu is dedicated to doing whatever it takes to help his ill sister get well.

Enter the illegal organ traders, who are social parasites. They feed off of the ill family, class and nation. They are interested only in exploiting those in need of life's vital organs. Ryu has turned to this illegal medical trade in order to save his sister. After losing his job he is desperate, and suffers the consequences for not having access to better medical care. As we soon see, there is a good reason that their capitalist, black market venture is highly illegal. Park talks about this aspect of the film in a recent interview: "I exaggerated this area as a negative side of Capitalism. The Organ Dealers are depriving people of something necessary for life. Although the scenes are exaggerated in the film, this (organ stealing) does actually happen in Korea."[2] The scene involving Ryu and the organ traders is portrayed by juxtaposing between light and dark, or good and evil. One example of this occurs when Ryu follows the organ traders up the stairs of a building under construction. As they climb higher and closer to their destination to meet the ringleader (mother) on the top floor, the scene cuts to a series of longer shots. The camera takes us further back and into darkness, which symbolizes the path Ryu is forced to take. The silhouettes of the characters along this dark pathway blur the boundary between good and evil. The fact that they are hidden in the shadows invites us deeper into the unravelling mystery of why people have to suffer like this.

Ryu isn't necessarily stupid, though he is socially naive. His zealous efforts to save his ill sister blind his lack of awareness about how the organ traders are intending to trick him. After the organ traders inform Ryu of the conditions of their business transaction, there is a series of elliptical cuts which pass us quickly through to the next day. The missing shots mirror Ryu's blackout. The audience is aware that the organ traders have tricked Ryu. He is left bleeding and exposed on the cold cement floor without money, clothes and a kidney. The organ traders have disappeared with his cash, leaving him in a compromising position. It is precisely this position and its indirect-subjective point of view (POV) that lures us deeper into the narrative. What will Ryu do next? How could something like this happen in modern-day Korea? Where is the protection for the ill family, class and nation against these parasites?

As the film creatively engages with these questions, the subjective POV of the film shifts and we are given the opportunity to identify with different characters and different aspects of Korean society. POV shots from Ryu's perspective are obvious as the audio is removed, placing us in his silent world. He is unable to "hear" the world, and the world is unable to "hear" him. Ryu's life is one of extreme silence. Although a subtle and constant humming

[2] Seana Sperling. Ibid.

can be heard whenever the camera adopts Ryu's POV, the audience can only imagine what he hears and how he perceives sound. Silence, and the ways in which it is edited, are powerful tools used throughout this film. Minimal dialogue sutures us into Ryu's world and the world of the story as we try to "listen" more carefully to Ryu's unspoken inner monologue. Cutting abruptly between Ryu's near-silent world and the world of those characters around him who can hear, jostles the attentive viewer.

The film unmistakably draws our sympathy toward the challenges of certain socio-economic and physically-disabled groups in Korean society. Their voices are not always "heard" because of their symbolic "bone rank" or class.[3] Ryu's life story is a case in point. It is difficult for him to escape his class boundaries, which are constructed and reinforced by the upper class. His opportunities are also limited by the fact that he has to worry about and provide for his sick sister. It is as though his sister symbolises the larger Korean society – an "ill" nation recovering from the extreme pressures to modernize and industrialize over the past forty-five years as well as the more specific economic crash since 1997.

Ryu's ability to move around in his home and work environments with confidence suggests that Koreans can survive without a voice. However, the film illustrates the difficulties of surviving without a kidney, a job and especially a family. We see the social limitations faced by the working class. The film reaffirms this notion by revealing the extreme measures each character goes through in order to take care of their family and break through both very real and socially-constructed barriers. Striking back at society with anger and revenge demonstrates the frustrations of the working class.

Kidnapping as Metaphor for Hostage Society

As soon as Ryu and Young-mi begin discussing plans to kidnap the daughter of Ryu's factory owner and hold her captive for ransom, we cannot help but conjure up images of Korea's traumatic past as a hostage society – ruled by dictators and torn by class struggles and war. As pointed out by Park: "Society's view on kidnapping is very negative, but I wanted to show that it could have other aspects".[4] We read these "other aspects" as knee-jerk and revolutionary solutions to poor working-class conditions. This is confirmed when Young-mi legitimizes Ryu's decision and persuades him to kidnap Yoosun, who comes from a wealthy family. Although Yoosun's kidnapping was improvised, the impact of the event remains the same. It is not a simple question of whether or not there are good and bad kinds of kidnappings. Rather, the point is that often some members of the working class may be so desperate that they feel compelled to resort to this type of violent outcry for help. This is one of the darker sides of capitalism that audiences don't like to be reminded about.

The audience is forced to pay more attention to the build-up of the kidnap rather than the kidnap itself. Elliptical cuts are used to move the narrative forward when Yoosun is kidnapped. The audience witnesses the kidnappers inside a small car, watching Yoosun amidst the unfolding of an altercation between her father and a disgruntled employee. The

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[3] See Steinberg, D (1989). *The Republic of Korea – Economic Transformation and Social Change*. Westview Press USA. 72. Steinberg defines "bone rank" as the cultural/socialized system that assigns social status to people as soon as they are born. Largely referring to the Yangban, Chung-in and Sangmin classes from the Chosun Dynasty, rising above one's bone rank was usually uncommon, though falling lower in status occurred more frequently.

[4] Seana Sperling. op.cit.

employee's self-slicing infliction demonstrates how desperate some working conditions are in Korean factories. The employee's blood-soaked shirt is a powerful sign of social protest and again, a symbol of the great sacrifices members of the working class make in Korean society. The scene makes an impression on us and would-be kidnappers, and makes them question their plan. They have switched their target. As it seems, Ryu, his ill sister and Young-mi may be slightly more affluent than other members of the working class than they initially believed. The audience is uncertain whether the kidnappers will go through with the plan, until the next scene showing Young-mi dancing and singing in the playground with Yoosun. The audience is left to imagine the progressive events of the kidnapping as they were taking place off-screen.

A series of paralleling cuts transfers the story's POV back and forth between Ryu and Dong-jin as the deeply-upset father learns of his daughter's kidnapping. Yoosun's toy doll is used as a graphic and thematic linking device. The doll connects the characters, shifts the focus of the scene from Ryu to Dong-jin and foreshadows the fusing of their unified existence. At one point, the narrative leaves Ryu's POV behind as a close-up of Yoosun's doll is matched to a close-up of a new, clean doll that says "Daddy loves Yoosun". The same doll has been tampered with. It has red lipstick smeared all over it and the lighting surrounding the doll is darker. A ransom note is attached. The ransom for Yoosun's safe return is the same money needed to save Ryu's sister. After Yoosun, Ryu's sister and Young-mi die, Ryu and Dong-jin will form a twisted variation of yin and yang in which they are held together – held hostage – by their respective vengeance seeking plans. They both possess scars, which eventually become numb. The continuity patterns between shots aid in character development by bringing them together.

This technique of using paralleling cuts appears throughout the remainder of the film, rising in pace and intensity until both characters meet in a powerful scene at the end. Throughout these cuts, it is up to the audience to connect all of the plot elements into a cohesive story, which is heading toward closure. As dialogue is minimal during these scenes, the audience has to pay close attention to the editing arrangement of the shots in order to get a full understanding of the story.

Sound editing is a significant feature in the film's overall syncopic editing style. Sound cuts are used to both shock the audience and provide linking transitions between dispersed locations in the world of the story. For example, while the ransom delivery takes place, we leave a scene in Ryu's apartment after hearing a barking dog. We then learn that a dog is barking at Dong-Jin, who is tied to a light pole in a park. The camera's subjective POV shows Dong-Jin screaming, and then peers off to a wider view of the city where we hear someone crying in the distance. This leads us back to Ryu's apartment to Yoosun, who is in tears due to Ryu's sister's death. These sound-editing and auditory cues matter, because they link the characters together and move the narrative forward in a highly-stylized way.

One of the film's most highly-charged and emotional sequences occurs when Ryu howls after learning that his sister kills herself. His emotional scars run deep. The suicide-discovery scene cuts to a children's cartoon on the television, suggesting that life is never more innocent and "happy-go-lucky" than when we are in our childhood. The cartoon and Yoosun's innocence is a stark and ironic contrast to the horrific reality surrounding the working-conditions plight of workers in factories and dangerous black-market organ trading. It is ironic Yoosun is kidnapped for a ransom to save Ryu's ill sister. She decides to end her life when she becomes aware of Ryu's plans to hold Yoosun hostage. Once she kills herself,

Ryu is propelled down a path which eventually results in Yoosun's and his expected death. In the end, Yoosun's kidnapping was unnecessary, and Ryu's quest to assist his ill sister becomes the reason for nearly all of the deaths in the film. As Ryu tragically buries his dead sister beneath a pile of rocks by the lake, another tragedy develops behind him, with Yoosun's accidental drowning. While he is silently mourning, we hear a splash. The audience is aware of the dangerous situation before Ryu is. In this way, we are lured to anticipate the gravity of the situation before Ryu realizes what has happened. Director Park uses this plot technique as a way of showcasing his interpretative POV, telling us how to see the world of the story in an unusual way.

Social Numbness as Apathy

Two key segments that stand out for us – the masturbation and autopsy scenes – represent the film's most powerful social commentary on the numbness the characters are showing toward pain and pleasure. We see this as key methods some people use to cope with their class conditions while hoping for a better future. Dong-jin and the four masturbating boys are apathetic – they are unable to feel normal or passionate human feelings or to respond emotionally.

The masturbation scene involving the four boys lying on a single bed takes place in the same crowded home environment in which Ryu and his sister live. Boundaries between the private and the public are blurred as off-screen noises easily pass through the shared walls of their older, working class apartment complex. The setting of their living space contrasts with Dong-jin's larger, modern and more expensive home. These contrasting images portray a large socio-economic gap between the classes in Korea.

The four boys are simultaneously enjoying the visual pleasure of erotic female magazine pictures and seemingly orgasmic screams from the adjacent apartment. However, on the other side of the wall, the audience sees Ryu's sick sister experiencing one of her deathly coughing fits. We cringe at the thought of the boys taking sexual pleasure in the face of such excruciating pain. Yet, the boys cannot be blamed for their pathetic excitement at Ryu's sister's suffering. They are numb youths who have no clear understanding of reality.

This scene can be read in two ways. On the one hand, the boys may believe that they are listening to a woman who is vocalizing sexual pleasure. After all, the small apartment block houses other examples of vocal eroticism emanating from at least one couple on the floor above. A shaking chandelier in the apartment below accentuates the extent of the couple's bedroom activities. On the other hand, the boys may be taking sexual pleasure knowing that the ill sister is screaming in pain. Both scenarios are disturbing, but the second one is more alarming. Each scenario shows how the boys in the film, as well as a younger generation of males in society, live without sympathy for their fellow citizens. The boys' future is not clear, but we suspect that they may continue developing this anti-sympathetic attitude and selfish desire for economic prosperity – that is, fantasize about leaving their class conditions behind.

Next, Dong-jin's transformative reactions during the autopsy scenes at the hospital reveal his character development and growing numbness towards society. At the first autopsy, the audience experiences Dong-jin's sharp pain of losing a daughter, as the camera looks up from the POV from Yoosun's dead body to a face showing extreme sadness, anger and remorse. The scene is visceral. Dong-jin decides to watch his daughter's body being cut open. We flinch at the sound of the coroner's saw cutting through Yoosun's delicate child body. What

father would go to such lengths as to see his daughter being cut open like this? Though we never see what Dong-jin sees, absorbing the off-screen actions and noises along with Dong-jin's deeply-upset expression is just as powerful as if we witnessed the visual of his little girl being cut open. The film's editing style has placed us in a precarious subjective position by seeing society from the POV of dead people.

Even more shocking, is Dong-jin's reaction (or lack thereof) during the second autopsy scene of Ryu's sister being examined. We are presented with the same view of Dong-jin's face – camera POV looking up at him from the dead body. However this time, Dong-jin simply yawns while Ryu's sister is being cut open. He is bored. He has no sympathy for this woman. He is numb to the things happening to others who are outside his class. Dong-jin is now on the hunt for his daughter's killers. He is no longer seen as the caring, upset father because he has become a cold, uncaring individual who is after revenge. We are reminded that Dong-jin must have lived his life as a hard businessman who can handle any situation, including employee disputes of all kinds.[5] Given his conversations with the investigating detectives, he thinks of himself as a good man. In reality, he still cannot believe this is happening to him.

Perhaps one of the best scenes that illustrates the social apathy contained in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*'s syncopic elliptical editing style is Ryu's death scene. First, the viewer is subjected to a bird's eye view of Dong-jin dragging Ryu through the lake. Second, we see a fish-eye view of Ryu's naked ankles under the water. Cut to a two-shot of Dong-jin and Ryu, Dong-jin announces that he is going to kill Ryu. Dong-jin submerges in the murky water. The camera follows with a close-up shot of Ryu's Achilles tendons, which have just been sliced open. No one is around to hear Ryu's silent cries of pain, or the cries of the working class for that matter. As Ryu dies from a combination of blood loss and drowning in the shallow water, Dong-jin watches without emotion. He merely blinks when some bloodied water splashes on his face. Dong-jin does not appear bothered in the slightest because he finally has gained vengeance for his daughter's death. Ryu's death scene, which symbolizes a harsh victory over the working class, ends as it began, with a bird's-eye view of Dong-jin carrying Ryu out of the water, leaving a long dragon-like trail of blood behind them in the dark open water. Although his life is short-lived from here, Dong-jin has achieved his goal of revenge – all while maintaining a cold distance from Ryu and all that he represents.

Concluding Thoughts: Held Hostage By Class and Syncopation

Sympathy For Mr Vengeance offers a meandering expedition through a minefield of visual and auditory neural activity, allowing inquisitive viewers to look for social commentary between ambiguous moments of hyperventilation and intense tragedy. The film's power lies in its elliptical editing style, which heightens the recognition and absorption of narrative meaning, at least for those spectators who are willing to put in the effort. In many ways, the audience is held hostage by the editing. That is, the viewer who misses something potentially misses the complete story. However, the viewer who is lured into the story is held captive – captivated – by its power.

As we follow the adventures of Ryu (Shin Ha-kyun), his soul-mate Young-mi (Bae Doo-na) and the angry father Dong-jin (Song Kang-ho), we are intimated to the circumstances that lead to their deaths. At the same time, we are exposed to the film's meditations of Korean society. Although exaggerated at times, the film couches these cultural reflections in a string

[5] Dong-jin's confrontation with the razor-wielding employee in the street shortly before Yoosun's kidnapping points to his ability to face the hardest situations without backing down.

of gruesome scenes and segments, which signify social relations between the classes. Often people forget how lower socio-economic groups and others with disabilities struggle in society. Either that, or they don't have the time or energy to do so because of the dog-eat-dog society we live in. Contemporary films such as *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, *Oasis* (Lee Chang-dong, 2002) and *Bad Guy* (Kim Ki-duk, 2001) remind us of the plight of lower socio-economic groups and others with disabilities and the harsh ways society treats them. The working class has day-to-day struggles that many people neither understand nor wish to sympathize with.

Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance produces different sets of struggles felt by both the working and upper classes. Members of the working class are not always heard. This is represented by Ryu's deaf-mute condition and his pursuit of illegal organ-trading as a way of surviving in a capitalist society. The gap between the rich and the poor keeps widening. Members of the upper class also face problems as they are sometimes targets for the working class to abuse. This is evident by the fact that Yoosun is kidnapped only because she comes from a wealthy family. Ironically, the police officer investigating the crime tells his wife on the phone that he is glad they do not have any money because he wouldn't want to experience a similar fate as Dong-jin and his family.

The closing title sequence contains the dead bodies of Ryu and Dong-jin in the same frame. In the end, all of the characters find their vengeance. However, the audience is left to decide for themselves whether they are sympathetic to both or none of the vengeful characters. The film gives us the impression that no-one wins when a path of revenge is taken, and bad things can happen to good people. If Ryu had waited a little longer and not lost the money, he may have been able to save his sister in a legal way – the right way. None of the events would have happened and the film would have had a happy ending. But, then there would not have been much of a story to tell!

Clearly, violent themes and gruesome scenes make *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* difficult for many people to watch once, let alone a second time. It is understandable why many Koreans did not warm to the film. Hence, it is possible that the film's harsh statements and suggestions about class and society may have fallen on deaf ears.

Conflict-editing, as apposed to continuity-editing, is a technique that stands out in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*. For Eisenstein each shot helps contribute-to and build-on the meaning of the text. He believes in the importance of each shot, and how the combination of each shot generates meaning. However, in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* representative meanings are often obscured at times when elliptical transitions between shots appear to mislead the audience by leaving out certain visual and auditory material. The text takes us from the unexpected to the unknown, leaving it up to feeling, experiencing and us to interpret what the characters are thinking. We are left to our own devices to conjure-up the larger world of the story. The journey through syncopic-editing style has only just begun. Like a fine wine improving with age, so too shall *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*.