

South Korean Season

Wednesday 5 February: *Pietà*, directed by Kim Ki-duk.
Eden Court, Playhouse Cinema, at 19:15.



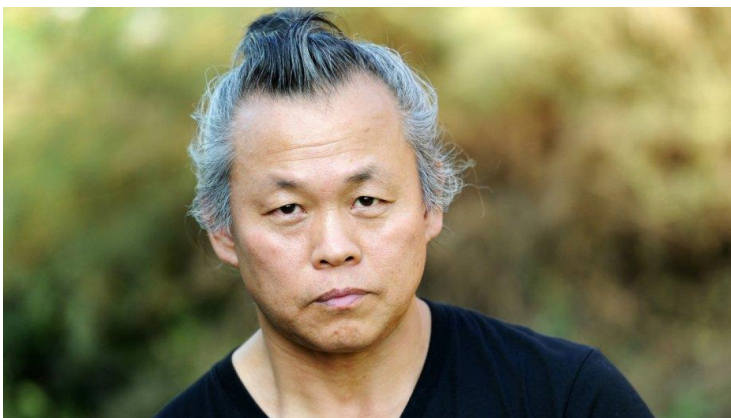
South Korean director Kim Ki-duk had made 17 movies before *Pietà*; he made them quickly and very cheaply, without any increase in scale. *Pietà*, a film awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2012, displays its minimalism like an unembellished badge of honour. The entire narrative focuses on a pair of tortured characters unravelling the demons of their past. Kim's intense portrait is enhanced by the closeness he maintains to his subjects' fluctuating emotions. The movie looks blatantly frugal but, as it sounds a deeply sorrowful note, never cheap.

The focal point of the film is its rather repellent anti-hero Lee Kang-do (Lee Jung-jin), a thug, without piety, who is tasked with gathering loans from impoverished residents of a working-class factory town. More killer than collector, he prefers to leave his victims in a state more dead than alive, ironically using as his preferred tools of torture the same machinery they use in their underpaid jobs. Deaf to cries for mercy, Kang-do continues his violent path without any reservations, until a melancholy woman (Cho Min-soo) steps into his world of destruction, claiming to be his long-lost mother who long ago abandoned him. He assaults her sexually and subjects her to other physical humiliations. But she remains at Kang-do's side no matter how hard he tries to get rid of her; she succeeds to inveigle her way into the savage man's life and gradually mollifies him. It might, however, already be too late for him to escape his restricted, deranged environment he's been trapped in since early youth.

Pietà never makes you forget that this is a film populated by waves of desperate acts: one of Kang-do's victims welcomes his punishment, claiming he only wanted "to spend money and then die"; another freely offers up a limb in the hope that he can gain another loan to support his family. When Kang-do forms a bond with his newfound relative and starts to warm up, he discovers that he's not the only cruel force in his constrained world, where everyone wants to achieve some form of success but there are no prospects for it. The title draws from the Michelangelo sculpture of the Virgin Mary cradling Jesus as he bleeds to death, and while there's nothing spiritual about the arc of *Pietà* plenty of people die in order for Kang-do to realize his sins. It just takes him a long time to realize it. Even though he forms a connection with the woman, her presence merely provides him with a wake-up call, not an exit plan. Is it not so that guilt has a more lasting impact than an act of violence itself?



Kim Ki-duk's *Pietà* is a thoroughly unsettling film that leads us into a very dark place and then succeeds in holding us captive there. Most of his earlier movies are disturbing affairs, but one of *Pietà*'s strengths is that it leaves much to the imagination. It is steeped in Korean folklore and traditions, although they might not be apparent to Western eyes. There are always different possible reactions to images of violence and other extremes: one can close one's eyes or open them. An image is something that inevitably any viewer will come to terms with, no matter how long it will take him or her. Kim Ki-duk is one of those filmmakers, like Oedipus, who elected to keep his eyes wide open.



Kim Ki-duk (left): My previous film *Arirang* was a chronicle depicting how my convictions as a filmmaker had collapsed and then were later restored through the traditional Korean folksong *Arirang*. While filming *Arirang*, I came to understand why I had ended up in such a rut and realized that the biggest problem was my own greed. By making *Pietà* I wanted to ask if there would be a future in what we call faith. *Pietà* is a testament to the reality of the extremely monetary society in which we live. At the same time, the film

shows how tragic the result of such extreme capitalism can be. If wars in the past were about a collision of ideologies, then modern wars seem to derive from greed. *Arirang* was a documentary that I shot by myself and without a screenplay, which was a first in my film career. It was a sort of diary that simply revealed my thoughts and life during that period. However, *Pietà* was another feature film written and directed by me just like all the other 16 feature films that I had made before *Arirang*. Well, I was back on my home turf without much trouble. Originally, it was my intention to shoot *Pietà* in France and Japan, and we worked for months in preparation. However, I couldn't cast the right actors for key roles and so decided to shoot in Korea. In the end, I think it was a better choice since I find filming in Korea much more comfortable and productive.

What interests me in Kang-do is that he's a child with arrested development, which was caused by the loss of his mother when he was young. This is why Kang-do blindly follows orders and inflicts such cruelty without a second thought. Judging from my experience, many violent people have become desensitized by violence done to them and are thus generally insensitive to the pain of others. I envisioned Kang-do as a sort of robot, barely functioning in society, and got curious as to how he would behave were his mother to reappear. Would he feel any warmth, i.e. a child's love, in his heart? Through *Pietà* I wanted to show that traumatic experiences could turn humans into unfeeling robots, but also that the process could be reversed. I believe that the appropriate punishment for inflicting cruelty is not sending an emotionless perpetrator to prison or executing him, but instead melting his frozen heart. I am really also fearful of violence. Violence begets violence exponentially.

This is a film which aims to thaw this violent guy's heart by holding his mother hostage. Kang-do hurts other families without thinking twice, but I hoped he would realize his crimes when he finally feels what it is like to have his own family harmed. We must learn that this age of ours is one of violence and that nobody is safe from violence. Once rooted, violence keeps growing, spreading, and getting nastier as we see every day. Just like wars between nations, violence is sowed and eventually grows uncontrollably like an over-populated pot of bean sprouts. *Pietà* does not show but rather insinuates violence so that the audience will recall already-familiar images of cruelty and feel the suffering of those subjected to such violence. There are no scenes of actual bodily harm in the film, but you can feel what it would be like should you be crushed by a press machine. To me, the machines in the film are the same as missiles. We

shudder whenever really reflecting upon how many nuclear warheads exist in the world. Even those who have created and possessed them are afraid of the power of such weaponry. Why, then, are we still building such lethal devices? Are we humans really that dumb? I cannot understand why our political leaders, who claim to be smart, continue this dangerous chess game with nuclear missiles for pawns.

In Korea, countless people suffer from illegal private loan practices, ending in suicide in many cases. During the filming, I saw alleys strewn with loan sharks' business cards. Somebody would pick up such a card, call the number, get a loan, be forced to make exorbitant interest payments and suffer with no end in sight. Money is the Devil of our age. Money has become a god that tests humans. I made the film to indict this tragedy of ours, but nothing has changed. Money threatens relationships between individuals as well as between nations. If nothing is done to change it, some unavoidable disaster will befall all of us.

The title **Pietà** cannot represent everything about this film, which is a warning against the peril of money and lack of trust or violence between people. In particular, I would like to stress that violence erupts when trust disappears. In my opinion, violence, on a small scale, is terror between individuals and on a large scale, war between countries.

Written, sourced and edited by Tony Janssens (InFiFa)

A Note on Cannibalism in Korean society. By Professor Se-Woong Koo. (Source: Korea Exposé.)

Between August 2011 and July of 2014, Korea Customs Service apprehended 117 illicit shipments of human flesh capsules to South Korea. The quantity amounted to 27,852 capsules in 2013 alone.

Human flesh capsules are reportedly made in China from aborted fetuses that are dried and pulverized into powder. They have been linked in popular discourse to a wide range of beneficial effects including better skin, improved sexual function, and a higher level of energy. The identity of those who buy human flesh capsules largely remains a mystery, allegations that they are being bought and sold by Koreans of Chinese descent and Chinese tourists notwithstanding. But why some here may crave the capsules can be placed in a context.

Cannibalism has a long history on the peninsula. During the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) the state sanctioned consumption of human parts if the provider intended to express filial piety. Children could, voluntarily or under family pressure, feed their own blood or flesh to ailing parents, and official records note that recipients miraculously rose from their deathbed.

A darker, more sinister form of cannibalism also existed: forcible procurement of human organs. In the sixteenth century King Seon-jo decreed that those who kill people by mutilating the stomach be arrested and brought to justice. He was referring to criminals in the countryside who abducted people in order to remove livers and gallbladders because of those organs' efficacy in curing leprosy. The problem was serious enough that woodcutters could no longer go into the mountains, too frightened from seeing all the victims littering the forests.

During the same century, beggars in the vicinity of the capital's clinics were disappearing one by one, to the point that streets became quiet from their absence. The cause lay with one court physician who had remarked that a human gallbladder could heal venereal diseases. His prescription led to a city-wide wave of murders, whose chief victims were the indigents loitering in the shadow of the clinics. When the supply of beggars dried up, children were next to be kidnapped and killed.

What these two types of cannibalism shared was the belief in the power of human body parts to heal. A gallbladder was believed to cure leprosy, and children's blood and meat could awaken dying parents. The authorities' objection to cannibalism, if there was any, was over violence committed against unwitting individuals whose organs and meat were harvested, and violence against society whose moral values were threatened by the unapproved procurement and consumption of human parts. But the conviction in the medicinal power of the human body was never challenged.

In 1910 the Joseon Dynasty collapsed and Korea was annexed by Japan as a colony. Cannibalism, however, persisted. A police manual dated to 1926 lists under common superstitions the practices of cannibalism as a cure for leprosy and of cutting one's finger off and feeding blood to a dead person as a way of reversing death. Korean reformers also weighed in with condemnations of lepers who attacked passers-by and fed on the oozing blood and unknown persons who exhumed bodies of dead infants, which were believed to be a universal cure.

More scandalous cases involved a man who sucked on the cranial fluid of a corpse to heal his lungs and another who attacked a drunken beggar by a river and excised the genitals so that he could feed them to his epileptic lover.

The last high-profile case of cannibalism in Korea took place on 8 September 1960. A man stumbled into a public toilet near the Seoul Train Station just before 4 a.m. only to find a mutilated seven-year-old boy. The killing had been so violent that not only the boy but also the entire space was stained in blood. A closer inspection showed that sizeable chunks of flesh had been cut away from his legs.

That same morning, a seventeen-year-old girl was arrested not too far from the scene because of blood stains on her clothing and clumps of meat, appearing to be of the victim, inside her pocket. It turned out that she had committed the murder to cure herself of epilepsy. The case file is still available in the National Archives of Korea. The court eventually determined that the perpetrator could only have carried out the crime in a state of insanity, ignoring the fact the girl suffered from epilepsy but no mental disorder.

But the incident revealed that the Korean fetishization of human parts as medicine was an enduring phenomenon, invulnerable to modernity's assaults and advances in science and medicine. And judging by the continuing imports of human flesh capsules from abroad today, there are still Koreans who desire to eat others, much to the chagrin of the South Korean state which has had to announce an official ban against the distribution.

The allure of the human flesh, tantalizing for its transgressive implication and claims of restoring beauty, virility, and health, may have met the perfect conditions under which to thrive in contemporary South Korea: an obsession with diet and personal well-being that began with the rise of the middle class, an outsized health supplement industry that dabbles in dubious ingredients, and above all, the commodification of the human being in all its uses as a provider of labour, service, sex, and now it seems, life itself.

Filial piety forms the core of human relations in Confucian morality. One form of filial piety is 'filial cannibalism', a term for incidents in which children offer their own flesh to their parents out of filial piety. One method of filial cannibalism during the Joseon dynasty in Korea was thigh slicing. This motif appears in Kim Ki-duk's film *Pietà*, in which the male protagonist Kang-do slices his thigh, and offers his flesh to Min-soo, a woman pretending to be his mother. While many studies on *Pietà* examine the Christian references and decode the film's title as a reference to compassion, this study suggests there is also value in examining Confucian references. The act of cannibalism in the film can be understood as initiation of compassion and filial piety, although it is still clear that the relation between Kang-do and Min-soo is based on betrayal and revenge. Arguably, filial piety—the very core of Confucian morality—can be understood as representative of Confucianism itself, similar to the way that compassion is one of the central concepts of Christianity.

To conclude our South Korean Season...

**Tuesday 18th February: *Oldboy*, directed by Park Chan-wook
Eden Court, Playhouse Cinema, at 19:15.**

Park Chan-wook won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 2004 (and reignited interest in the Korean film industry) with this modern classic of punishment and vengeance. One day, Oh Dae-su (a mesmerising Choi Min-sik) awakes in an isolated prison cell, with no idea of what his crime was or who his jailers are. Released after 15 years behind bars, Oh Dae-su struggles to unravel the secret of who was responsible for locking him up, what happened to his wife and daughter, and how to best get revenge against his captors.....

