

BAFTA Screenwriters' Lecture Series: Park Chan-wook
22 October 2016 at BFI Southbank

Jeremy Brock: Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, I'm Jeremy Brock. On behalf of BAFTA and the BFI welcome to the third in our 2016 series of international Screenwriters' Lectures, in conjunction with Lucy Guard and the JJ Charitable Trust. Today we are truly honoured to be hosting the legendary South Korean writer-director Park Chan-wook. His extraordinary filmography includes the seminal Vengeance trilogy; *Oldboy*, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and *Lady Vengeance*, the extraordinary *Thirst*, and *The Handmaiden*. We'll begin this afternoon with a screening of Park's short film *Night Fishing*. Park will then give a brief talk with simultaneous translation by the producer Wonjo. This will be followed by a Q&A moderated by the writer and film critic Ian Haydn Smith, after which as we always do we'll open it up to questions from the floor. So ladies and gentlemen, we'll begin with Park Chan-wook's *Night Fishing*.

[Applause]

[Film plays]

Ladies and gentlemen, Park Chan-wook.

[Applause]

Park Chan-wook: Hello. Well it's been a long time since I since I saw this film last. Such a long time that even though that it's something that I made, rather than the time that I saw it just after I had finished working on it, I think I was able to see it with a more objective pair of eyes, and seeing it now like this it somehow seems better than I remember. I actually, this film is something that I have wrote together with my younger brother, and I have directed it together with him as well. My younger brother is an artist. Well I had suggested to him that, well let's make movies together, be like Coen Brothers, and that was back when we were both university students, but he flat out said no and he left to study the arts. And as we grew older he said, "Well I want to actually make films," and we decided well let's start by making this short film together, and that's how this film all began.

Until then I didn't have any interest in Korean shamanism, this Korean

traditional belief system of shamanism. But as an artist the subject of shamanism was an important theme for my brother in all of his works. But as we set about to do this short film together he told me that "this is a story that I wanted to tell." And I was a bit, I wasn't very sure because I wasn't interested in the subject matter of shamanism, and he got me to watch a few videos, documentaries on shamanism. You know this last shot in the film where the shaman makes away by parting this long piece of cotton. What it is, is that it's a part of the shamanistic ritual which is to comfort the dead souls, it's like a requiem, and it's the climactic part of that ritual. Metaphorically, this is paving the way for the dead person's soul so that it doesn't float about in the netherworld, but it can follow the path to arrive at a good place. So it's paving the way, and it represents that path, so that rather than being stuck neither in this world nor the afterlife, the soul can follow this path to get to the afterworld. How the cloth is parted represents how that difficult path is paved. And here the shaman represents the soul of the dead person. And the rice grains that are scattered on the top of the long piece of cotton, it represents both the resources that you need along your journey, it also represents the sustenance that you require along this long journey.

So as I was watching this documentary where the shaman was using knives to cut through the long piece of cloth in this climactic moment in the ritual, I was mesmerised by this ritual. And it awakened this Korean sensibility that had been laying dormant in my conscious. When you're watching an actual "gut", or a shamanistic ritual in Korean, and also in the climactic moment in this film, the act of using a knife to cut through this long piece of cloth, to pave this way is really a cathartic, climactic moment. The kind of catharsis that grants this poor soul who has died a tragic death redemption at long last. And for those friends and family members who have lost their beloved one, who are left behind in this world, who are gripped with sorrow, for all those people left behind they're able to witness the dead person making this journey, paving the path finally to afterlife. And being able to witness that

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allows them to accept this as a goodbye, and allow them to get on with their lives. So seeing this film again, I'm reminded what art should really be, and with this I will take it with me in going on to make my next film. Thank you.

[Applause]

Ian Haydn Smith: It's a remarkable film, and those of you who don't know, it featured at the 2011 Berlin Film Festival where it was awarded the Golden Bear for Best Short that year. You followed it in 2012 with *Day Trip*, another short that you co-wrote and co-directed with your brother. And it's about a young... You can see these films online. It's about a young girl who didn't win a pansori competition that she'd entered, and she goes with her teacher on a long walk up a mountain, and there she rehearses singing. And again it's a film that has a very strong profound spiritual element to it. Could you talk about the conversations you had with your brother of developing that story, and do you feel that the film, the feature that you made before these two films, *Thirst*, which has a very deep spiritual element to it as well, sort of fed into the ideas for these two short films?

PC: Well you know the origin of the team name, PARKing CHANce, it comes actually from our names. My name is Park Chan-wook, and my brother's name is Park Chan-kyong. And we share the two syllables, our family name Park, and the first syllable of our names happens to be Chan, so we used those two syllables to come up with this name PARKing CHANce. And as the name suggests, the idea behind this team is to be light-footed and very agile, and be all about guerrilla filmmaking, and be ready to try out anything new and interesting. That's why under this banner, PARKing CHANce, when we make films, other than the two short films that you have mentioned we have done together a documentary and a music video and other such works. And these films tend to be, well they invariably are different from the short films and feature length films that I make on my own. And as I was saying before, my younger brother is very much interested in the traditional Korean culture, and very

much likes to bring elements from that in our filmmaking. And I take it as a good opportunity for me, who doesn't know much about traditional culture to the extent my younger brother does, I take it as a good learning opportunity, and an opportunity to be able to cinematically express these elements.

Because me and my brother we have parents who are both Catholics, or we have been raised as Catholics, so until our high school years we would go to Catholic church every Sunday, so I think we naturally cultivated this interest in religion. Of course both my younger brother and myself have left the Catholic church, stopped being Catholics after high school, but being raised Catholic, that sort of childhood experience I think has had a decisive influence on my making *Thirst*. While I'm a complete atheist, my brother, while he doesn't subscribe to Catholicism, he remains quite interested in the spiritual world. Because when you go to all these scenes of shamanistic rituals and you see these "gut", Korean for shamanistic rituals, you encounter a lot of mystical moments. Because you're facing an endless number of these scientifically inexplicable phenomenon, that you end up believing in these beliefs. Compared with my brother, my attitude is, you might be able to tell from seeing this film, I approach it metaphorically. So you might consider this film as a collaboration between an artist who has the belief in shamanism, and an artist who doesn't believe in shamanism but takes it as a metaphor.

IHS: I've been lucky enough to speak with director Park once before, so I feel thoroughly prepared today of having this perfect poker face as I'm listening to him thinking, "He's just answered the sixth question I was about to ask... And now the seventh." But, I wanted to carry on the talk about collaboration, widening the net further now to talk about your whole career. Because one of the things that's so remarkable about your work as a filmmaker is that it feels that it has such a singular vision, whilst at the same time as a writer you work with so many different people on each film. Could you talk a little bit about the collaboration process of how you develop your ideas?

PC: Well I've heard that my work is very unique, original, and of a singular vision, but despite what you may think, my working process is not one where I'm sitting myself, all feverishly gripped by inspiration, and I'm being this crazy writer, the kind you see on screen, this lonely crazy writer. I can't be further from that image. Completely the opposite from these kinds of romantic images of a writer. I always usually work with someone else. I always compromise and I always come to the middle. I always ask questions, and I always get influenced by those close to me around me. I don't agree with the idea that compromise or coming to the middle is in any way the enemy of art. Well just talking about this film, at the very beginning the idea was, because the river is very near the North and South Korean border, the idea was to have a North Korean soldier's corpse float down the river and it's fished by the fisherman, and they get all tangled up with these fishing lines and do a dance. To serve as a kind of a metaphor for this wish for the North and South Korea to be united. But the telecommunications company who had suggested that this film be shot in an iPhone, and the company who have funded this short film, there's no way that they're going to like this idea, because this is still a subject matter that is quite sensitive when it comes to commercial film in Korea. Of course if I was to abuse my position that I have in the industry in Korea, and I say, "Well I'm going to do whatever I want, you guys can just go away," I may have been able to do that, but I don't think that anything must be the way they are.

Because the world of art is so vast, and it promises so many different possibilities, it's just a matter of being able to find another thread of possibility. So it was our efforts to try and come up with different ideas that we have ended up with what you see on screen. I believe it ended up being a better film. There's a writer who I collaborate with all the time, although who I collaborate with have changed over the course of time. But recently, well ever since *Lady Vengeance* I have worked with this co-writer on all of my films, and she is a talented female writer. The way I work, of course I would love if

there's a genius of a writer working side by side next to me, but all I ask for really is for there to be someone with common sense. Well of course the female writer that I work with, she's closer to a genius writer, but I'm just lucky. Because not everyone can be so lucky to have someone like her working with them. But what I want to say is that when you are writing all by yourself and you are falling into the trap of being so obsessed with your own work and being so stubborn about what you are writing, and you're following only that single path, and you end up to go into all this self-contentment and go into self-praise of what you've done, become so proud of what you've done, that is something you should really be conscious against. So for me, well what I'm saying is that it doesn't matter who it is, as long as you have someone next to me, then you can talk to and say, "Well, I can go this way or that. Which way is better?" And at least for someone to give an answer to that question is enough. And someone who can read what I've written and say, "Well, this is a bit too weird, isn't it?" In other words, I don't require somebody who gives me good ideas.

But now I'm going to explain to you the way I collaborate with this female writer who I am very fortunate to have found. So what we do is we sit in the same room facing each other, across from each other, and we use one computer. Into this one computer we hook up two monitors, one for each of us, and two keyboards, one for each of us. Someone will write first. Say one line, and ask the other, "How is it?" "Well," the other will reply and press on the backspace. And I will say, "Well, then why don't you try and write it?" And then she writes something, "Well I like it, keep writing." Let's say she wrote ten lines now, and I drag and select all and delete it. So there are times like that, but if it works well, when I write one line she writes one, and vice versa. I write one word and she would write the next word. And there are more times when things go well like this. Sometimes we fight over where to put the comma and how, for ten minutes and longer. Working like this, after I've finished with the script and after I've made the film and it's released, people come up to me and ask, "I really liked

that line of dialogue, so which of the two writers wrote it?"

And we really cannot answer that question. In that one line of dialogue it contains a lot of different ideas and we cannot suss out which idea came from whom. So it's a result of this teamwork that has been enhanced for a number of years, that has been calibrated over a long period of time where we have grown accustomed to each other. But when it comes to the last stage I work by myself. I consider this stage to be very important because no matter how well you work together as a team, there is a limit to how much work you can do by way of having discussions. So the last stage of the scriptwriting process is for me to spend two to three days, or around the week even, I work strictly by myself. I would say that during this stage I'm closer to this romantic image of a writer gripped with this inspiration and writing with great fervour. I don't even sleep, I don't even eat, I just write. What I would change during this stage where I work alone, it's not the structure or the basic elements of the plot, the work during this stage is mostly I would say putting the colours onto the picture. And if I was to compare it with the whole filmmaking process I could compare it with say the very end when you do the colour correction. Or if I want to compare it to a process of creating music, I would liken it to the final mix stage. When you compare the draft that I would finish by myself, and you compare it to the previous draft to that, you might not notice much of a difference, but what it does is it imbues a subtle amount of difference, and this is what decides the nuance of the film.

IHS: *Therese Raquin*, which you very, very liberally adapted as *Thirst*, the author Emile Zola was once quoted as saying that what he aimed to do with that novel was to study temperaments and not characters. And going all the way back to your 1999 short *Judgement*, through your many films, through *Stoker*, it struck me that that's a phrase that could be applied to your work. You're not someone who's necessarily solely, or plot isn't necessarily the main thing that comes to the fore, and then neither is character. There's a specific tone

between the characters and of the characters that filters through in all of your work, would you agree with that?

PC: Well, I know that Zola has applied that attitude to all of his work, but I don't think I'm necessarily subscribing to the same kind of attitude, because for me the plot, the narrative is always the most important. What's most important for me is, and not even the character, nor is it style, for me first and foremost comes the narrative. I'm not saying that in my movie that's the most important part, but I'm saying that's the one thing that comes first. Shall I use the example of adapting *Oldboy*? Anyone in the audience who has read the original Japanese manga? There are a few, not many enough though. It is a great manga for sure. But the reason why the villain has come to hold a grudge against the protagonist, the reason is completely different from the manga in film. And the way that he exacts the revenge on the protagonist is also different. In the original manga these different reasons worked well for a manga, but to retain them for a film I didn't feel it worked very well, they were too bland cinematically.

So it was a situation where I had to come up with completely new reasons in the method of vengeance. So I was thinking that it needed to be different, and it needed to go beyond, it needed to jump over what I found in the original manga in order for it to have meaning in this different medium. So remember, I am someone who always works through heavy conversation with different people, so in this instance too I sat down and talked to my producer about it. The question was just why this villain would incarcerate this protagonist for such a long time, and the whole conversation was about what was the grudge, why did he want to go out and kidnap this person and incarcerate him for such a long time? But we just couldn't come up with an answer for this. I took a moment to go to the toilet, to pee, and while I was doing my business, as I was facing this white wall a thought came to me. Why did he incarcerate, but why did he let him go? Wouldn't it be better if the villain kept him locked up until the day he died, isn't that more of a punishment

and more of a revenge, more of an agony?

But then it occurred to me, maybe the releasing part is the more important part for this villain. So the protagonist in the story and the audience, they're all obsessed with the question, "Why is he locked up?" "Why am I locked up?" But maybe the more important question is, "Why am I let go?" "Why is he released?" And I thought if I change the question around a new path might present itself. Now the follow up question to that would be, okay, so if he's released him, why after 15 years? Why not 10 years? Why not 25 years? Why specifically 15? What is that time required for? So there was this train of thought, and the train of thought led to me thinking, well 15 years might be time long enough for someone to grow older into an adult. But then who would it be? Could it be the daughter? But then why the daughter? And as you may know from seeing the film *Oldboy*, it led to that reveal that you see in the film, and what it answers is that very question, the very reason why the villain holds this grudge against the protagonist, his motivation. And the answer being all these incestuous elements in it.

So, as you know when you're doing the business of peeing in the toilet, it doesn't take a whole lot of time. But in this time all this train of thought led me to this destination. So right after that I rushed to the producer I was talking to, and I told him everything, I told him all these ideas. And I said, "Well I'm very sure that this will work, and this is the movie I'm going to make, but this will require a sex scene between a father and a daughter, but it should be okay because they don't know that they are, who each other are, that this is my daughter or this is my father, so it should be okay. So you need to make a decision now. If you are not going to do this, I'm walking out from the movie." So what I want to say is that it wasn't a case where I wanted to tell a story about incestual relationship that I made all the way like this, that's not the truth. In actual fact I wanted to adapt this original manga, but I wanted to make a really good story from that, and that led me to this idea.

But what I'm going to say next is important I think, in that once you have decided to tell a story with that sort of element in it, you have to do a proper job of it. As if I had always set out to tell a story, make a film about an incestual relationship, and I have to really dig down and go at it. For the audience seeing the film it's not very important what order these ideas came in. And when the audience sees the completed film, and when they see the important themes and elements and subjects in it, it has to feel as if, right from the get go, the film was all about that. And you should really aspire to then go. And in this film two things were important, one was that element of incest, and the second is the other thing that I was talking about before. In order to get the right answer, you have to ask the right question.

IHS: Let's open the floor for some questions. We had someone down here, and then we'll go further back. Actually, go to that gentleman there if you have the mic just near, and then we'll come down.

Q: In your introduction you talked about the effect your brother's belief in shamanism had on you, and you said it awakened your Korean sensibility that had lain dormant in my consciousness. And I think that's the power your films have on an audience, you awake in us dormant things in our consciousness, and that's why your films have a big impact with... But can you say something about when you're shooting your films, you said the narrative was always key, but the link between the narrative and the visual style, and to what extent sometimes the visual style might impact on the narrative, and the way the narrative impacts on the visual style as you're a screenwriter-director. But the links between your narrative screenplay and the visual style?

PC: Well this is a very difficult thing to explain because it involves talking about specific scenes and how they were written and how they were realised, but I'll give it a try. Right so, so-called visual style, or including sound, all of these other elements which together form what I might call the cinematic form, they all have to serve the story. So when

you separate out the content and the form, the form has to really serve the content, but it's not to say that content is more important than the form. Once an expression is made through form you should no longer be able to separate the form and the content. So I'll give you an example, this first film that I did, I'm very embarrassed by it, but if I can use a scene from it to give you an example. So in this film there's a character who's a female singer working at a bar. So there are POV shots of the good guy and the bad guy who are sitting on their own but watching her. So when I wanted to express the moment when these two men felt drawn to this woman, to express that moment what I did was for one person I, in his POV I used zoom to zoom in on the female singer, and for the other man I used tracks and I pushed in on the dolly into the woman. So the way I thought was, when I would use zoom for one POV it was for a character man who was a gangster, so this gangster, the way I think about zoom is that it grabs a subject and brings it to you, so this guy being a gangster he wants to have her, make her his, so I thought that zoom was the more appropriate way for him to be mesmerised by her in that moment. Whereas the other guy, he's the more devoted type, and he would go to her, he would run to her, that's why in that moment I thought using the dollies and having the camera move towards her would be the more appropriate form. That's, as far as I can think right now, is the simplest way to explain. And these subtle differences in form, I believe is the way that, it's my principle that content and form cannot be separated, even if it ends up in creating these very subtle differences. And some people might ask the question, "Who will notice? Who in the audience will notice your subtle differences?" And if there are people who are asking that question they are obviously not the kind of people who think like I do, because I think every little difference like that creates a difference in perception for the audience.

IHS: I'm just checking that we're okay for time? We have five minutes so we have someone down the front. Or ten minutes, sorry.

Q: I was very interested to hear you

talking about the adaptation of *Oldboy*, and I saw *The Handmaiden* at the London Film Festival and thought that was fantastic, and I suppose I'm interested in the process of adaptation and the fact that you're coming to source material that some people might feel quite protective of and very fond of, and that inevitably people will draw comparisons between the two works. So I wondered whether when you are going through that process of adaptation, which is very bold and creative in the way that you do it, you ever feel constrained or obliged to maintain a tone or a sensibility or an idea in the source material? Or whether you feel that the best thing you can do for the source material is to make a film that works on its own terms?

PC: Well there are a number of films that I've made which have source material, but not all of them, for instance *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* or *Lady Vengeance* are films, there are no source material like novels. Whereas *The Handmaiden* for instance is something that has source material in *Fingersmith*. People like to divide up my work between those that are original and those that are adapted from source material, but for me there are no difference between the two because this act of reading, be it manga or be it novel or be it a play, is in itself an experience for me. And it's not, a book is not, doesn't exist by the book alone, but when I go through the act of reading, it conjures up images in my head, and I have this experience. For example, as you live through your life you go through these different things, and you might have someone close to you pass away, or you might go through a divorce, there are important events in your life like this. For me it's just like creating a story out of those experiences. Or you have other sources too, let's say you watch the news on the telly, or you've read an article on the internet, that might provide a starting point for you. But all of these are exactly the same for me, they are just all sources. So am I saying that I have no respect for the source material? I think it really depends on your definition of the word respect, because I believe that I have shown my respect towards the source material in the case of

Fingersmith, and I have retained the core ideas and themes of that book in the best way I can. And that Sarah Waters, the original author, having seen the film twice and having liked the film, I think I have done a good job of respecting her work. And when I was reading *Therese Raquin* by Emile Zola, I got this feeling that, "Wow, I think I wrote this."

IHS: Oh we all get that.

PC: Please don't misunderstand what I'm saying, I'm not saying that I'm that good of a writer, but what I was thinking was this writer, this author, he has written in the way that I would exactly like to write. When I was reading *Fingersmith*, as I was reading it I got all excited and was thinking that, "I wish this happened to this character, I wish that happened to the other character, I wish the story would go along this path." You know as you watch daytime soap opera how you say, "Oh I wish he would die," or, "I wish those two would get married." And it just inspires so many ideas, it becomes a well for all these inspirations, so you have to come across that sort of source material for you to be able to engage with it. But what you do need to be careful, I suppose there's a con, one bad thing about taking on source material and adapting it into a film. What it is, is that you don't make films by yourself, so when there is a source material there's a producer and there's the financier, or sometimes the source material might reach the star of the film first, so what happens is that all these people read the source material and they all have different pictures in their head about what this film is going to be. And there's no reason to say that those pictures that they have in their head will be the same, nor will it be the same as the picture that I have in my head. That's something that you should always be careful of.

IHS: I think we have time, just one more question. The mic is just coming down.

Q: Park, thank you so much for that amazing talk. One quick question: the cultural provenance of your material, does that make you a South Korean filmmaker or a universal storyteller?

PC: Of course I'm probably both, but I don't want to make films which would have elements in it which will be undecipherable, incomprehensible for international audience. Usually you find such instances in jokes, they don't tend to travel well and it's harder for jokes and humour to go over the cultural barriers. For instance, Scottish comedies and French comedies, I have a hard time understanding them sometimes.

IHS: You're not alone.

PC: But when I say that I don't want to make films which would have elements in it which are incomprehensible for international audience, I'm not saying that I want to make it in itself a goal for me. What I'm really aspiring to make is, well I do have the Korean audience in mind as a primary audience when I'm making these films, but I consider myself making films for the future Korean audience. What I'm saying is that, if you're a filmmaker you'll understand what I'm saying, but we want to make films that will stand the test of time so that in 50 years' time or 100 years' time it will be screened at a place like BFI or BAFTA, and have the audience enjoy it in that time too. So when I said about making these films I tell myself I'm going to make films that the future Korean audience can also enjoy, it just happens to be that the international audience don't have trouble enjoying them either. So when you are aspiring for universality like this, in other words not being entrenched or not being focused on the current trends and be able to think outside of that, spatially you expand yourself as well. So I suppose I'm saying that of the ticket price you're paying to see my films, you're only missing out on a few cents worth of the ticket price.

IHS: For anyone who wants to hear more of the wise words of director Park, he's going to be introducing the *Vengeance* trilogy this evening at Picturehouse Central, it's the entire trilogy is showing, and Picturehouse is offering a free psychoanalysis service at the end of the programme for anyone who feels profoundly disturbed by it! That trilogy is showing as part of the London East Asian Film Festival which is a fantastic festival that started late last week, and it's

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running through the whole of the next week, so do pick up a programme from Picturehouse Central and the other venues it's showing at to see what's on. As for *The Handmaiden*, Curzon Artificial Eye are releasing the film towards the end of February. It is a masterpiece by Park Chan-wook, it's an absolutely extraordinary piece of filmmaking, so do catch that when it comes out. Thank you to the BFI for hosting us here today. Thank you to Wonjo, who is the first person who has sat on a BFI stage and actually used up a whole pad of paper, which is an incredible feat unto itself. Thank you to Mariayah and her team at BAFTA, also to Lucy Guard and the JJ Charitable Trust. Thank you to Jeremy Brock for all of his support of these events. But most of all can you please join me in thanking Park Chan-wook.

[Applause]