

Notes on a Korean Scandal: The Blockbuster Social Critique of *Veteran*

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Abstract

In the summer of 2015, the blockbuster crime film *Veteran* (*Beterang*, Ryoo Seung-wan) was released on the screens of South Korea, becoming the biggest box office success for that year and the third most successful Korean film ever. One of the most prominent elements of the film's identity was its caustic critique of some essential institutions of South Korean society, especially the law enforcement system and the powerful conglomerates. *Veteran* merges its political and social commentary with striking action film aesthetics, not neglecting to give depth to the former for the sake of reinforcing its generic identity as a blockbuster movie. This paper addresses the significance that a mainstream film such as *Veteran* attains when mediating topical matters of social relevance. Corruption, social injustice, mistreatment, and nepotism are negotiated on the silver screen as they become so omnipresent that they eventually find their way into otherwise traditionally entertainment-oriented venues. This phenomenon suggests that discussing widespread illegal and socially unsettling conduct is now more urgent than ever in the scandal-stricken modern Korea. The cinema, through its wide access to the public, serves as a conveyor of politically significant messages that dynamically interact with and ultimately influence the spectators' collective memory.

Keywords: South Korea, blockbuster film, social critique, social memory, corruption, *chaebol*

Introduction

South Korea has found itself repeatedly trapped in a net of thorny political and economical scandals during the past two years. Charged with accusations ranging from bribery to abuse of power and attempted fraud, the country's preceding president, Park Geun-hye, was impeached in March 2017. Furthermore, investigations continuing to this day have brought to the surface the involvement of various prominent names from South Korea's political, economical, cultural, and academic sectors in what the media quickly labeled as "South Korea's Presidential Scandal." It was proven that the country's major business conglomerates, commonly known as *chaebol*, were furtively entangled in the wrongdoing, and this discovery led to a series of investigations that ultimately led to the arrest of Lee Jae-yong, Samsung's third generation leader.

In this unsettling context, cultural representations of the country have been reactively transforming, adjusting themselves to a mood of expanding insecurity that haunts South Korean society. South Korean society, in turn, experiencing this widespread crisis that has been propelled by the recurring misconduct of political and economic elites, calls for the establishment of mechanisms for negotiating the dilemmas that have been brought to the surface while, at the same time, requiring an effective vehicle for expressing its fears, anger, and uncertainty. This fact has been persistently confirmed by the growing numbers of mass protests and demonstrations that Korea has witnessed in the past few years, the so called 'candlelight protests' being only one of the most characteristic examples among them.

It is in this very context of widespread public insecurity and resentment towards figures of authority that the analysis of a film like *Veteran* (Ryoo Seung-wan, 2015) becomes essential. *Veteran* is currently the fourth most successful Korean film of all time, managing to attract more than thirteen million viewers at the box office.¹ It can be safely characterized as a mainstream blockbuster film, distributed by CJ Entertainment, Korea's most successful entertainment company,² and featuring numerous vibrant action sequences where a "spectacular audio-visual experience ... is offered in contrast to the smaller-scale resources of

rival films or media.”³

What is notable in *Veteran*'s case, though, is not its box-office success, which is not at all surprising in retrospect, but its willingness to offer a carefully constructed critique of modern South Korea's society and economy, focusing on the responsibility of the country's infamous *chaebols* for its current predicament. Released almost a year before the beginning of the disclosures of the presidential scandal, *Veteran*'s purely fictional cinematic events emerge to be prophetic, pointing the finger to widespread social inequity and satirizing the obsolete, authoritarian, and unauthorized practices of Korea's economic elites.

As it will be more thoroughly argued, the fact that a mainstream blockbuster film chooses to negotiate political issues can be read as a sign of a wider phenomenon whereby popular cultural representations are undergoing a metamorphosis. Furthermore, this transformation seems to respond directly to a now-bigger-than-ever urgency to talk publicly about thorny matters that would otherwise be doomed to languish in the archives of news organizations and on the fringe of social memory.

Blockbuster Film with a Cause

It can be stated with little doubt that blockbuster films suffer from a poor reputation in the circles of academic scholarship. Almost exclusively scrutinized in the framework of American authority and usually identified as vehicles “for Hollywood to cash in on the screen presence of its stars and its technological wizardry,”⁴ they are rarely seen as conveyors of any sort of progressive message or idea. While their potential for promoting the ideological agendas of the political and economic status quo has been repeatedly analyzed and criticized, this very point of view seems to leave out of the equation any capacity for a constructive social critique. In *Veteran*'s case, this issue gets even more perplexing because of the film's double identity first as a generic blockbuster and secondly as a Korean blockbuster.

Korean blockbuster films slowly and steadily made their appearance towards the very end of the 1990s and rapidly multiplied in number and production value during the 2000s to give a dynamic boost to the

country's film industry. However, they are almost solely examined in the context of "a local cinema (that) primarily tries to copy or follow what Hollywood has done."⁵ The discourse that arises around them usually seeks to identify the indigenous Korean identity that these films manage to articulate, persistently reflecting on Homi Bhabha's influential theory of "the third space." Furthermore, Korean blockbusters' unrelenting focus on narratives revolving around South Korea's history has repeatedly made them susceptible to a critique highlighting the dominance of a nationalistic proclivity, striving to "rekindle Korea's post-colonial identity."⁶

Films like *Shiri* (*Swiri*, Kang Je-gyu, 1999), *J.S.A: Joint Security Area* (*Gongdong gyeongbi guyeok JSA*, Park Chan-wook, 2000), *Roaring Currents* (*Myeong-ryang*, Kim Han-min, 2014) and *Ode to My Father* (*Gukjesijang*, Youn JK, 2014) are examples that emphatically attest to the fact that the vast majority of the films that are crowned as box-office successes in Korea do indeed favor a type of "overarching narrative that has a particular focus on articulating Korean identity."⁷ The threat of Japan throughout the centuries, the division between South and North, and the Korean War of 1950-1953 are among the events vividly remembered, represented, and reconstructed in the films of contemporary South Korean cinema, decades or even centuries after their original occurrence.

Therefore, one of the reasons why *Veteran* presents itself as an intriguing case of a Korean blockbuster film is because it manages to avoid the pitfall of copying the Hollywood blockbuster model while simultaneously dodging the danger of patriotic sentimentality. By focusing on social questions born and bred exclusively inside the borders of South Korea, it becomes a rare manifestation of a mainstream film interrogating some of the major and controversial predicaments of modern South Korea.

Eye-Catching Spectacle with a Mindful Narrative

Do-cheol, the protagonist of the film, is a rough and impulsive police officer with a strong sense of justice. He often acts against the orders of

his superiors and his impetuosity leads him to get into fights with his much more sensible and responsible wife. He nevertheless shares a relationship of true camaraderie with his colleagues, supporting them and tending attentively to their problems. The antagonist of the film is Cho Tae-oh, the heir of a dominant and formidable conglomerate, Sin Jin Trading. Cho strives to get the most profitable subsidiary of the group under his control when his father retires, scheming against his own siblings in order to achieve his goal. He is the embodiment of the stereotype of the evil rich kid who manipulates and humiliates everyone who gets in his way. Obnoxious, neurotic, and with a problem of drug abuse, he provokes a scandal that Do-cheol will be called to unveil, and the two men turn against each other in a typical good-against-evil confrontation.

The scandal erupts when Bae, a humble truck driver working for a subcontractor of Sin Jin, visits Cho Tae-oh with his son, determined to get a sum of money that he has earned but never received. The spoiled young man unabashedly forces the driver to get into a boxing match with the slippery subcontractor, Jeong, who is the one refusing to pay him in the first place. Bae refuses to participate in Cho Tae-oh's game, and so he gets brutally beaten by Jeong in front of his crying young son. Tae-oh then throws a check at the bleeding contractor, further humiliating him verbally. After Bae exits the building, he gets furious and decides to go back to face Tae-oh. Tae-oh punches and kicks Bae, who falls on the floor and severely injures his head. The rich man's gang does everything in their power to make sure that no one ever learns what actually happened in the room, throwing Bae from a staircase and staging it as a suicide attempt. Do-cheol and his team strive to unfold this series of events that are meticulously covered up by Sin Jin's men and their connections with the police and the media.

The four films mentioned earlier were all massive box-office successes with direct or indirect references to real historical events that affected Koreans on a large scale. From the Japanese invasions at the end of the 16th century, depicted in *Roaring Currents*, to the portrayal of the Korean War and its aftermath in *Ode to My Father*, and the tension and hostility between the North and South Korea showcased in *Shiri* and *J.*

S.A, these films all offered a modern reconstruction of the country's past, portraying conflicts that directly threatened the lives of its citizens.

Veteran belongs to the same family as the aforementioned films, with *Roaring Currents* and *Ode to My Father* being two of the films outclassing its popularity at the Korean box-office. However, *Veteran*'s focus is not on such large issues as a civil war or foreign occupation. The matter at hand, the abuse of citizens orchestrated by *chaebol*, is one of a smaller magnitude even if its consequences affect the vast majority of the Korean population. One of the most prominent cases testifying to that reality would be the IMF crisis, widely regarded as a direct outcome of *chaebol*'s "unrestrained market power and expansion, which caused enormous damage to the Korean economy." The *chaebol* systematically took up contentious practices ranging from "excessive and illegal debt financing; boundless expansion of capacity; charging excessively high prices" to "persuade the government to restrict new entry or open market policies." The *chaebol* also engaged in "speculation in real estate and the stock market" and were complicit in schemes having to do with "illegal inheritance or transfer of property."⁸

While the plot of *Veteran* is purely fictional, there is but little doubt that it takes the blueprint for the problematic situations it depicts directly from the socioeconomic realities of modern South Korea. Switching from comedy to action and from drama to police thriller, *Veteran* uses the silver screen as a canvas where it unfolds its critique on pressing social issues arising from inequity, abuse, mistreatment, nepotism, and bureaucracy, all caused by a single event. There is even a striking allusion to Park's presidential scandal towards the film's climax.

A cop movie with a noticeably high budget, filled with spectacular action sequences and a formulaic good-against-evil plot could be easily regarded as "culturally retrograde, beneath serious consideration or analysis."⁹ Breaking that stereotype, *Veteran* does not shy away from going deeper into a realistic portrayal of social violence and discrimination. This very fact makes its critique spontaneously accessible to the spectators, as the sight of a man brutally abused in front of his young son for economic reasons, can hardly appear on the screen without causing a deeply-felt discomfort and rage within the audience.

In the light of this description, the immediate audience response to the bold images of *Veteran* is worthy of note. It is a response generated by the film's choice to use characters that are easily relatable to the viewer so that the narratives revolving around them can immediately become personal to the audience. Bae, the victim of Cho's abuse, is represented as a person who prioritizes his son's well-being above everything else. In the very first scene where his character is introduced, he confesses to Do-cheol that even if he works a lot he is still unable to pay for his son's after-school tuition. That happens, as he explains, because numerous of his contractors refuse to pay him even after he has executed the job that they assign him to do. After the truck driver gets brutally beaten by the subcontractor, he chooses to send his son home on a taxi before going back to face Cho in his office. Bae's choice of words and actions represent him as an honest working-class man, who cares for his child and cannot turn a blind eye on the injustice that he experiences. His character is, therefore, highly relatable to any working person with a family that has faced economic injustice or has lived with the fear of it.

Even if that seems to be a basic and widely used approach grounded on the very unpretentious natural human reaction to cinematic images, its effects should not be disregarded as being of lesser social or political significance. In times where economic uncertainty remains high, the exposition of individual cases involving intense agony can contribute to the establishment of a public platform to discuss and negotiate traumatizing issues like those shown in the film. Such a platform, be it in the form of a book, or a film, or an academic conference, can, in its turn, "mitigate traumatized isolation and create empathy with the sufferings of others in the present."¹⁰ Anger, shame, and other negative emotions associated with economic frustration are therefore channeled into public forms of expression, where productive practical discourses can emerge, transforming the reasonable pessimism of the past and the present to an equally reasonable hope for the future.

Further investigating how a mainstream film like *Veteran* comes to be of social relevance, it would also be useful to take under consideration that there is an important "distinction between films whose stories are mere pretexts for showing off certain technical effects and films that

‘actually’ have a story to tell.”¹¹ That said, Ryoo’s film positions itself in this group of movies that do not prioritize spectacle over narrative. On the contrary, the spectacular action scenes are carefully distributed inside the body of the film so that the dynamically edited car chases and criminal pursuits do not overshadow the realistic and dramatic scenes and sequences of social relevance.

The corruption of the country’s corporate giants, though, is not the only target that *Veteran* chooses to denounce and satirize. Do-cheol’s team is repeatedly portrayed as highly unprofessional, prioritizing eating or going home early over solving a case. Their clumsy, almost childish behavior portrays the Korean police force to be afflicted by a generalized incompetence, a representation that is prominent in numerous contemporary South Korean films. Do-cheol has to initially work on Bae’s case independently from the police, as his superiors warn him that getting involved in it could result in his layoff. The protagonist’s team leader and close friend, officer Oh, even reminds him that no police officer has ever touched the super-rich people and the ones who had tried it have ended up with no job and no family. Throughout the largest part of the film, police is represented as turning a blind eye on Sin Jin’s atrocities with its leadership covering the latter’s illegal deeds. Do-cheol’s resolution to go against his superiors’ warnings, ultimately persuading them to follow his lead to fight for what is right towards the end of the film, is presented as a sign of resistance that pays off.

The encroachment of labor rights and laws is another reoccurring motif in the film. Driver Bae’s decision to confront Tae-oh is the unexpected consequence of the former being fired after joining a union. Jeong, who furthermore accuses Bae of being a communist, frowns upon his decision. For the slippery subcontractor, fighting for one’s rights as a worker is as unimaginable and impermissible as being a communist. The segregation of immigrants and the discrimination enforced by the class divide should be, finally, mentioned as some additional socially relevant themes that the *Veteran* criticizes. Jeong, who has been hiding after the scandal erupted, proposes to Choi that eliminating Do-cheol would be a solution to the problems that the officer has created. He informs him that there are numerous illegal immigrants, with no identification

documents, who would be willing to kill for a considerably low amount of money. Choi, unsurprisingly enough, agrees to Choi's plan to employ impoverished immigrants to get Do-cheol out of the way.

From this condensed delineation it becomes visible that, in *Veteran*, the enemy is not the North Koreans or the Japanese, as is usually the case with numerous other blockbusters made in the country, but modern South Korea itself, with all of the problems and contradictions that impair its social infrastructure. That alone is a matter of great significance since switching the object of judgment from the others to South Korea itself presupposes the acknowledgment that something has gone wrong and this acknowledgment can show results of actual political significance. "The swing from silence to public acknowledgment may strengthen a democracy's political culture instead of undermining the legitimacy of its institutions"¹² and such strengthening is crucial in a country afflicted by political corruption.

Fittingly set in the heart of contemporary cosmopolitan Seoul, *Veteran* represents the modern environment of the city as the ground where contrasting social and economic inequities that afflict South Korean society make their devastating appearance. Seoul is always in focus throughout the film with its towering skyscrapers, large avenues, and tightly built residences offering a compelling background for the plot to unfold. The posh, modern hotels and restaurants that the rich antagonists of the film frequent in the very heart of the city are forcefully contrasted with the poor flats situated in the city outskirts bringing to the surface the problem of the class divide. But these contrasts do not only exist inside the limits of the fictive universe of *Veteran*, but also affect its composition as a film, in the way that the film presents itself to the spectator. To be more specific, Ryoo's blockbuster cannot be straightforwardly branded in terms of genre, and this very fact adds to its effort to provide social commentary.

Hybridity as a Sign of Resistance

As stated above, *Veteran* strategically alternates spectacular action and slapstick sequences with ones filled with realistic drama and

social commentary, thereby connecting heterogeneous or seemingly incompatible film genres with each other. Accordingly, the social critique that it offers gets blended with the purely visual attractions that periodically make their appearance. This very fact additionally contributes to the efficacy of its critique, as the intervening action sequences function as a break from the devastating scenes of social injustice and abuse, offering time to the spectator to process and register the depth of the harm. Leaping from one film genre to another and changing its mood from a feel-good atmosphere to a heavily emotion-charged tone, it corresponds to the tradition of hybridity that is so prominent in contemporary Korean cinema, being a “South Korean blockbuster which clearly demonstrates ‘different’ features from the dominant Hollywood form.”¹³

Examples of such features can be found throughout the film, as the vast majority of its characters seem to defy any strict classification under the schematic labels of black and white or good and bad. Miss Bong, the only female cop on Do-cheol’s team, makes her first appearance in *Veteran* all dressed up in an overtly sensationalistic manner, as she is under cover as the secret lover of the protagonist in order to crack a case. Her temperament quickly changes when they draw away from the suspects; she throws away her wig and starts to curse out Do-cheol for getting too deep into his role and flirting with her while on duty. Miss Bong could be interpreted as a dynamic female character as she is much more effective and fiercer than most of her male colleagues. High-kicks are her signature and she shows true compassion for the victims of Tae-oh’s malevolence. However, she is also often clumsy, at times immature, and frequently depicted as being bored while at work. Do-cheol is also a lot like Miss Bong, neither a clear hero nor a villain. He tampers with evidence to cover his wrongdoing, is accused by his wife of being a bad role-model for his son, and systematically refuses to follow the orders of his superiors. Furthermore, even if he is represented as a tenacious fighter throughout the film, he gets utterly beaten by Tae-oh towards the end. It is actually Miss Bong who gets to deal the final decisive blow to the villain, an act for which Do-cheol congratulates her. Such contradictory details in character and gender reversals make *Veteran* a

special case of a blockbuster film, making for a visible contrast with the dominant Hollywood formula.

It should be clearly stated, at this point, that Hollywood blockbuster films are by no means disregarded here as devoid of any sorts of social critique. The very term blockbuster is by design tailored to speak of a film's financial merits without imposing any classification in terms of the latter's narrative or style. There are therefore no ramifications preventing a blockbuster film from offering social commentary to its wide audiences. As scholar Julian Stringer has asserted, "some movies are born blockbusters; some achieve blockbuster status; some have blockbuster status thrust upon them"¹⁴ and this fate is largely decided upon their financial potential and performance rather than their narrative content. Nevertheless, it is Hollywood blockbusters' inescapable bond to box-office that makes them emerge as a consequential part of "a conspicuous oligopoly that acts both consistently and incongruously to capitalism."¹⁵ After all, not adhering to the latter's ideals would be, on the part of the American producers, "a very bad business decision."¹⁶

In light of the statements above, it could be asserted that *Veteran's* novelty in the context of blockbuster production is not the existence of social critique on its own, but the inauguration of a new mode of heroic agency, in terms of its character building. Do-cheol is definitely the one launching the investigation of Bae's case, trying to persuade his superiors and his team to join him on his quest for justice. The latter initially show signs of resistance, being afraid of the consequences, but ultimately follow Do-cheol's example, refusing to let him face Sin Jin's corruption on his own. As a result, when they manage to uncover Tae-cho's guilt, they do it as a team rather than Do-cheol's mere sidekicks; a good instance would be the final scene where Miss Bong delivers the final blow to Tae-oh with the rest of the team standing behind her. This pattern of a collective heroic agency sharply contrasts with the Hollywood formula where heroism "reduces social problems to individual agency, thereby masking the systemic nature of economic conditions by encouraging individualistic solutions."¹⁷ This model of individual agency, so prevalent in the smash superhero franchises of Marvel, is transformed into collective agency where the protagonist's actions are accompanied by the

ones of his colleagues.

Even if *Veteran* borrows elements from what is widely considered to be a traditional Hollywood blockbuster formula (good vs. evil, manhunts, car chases, etc.), it is far from formulaic. It would be more relevant to claim that it handles “the blockbuster as a site [by means of which] to speak to local Korean issues,”¹⁸ as it confronts predicaments that remain pervasive in the social reality of modern Korea. Among these concerns, the dominance and duplicity of the *chaebol* receives the lion’s share of *Veteran*’s critical discourse.

We Need to Talk about *Chaebol*

The fact that a blockbuster film like *Veteran* chooses to tackle deeply rooted injustices and socially destructive phenomena like the ones described above can lead to a couple of thought-provoking hypotheses. The first one has to do with an urgency of publicly representing and negotiating cases of entrenched corruption and injustice that arise in the midst of the long problematic relationship between the country’s political authorities and its conglomerates. It is not a big secret that South Korea has for a long time been facing multifarious problems directly or indirectly caused by the widespread misconduct of the *chaebol*. The “family-based despotic and adventurous entrepreneurship” of the colossal conglomerates “is certainly a key factor in their phenomenal compressed growth,”¹⁹ and persistent practices of bribery and illegal transactions with clients have become part of such entrepreneurship and naturally provoked the rage of the public.

Slowly making their appearance in the first half of the previous century and starting to grow in number after the end of the Japanese occupation in 1945, the South Korean conglomerates were tainted from their very beginning with the perception that they received privileged treatment from the country’s political elites. Syngman Rhee’s government was the first to grant favors to promising Korean businessmen, and in return those “promising businessmen contributed to Rhee’s political fund.”²⁰ These favors took the form of import licenses and foreign currency, and both of them were extremely precious in the period

when South Korea's economy almost exclusively relied on the financial assistance provided by the United States.

However, the most dramatic acceleration and accumulation of power and wealth for the *chaebol* took place during the military government of Park Chung-hee. The dictatorship provided the corporations with ample capital through a "vast array of measures like tax reductions and export subsidies or loans without collaterals and by acting as their credit guarantor,"²¹ a situation that led to South Korea's extremely rapid and problematic compressed modernization.

What was only briefly outlined above shows that the uncovering of the involvement of some of the country's most prominent corporations in the scandal that led to the impeachment of Park Geun-hye is only the latest disturbing event in a lengthy series of incidents of corruption and impropriety. While news about such scandals regularly reaches the pages of newspapers and Internet news sites, the perpetrators of the economic crimes are rarely punished in a manner that is in proportion to their transgressions. This longstanding phenomenon has generated a discourse of unfinished business, in which each new administration has had to pay the "unavoidable costs of political and legal punishment" whereby "each new political leader has tried to purify himself from the wrongdoings of his political predecessors."²² *Veteran's* decision to convey such an incident to a large portion of the Korean population by taking advantage of its status as a mainstream film can therefore be read as a sign of the willingness of the public to negotiate issues that have stayed in the margins of the country's social memory longer than they should have.

Discussing the *chaebol* and their scandalous practices in public furthermore entails leaping over various pitfalls of a practical and emotional nature. The conglomerates of South Korea control an extremely large amount of the country's wealth, a fact that is explicitly reflected in their share of South Korea's GDP. The share of the *chaebol* at its highest point in 2011 made up 80% of the South Korean economy.²³ Such figures seem to echo the monopolistic behavior of the *chaebol* and the favoritism shown to them by the government, but their aggressive and illegal attitude rarely discourages the Korean people from wanting

to take them as their employers, as their names are still synonymous with social prestige and the wider acceptance inherent to it. Furthermore, the indisputable role that the *chaebol* played in the extremely rapid economic growth of South Korea during the second half of the last century, known as the “Miracle on the Han River,” contributed to their recognition as models of vigorous entrepreneurship responsible for modernizing the face of Korea. The repeated scandals, therefore, along with their depiction in popular cultural representations, are sensitive issues that demand that the society prepare itself to face the precarious contradictions behind the story of its modern success.

The second assumption has to do with the inherently commercial nature of a blockbuster film. If an issue is portrayed and negotiated in a mainstream film, that fact presupposes that the type of representation that is offered is likely to be accepted by a mass audience, as the objective of a blockbuster is to attract millions of people to the movie theaters. The reason for this is that the production and distribution companies backing blockbuster movies are very careful in choosing themes that share the public’s thoughts and feelings in order to ensure that their investments will be profitable. The backers of *Veteran* operated on the understanding that its anti-corporate standpoint was shared by a large segment of Korean society.

Apart from having the ability to reach a large audience, *Veteran*’s status as a blockbuster fiction film lends it additional advantages when it comes to serving as a form of social memory. These advantages can be located in the center of a contradiction created between a fictional film’s de facto distance from reality and its effective proximity to the spectator’s world. A fiction film like *Veteran* arguably has the ability to demonstrate a critical distance towards the subjects that it raises by not referring to actual persons and situations, leaving the audience to make its own connections and associations. At the same time, because it uses cinematic characters with personalities, actions and reactions that resemble real life, it easily evokes the sympathy of the spectators who spontaneously project their own experiences and feelings onto the onscreen personas. It is at this very point that the element of critique in *Veteran* becomes so compelling, “registering the direct personal experiences of individuals of

a particular singular event or a constellation of events, including his or her affective disposition towards the said episodes of the past²⁴ and the present.

Social Memory Versus History

The relationship between social memory and popular cinematic representation has been repeatedly explored and analyzed from various scholars in the field of cultural studies. Fiction films have been seen as cultural agents shaping and reshaping the collective memory of societies, and memory has been regarded as “a narrative rather than a replica of an experience that can be retrieved and relived.”²⁵ Treating memory as a narrative presents one central reason why fiction films can be so potent in influencing people’s thoughts, feelings, actions, and reactions.

The way that traumatic events of the past are negotiated, appropriated, and registered in the collective memory of a society is indeed a thought-provoking field of research that brings to the surface issues of greater social and political relevance. Molding a given society’s collective memory is an ongoing project, where not only cinema but also various media take part, amalgamating impressions of the past with experiences of the present and expectations for the future. Furthermore, representations of the past change as time goes by and the consequences of now-long-gone actions start being felt. “The past is not given, but must instead continually be re-constructed and represented”²⁶ and that very fact is what makes the transfiguration of popular cultural representations inescapable and vital.

In the case of South Korea’s former president, Park Geun-hye, the interplay between public outrage and cultural representation was initiated long before her recent impeachment. In 2014, artist Hong Sungdam produced a painting depicting the then-president as a puppet in the hands of her military general father, next to an image of the sunken Sewol ferry. The painting was pulled from Gwangju Biennale that year, due to its supposedly inappropriate representation of Park, causing the fierce reaction of various artists who defended Hong’s right of expression. Two and a half years later, when the presidential scandal

erupted, demonstrations organized by labor unions demanding the impeachment of Park made a display of sizable effigies and placards with satirical representations of the country's most powerful individual. One of them portrayed her tied up in ropes along with the logos of some of the country's most prominent conglomerates.

The discussion above is applicable to *Veteran*, as the film depicts outrages familiar to scandal-stricken Korea and fiercely criticizes the guilty party behind it. There are scenes of brazen injustice, like the ones mentioned earlier, but there are also ones that are shrewdly satirical. In one of the latter, the right-hand man of Tae-oh passes a diaper to the young man so that he can sit through a long meeting with the main shareholders of Sin Jin without soiling himself. This is shown to be a common practice in the film. Later on, the very same man gets spanked on his buttocks by Tae-oh's father for not having been effective in covering up the scandal.

The leading members of Sin Jin are, furthermore, portrayed as being on the verge of a nervous breakdown throughout the largest part of the film. Tae-oh gets easily irritated and reacts neurotically every time he realizes that his underdogs have not managed to make Bae disappear, but instead of fixing the situation by himself he keeps on commanding his men to find a solution to the problem that he alone created. Accordingly, Choi responds to his boss's commands by scheming to keep all the parties involved in the scandal silent. He tries to bribe Bae's wife, pretending that Sin Jin is above all sympathetic to the tormented woman and consequently ventures into offering a designer's bag to Do-cheol's wife in order to persuade her to convince her husband to get involved in the case. He ultimately fails in both of his attempts as it is proven that the women prioritize their husbands over money and luxury. The villains of *Veteran* are, therefore, showcased like caricatures taking for granted the immunity that their economic superiority grants them while being impotent to orchestrate a master plan that could work.

One of the strongest instruments that films, along with other cultural representations, possess in the shaping of collective memory arises from their proximity to the public's affective world. Through identifying with cinematic figures and situations, spectators make the filmic depictions

their own, empathizing with the protagonists and interpreting them in a personal manner. Films like *Veteran*, therefore, help audiences to reflect upon their past experiences, comparing them with the ones exhibited through the screen. Coming face to face with the misfortunes of *Veteran*'s fictional characters, the viewers have the chance to project spontaneously their own emotions and thoughts on the representations of the characters. That is another reason why memory gets so easily edited by film; because the former resides in the realm of the personal, the realm that cinematic images and impressions resettle after the spectator leaves the movie theater. "Memory, even cultural memory, is local, egocentric, and specific to a group and its values"²⁷ and that's what makes it so vulnerable to narratives that address intimate issues.

At this point, cultural representations gain an advantage over history as it is recorded and disseminated by history books, newspapers, and other official accounts. Newspapers and magazines all over the world may report frequently on corporate malfeasance and on abuses of power. However, while doing so they are often compelled to adhere to the rules of a social and political order that is informed by the interests of a particular class or ruling group. Cultural representations on the other hand provide a type of knowledge that, as it was discussed above, is much more personal and therefore accessible, conveying events "to the public with what is variously termed 'authenticity' or 'truthfulness.'"²⁸ In the case of film, specifically, such mediated knowledge can become even more authentic to the audience through the power of cinematic immersion. Film has undoubtedly the inherent ability to deliver its images and narratives in an ultimately uninhibited manner as "it engages the viewer at the somatic level, immersing the spectator in experiences and impressions that, like memories, seem to be burned in."²⁹

The issue of immediacy is of the utmost importance in the context of discussing film's ability to offer productive critique on a matter of wide social importance. That is because this critique, in turn, spontaneously influences the way that the spectators of the film are going to think and/or act on the matter in question. It is vital, therefore, for a movie presenting social commentary to be accessible to an as large as possible number of spectators. *Veteran* succeeds in communicating its messages to

a large audience, being distributed by CJ Entertainment. The ambitious entertainment company effectively guarantees that the film will be efficiently advertised, distributed, and exhibited.

At this point, the counter-argument could be made that a commercial action film would only let its spectator draw inferences allowed by the dominant ideological system of the society where it is produced. From that point of view, *Veteran* would be seen as naturalizing any radical content it may express, as it is a film produced in South Korea, a country whose modern complexion has been defined by its neoliberal capitalistic economy. A constructive response to such claims can arguably be found in Judith Mayne's writings on the concept of film spectatorship. The feminist scholar has asserted that examining film from a strict ideological perspective can lead to a counter-productive negation of any potential that the former may have for social change. In particular, Mayne states that if "there is nothing about cinema that is not saturated with ideology, then the radical or contestatory powers of the cinema [would be] limited to those films which functioned to demonstrate the ideological complicity of the film."³⁰ In other words, any film expressing ideas that function as dissonances to the dominant ideological system of a given society would be automatically and exclusively seen as inhabiting a marginal locus of social importance that the latter has allowed it to inhabit. *Veteran* has therefore been examined here as "ideologically influenced, but not necessarily monolithically so,"³¹ opposing any assumptions of a complete compliance to the neoliberal capitalistic spirit of the society that produced it but without excluding the latter's power on it.

The discussion above shows why a fiction blockbuster film like *Veteran* can actually have the ability to influence the public opinion much more efficiently than institutionalized media. By positioning itself close to the spectator's affective world through the empathizing power that fiction cinema lends it, the film relays public events in a personal manner, leading to a promising potential shift of their ways of thinking and their courses of action on various issues.

Conclusion

From this broad analysis of the film it becomes clear that *Veteran* showcases a series of idiosyncratic elements that make it stand out in the context of Korean blockbuster film. Its dexterity in avoiding the patriotically oriented cinematic tradition of the country enabled it to emerge as a South Korean blockbuster that makes a forceful commentary on the social, political, and economic misadventures of modern South Korea.

By pointing the finger at the abuse of power on the part of the country's economic aristocracy, *Veteran* exposes a number of socially destabilizing phenomena on the cinema screen. The *chaebols* and their members are represented as masked sociopaths that brazenly abuse the people around them, relying on their privileged economic position to shield them from justice. But they are also satirized, exposed as caricatures with highly neurotic dispositions that engage in inconsiderate behaviors that ultimately lead to their downfall. This turn in the plot strategically provides a catharsis for the viewers from the moment that all of the wrongdoing perpetrated by the leaders of the *chaebol* meets the justice it called for.

Being a fiction film, *Veteran* keeps its distance from reality, letting the spectators make their own associations and connections with real facts and persons. By letting them do so, it carves their memories, projecting its cinematic images to their personal experiences and thoughts. In that sense, *Veteran* functions as cue "for the discussion of those images, thus centering a memory culture on certain medial representations and sets questions connected with them."³² These questions are, in their turn, of political significance as they interrogate incidents of widespread corruption strikingly similar to the ones that South Korea has been facing in the past couple of years. Representing them in an accessible manner in the form of a blockbuster action film, it sheds light on controversial events and situations and negotiates them in an affective way: "To represent the unrepresentable is to force the truth into a situation in such a way as to reveal the inconsistency of facts as they are currently understood as well as the possibility that there is something we don't know or understand."³³ That is precisely what *Veteran's* memory-editing force manages to do in the framework of the long history of corruption

in South Korea.

Analyzing the film in this context, the hope arises that more blockbuster films will choose to follow *Veteran*'s approach to pressing problematic social and political issues. The director of the film, Ryo Seung-wan has already announced his plans to make a sequel that "will revolve around real social issues that many people will relate to."³⁴ From his statement it becomes clear that the critique in his films is highly intended, offered to the spectators as the culmination of the director's determination to make them sympathize to their heroes. *Veteran*, therefore, presents itself as an emissary of an inquisitive spirit and a sympathetic attitude, breaking the barriers of communication around controversial issues that have plagued modern Korean society. That is enough of a reason why its social critique succeeds in being so poignant.

Notes

¹ "All Time Box Office," *KOBIZ: Korean Film Biz Zone*, accessed August 2, 2017, http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr/jsp/news/boxOffice_AllTime.jsp?mode=BOXOFFICE_ALLTIME.

² "Database, Film Directory," *KOBIZ: Korean Film Biz Zone*, accessed August 2, 2017, <http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr/jsp/films/index/filmsView.jsp?movieCd=20148048>.

³ Geoff King, "Spectacle, Narrative, and the Spectacular Hollywood Blockbuster," in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003), 114.

⁴ Constantine Santas, *The Epic in Film: From Myth to Blockbuster* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 13.

⁵ Dal Yong Jin, "Hybridization of Korean Popular Culture," in *The Korean New Wave: Korean Media Go Global*, ed. Youna Kim (London: Routledge, 2013), 55.

⁶ Hye Ryoung Ok, "The Politics of the Korean Blockbuster: Narrating the Nation and the Spectacle of 'Glocalization' in 2009 *Lost Memories*," *Transnationalism and Film Genres in East Asian Cinema* 29, no. 2 (2009): 43-44.

⁷ Chris Howard, "Contemporary South Korean Cinema: 'National Conjunction' and 'Diversity,'" in *East Asian Cinemas: Exploring Transnational Connections on Film*, eds. Leon Hunt and Leung Wing-Fai (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 92.

⁸ Phil-Sang Lee, "Economic Crisis and Chaebol Reform in Korea," *Discussion Paper Series APEC Study Center Columbia Business School* 14 (2000): 2.

⁹ Julian Stringer, "Introduction," in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003), 1.

¹⁰ Susannah Radstone, "Trauma and Screen Studies: Opening the Debate," *Screen* 42, no. 2 (2001): 192.

¹¹ Erlend Lavik, "New Narrative Depths? Spectacle and Narrative in Blockbuster Cinema Revisited," *Nordicom Review* 30, no. 2 (2009): 145.

¹² Andreas Langenohl, "Memory in Post-Authoritarian Societies," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 170.

¹³ Jung Sun, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 15.

¹⁴ Stringer, "Introduction," 10.

¹⁵ Jayson Baker, "Waking Up the Mythic American Neo" in *Heroes of Film, Comics and American Culture: Essays on Real and Fictional Defenders of Home*, ed. Lisa DeTora (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 268.

¹⁶ Mark T. Decker, *Industrial Society and the Science Fiction Blockbuster: Social Critique in Films of Lucas, Scott and Cameron* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company: 2016), 8.

¹⁷ Baker, "Waking Up the Mythic American Neo," 268.

¹⁸ Chris Berry, "What's Big About the Big Film? 'De-Westernizing' the Blockbuster in Korea and China," in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003), 226.

¹⁹ Kyung-sup Chang, "Compressed Modernity and its Discontents: South Korean Society in Transition," *Economy and Society* 28, no. 1 (1999): 39.

²⁰ Sea-jin Chang, *Financial Crisis and Transformation of Korean Business Groups: The Rise and Fall of Chaebols* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 47.

²¹ David Murillo and Yun-dal Sung, "Understanding Korean Capitalism: Chaebols and their Corporate Governance," *ESADEge POSITION PAPER* 33, (2013): 5.

²² *Ibid.*, 40.

²³ Eun-jung Kwon, "Top ten chaebol now almost 80% of Korean economy," *The Hankyoreh*, August 28, 2012, accessed August 5, 2017, http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_business/549028.html.

²⁴ Chua Beng Huat, "State Violence, Social Memory, and the Ethics of Remembrance and Forgiveness in East Asia," *Situations: Cultural Studies in the Asian Context* 10, no. 1 (2017): 3.

²⁵ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 7.

²⁶ Astrid Erll, "Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (see note 12), 7.

²⁷ Jan Assman, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, 113.

²⁸ Astrid Erll, "Literature, Film and the Mediality of Cultural Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, 389.

²⁹ Robert Burgoyne, "Memory, History and Digital Imagery in Contemporary Film," in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University

Press, 2003), 223.

³⁰ Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993), 78.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

³² Erll, "Literature, Film and the Mediality of Cultural Memory," 396.

³³ Patrick McGee, *Bad History and the Logics of Blockbuster Cinema: Titanic, Gangs of New York, Australia, Inglorious Basterds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 19.

³⁴ "'Veteran' Sequel Confirmed," *The Korea Times*, November 10, 2015, accessed September 3, 2017, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/culture/2015/09/141_186554.html.