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Writing the past to fight Alzheimer's disease: Masculinity, temporality, and agency in *Memoir of a Murderer*

Raquel Medina

Memoir of a Murderer is a 2017 South Korean thriller film directed by Won Shin-yun and adapted from the 2013 fiction novel by South Korean writer Kim Young Ha, *A Murderer's Guide to Memorization*. The film tells the story of Byung-soo, a 70-year-old veterinarian and former serial killer, who lives a quiet life with his daughter Eun-hee, who has cared for him ever since his Alzheimer's disease diagnosis. When Eun-hee brings her new boyfriend home, the young policeman Tae-joo, Byung-soo realizes that Tae-joo is a serial killer as well. To save his daughter, Byung-soo must fight both Tae-joo as well as his forgetting. Therefore, the film's story is constructed and structured around two narrative levels: the film's narrative and Byung-soo's diary writing in which he inscribes his memories (and narrates himself). In addition, embedded within the narrative of the film, Alzheimer's disease becomes a plot device to create suspense by erasing or blurring the limits between reality and fiction. Hence the Alzheimer's disease experience of the main character is used to shape the viewing experience itself; the viewer is never sure if what is presented on screen is Byung-soo's imaginative rewriting/remembering of the past and present or the events as they happened and are happening in the present. The film, with the goal of getting the viewer to identify with the main character, makes the viewer experience memory loss as Byung-soo is experiencing it, adding thereby another degree of uncertainty about reality.

Film and TV series in which dementia is a plot device have shown a clear tendency to masculinize crime narratives as spaces in which the forgetting minds of the detectives or criminals still shelter the intelligence and agency to resolve a

crime or to redeem themselves (Cohen-Shalev and Marcus 2012; Medina 2018). There is a vast discussion among film scholars about the differences between mystery and crime film, their subgenres (Rafter 2000), the viewer's expectations (Leitch 2002), and the difference between crime, a metaphor for social unrest, and thriller, in which an isolated event takes place (Clarens 1997). The same problem occurs when trying to define thriller or film noir. Frank Krutnik (2001, 17) stresses the trans-genre quality of film noir, hence his preference for using the term 'tough' thriller, which is used for those films centred on a male hero who is involved either in the investigation of a crime or in the crime itself (Krutnik 2001, 24). Likewise, the 'tough' thriller 'reveals a particular obsession with the representation of masculine identity and male cultural authority' (Krutnik 2001, 25). Within this 'tough' thriller term, the psychological 'tough' thriller is also found (Krutnik 2001, 18), which can be succinctly defined as a story usually told from the point of view of characters experiencing psychological problems and thus depicting their mental state and perceptions.

Nikki J. Y. Lee and Julian Stringer (2013) pin down the post-Second World War period as the time when many US and European genre films were finally released after the hiatus occurring during the Second World War. Following this trend, South Korean filmmakers started to make films with thriller elements to distance themselves and their films from melodrama, the most popular genre of the period. From this point onwards, crime/action-thrillers became very popular in South Korea. Since the 1960s, thrillers in all their subgenres have been produced in great numbers, in all subgenres, and with big box-office success. In fact, as Jinhee Choi (2010) points out, thrillers allowed the advent of the blockbuster phenomenon in South Korea at the turn of the century and after the 1997 IMF crisis.¹ As will be discussed, thrillers were conceived as a means for restoring masculinity in Korean cinema and subsequently in South Korean national identity.

Among the most recent filmmakers combining thriller and masculinity is Won Shin-yun. His first horror film was *The Wig* (2005), followed by action-thrillers such as *A Bloody Aria* (2006), *Seven Days* (2007), *The Suspect* (2013), and *Memoir of a Murderer* (2017). His last two films, *Fifth Column* (2020) and *The Battle: Roar*

¹ South Korea signed an agreement with the IMF to address the financial problems resulting from the 1997 Asian financial crisis that affected much of East Asia and Southeast Asia in July 1997 and lasted until the end of 1998.

to Victory (2019), combine period action and the military along with crime plots. Following the path of the recent Korean thriller success, Won Shin-yun directed *Memoir of a Murderer*, where he employs one of the aspects of the psychological thriller: to follow the state of mind of the character, thus focusing on the individual's subjectivity and not so much on the plot. *Memoir of a Murderer* is an example of a thriller in which masculinity, male authority, and the individual's state of mind and subjectivity are core for the understanding of the film within the context of the remasculinization of South Korean cinema (Kyung Hyun Kim 2004) after the so-called 'IMF crisis' in 1997.

In this chapter, I examine *Memoir of a Murderer* from three perspectives. First, the film is analysed as an ethical reflection about violent masculinity (Peberdy 2011) within the context of the remasculinization of South Korean cinema. This ethical reflection is deployed through the remembering and then writing about the crimes that the retired serial killer committed with the intention of justifying the ethical (and patriarchal) reasons behind those killings (his father's sexual abuse of his sister and physical violence against him; the adulterous wife; etc.) and trying to redeem himself by stopping Tae-joo's killings of innocent women. That is, Byung-soo's masculinity and the patriarchal role men have in South Korea are reflected through his role as both the protector and punisher of women. Secondly, the paradoxical effect Alzheimer's disease has on the retired serial killer will be explored: memory loss allows him to first remember his past and then to memorize it through writing, which in turn permits him to narrate himself. Finally, this chapter will show how this memorization, as reflected in the circularity of the film and its ambiguous ending, acknowledges that forgetting that something has happened can help to maintain one's temporality: Byung-soo's forgetting of having killed Tae-joo (recent past) drives him to preserve his own life (present), instead of committing suicide because his goal is still to hunt down Tae-joo (future).

1. Violent masculinity and the concept of the 'eternal recurrence of the same'

The Korean War (1950–3) resulted in an image of an emasculated and weak Korean male. This emasculation was fought with the implementation of a

state-enforced public discourse that presented a militarized masculinity (Chungmoo Choi 1998). During Park Chung-hee's dictatorship (1961–79) and the Vietnam War, a concept of masculinity that was anchored in the notions of nation and duty in both the military and economic spheres was created. This masculinization of the Korean male was later reinforced by a buoyant labour market that allowed men to become successful and empowered (Elfving-Hwang 2017). The masculinization of employment defined Korean men as the family providers, hence strengthening the Korean patriarchal social system and relegating women to the domestic sphere.

However, the 1997 Asian financial crisis severely affected South Korea and produced a high rise in unemployment rates and consequently a crisis of patriarchy. The loss of employment evolved in a new emasculation of the Korean male and family provider that, in return, according to Joanna Elfving-Hwang,

was used to legitimate the perceived necessity of supporting the existing gendered structures, which in turn repositioned women into the domestic support roles or into 'flexible workforce' thought to benefit the nation and society at large by safeguarding the normative family.

2017, 57

Elfving-Hwang notes how by the early 2000s a new type of 'soft' masculinity surfaced in Asia that popularized the so-called 'flower boy': androgynous males who became very popular among young and middle-aged women. This new kind of 'soft' masculinity, according to Elfving-Hwang, was perceived by the political and social establishment as a threat to Korean masculinity (2017, 58).

The tension just described between masculinization and emasculation seems to have defined the role of men in South Korea in the last seventy years. As a result of the historical traumas that South Korea as a nation experienced, Miyoung Gu argues that South Korean cinema has embraced the representation of a post-traumatic father that is characterized mainly as violent and sacrificial, and emerges as a metaphor of national identity in films produced in the last fifteen to twenty years (2020, 73). Gu classifies the different types of father presented in these films: the poor father, the homemaking father, the desperate father, the gangster father, the salaryman father, the brutal father, the criminal

father, and the sacrificial father, among others (2020, 75). Similarly, Gu claims that 'Korean films exhibit a trend of strengthening the position of the father, thereby increasing male solidarity by representing the crisis of masculinity in terms of men who have lost their patriarchal authority' (2020, 75).

Y. N. Kim (2010) has analysed the figure of the violent father in South Korean film as the method of representing the collapse of the family and the victimization of the patriarchal figure due to either social injustice or the deceit of the state. Nonetheless, as Gu highlights, violent males, instead of directing their violence in the direction of the state (the perpetrator of their trauma), direct it towards female figures: mothers, wives, daughters, girlfriends, etc. (2020, 78), whose disobedience to patriarchy is highly sexualized and needs to be punished.

Memoir of a Murderer presents on screen at least three generations of male characters whose commonality resides in their innate violent behaviour towards women. Thus, the thriller offers from the beginning a conscious depiction of a reflection about violent masculinity. Through the writing of his memoirs, the retired serial killer starts remembering his crimes and aims to justify the ethical (and patriarchal) reasons behind those killings: the constant sexual abuse by their father that Byung-soo's sister has to endure; the brutal physical violence against him and the mother; his adulterous wife; and the danger his daughter, Eun-hee, is in by befriending the young policeman Tae-joo, whom the 70-year-old Byung-soo believes to be a serial killer as well.

The viewer learns in the opening scenes of the film that Byung-soo's father came back home from the Vietnam War in 1971. The military boots, as well as his characterization as a ferocious domestic abuser against all the members of the family, directly link his violent masculinity not only to the masculinization of war but also to the transposition of brutal violence from war to home. The opening scenes introduce a young Byung-soo who suffers and witnesses the violent abuses of his father against all members of the family. The father's characteristic violent personality is based on his military status by showing both his boots and his uniform (he wears it even while asleep) as prominent symbols. In clear contrast to the violent masculinity symbolized by the muddy and stiff military boots, Byung-soo's soft white sneakers embody the gentle and non-violent masculinity that he wishes for himself. The white sneakers, later worn first by his daughter Eun-hee, and then by Byung-soo himself at the

end of the film, turn out to be a symbol of a desired but unachievable male purity. Although Byung-soo has witnessed the brutal abuses against his mother and sister and has also been viciously abused, he loses his tolerance when he finds out that his father has destroyed his white sneakers. That is, the trigger of Byung-soo's killing of the father is not an episode of domestic violence but the destruction of his white sneakers, which symbolize his future aspirations.

Although the killing of the father seems to be justified in Byung-soo's mind as the consequence of the former's violence against wife and daughter, it is also important to highlight that placing the ultimate motive of the killing into a material object enhances the perpetuation of violent masculinity. Even more, this motive displaces domestic violence and portrays it as a family and private matter² (Heo 2010, 227). Tae-joo's depiction follows the same pattern with regard to the reification of the motive that impelled him to kill, but a generation later. In his case, this third generation seems to place on the mother the cause of the killings. Tae-joo's mother assaulted him when he tried to kill his father in order to stop him from physically abusing her. The mother, contrary to any expectation, defended her husband and attacked her son, causing Tae-joo to lose part of his head after being hit with an iron. Despite the unrealistic touch surrounding the character of the young policeman (he has a prosthesis to cover the missing part of his head that can be removed anytime), the iron comes to symbolize femininity and therefore equates it to violence as well, but violence in a domestic space dominated by the female figure. The violent nature of Tae-joo is shown as justifiable by presenting it as the consequence of his mother's abuse. Moreover, Tae-joo's physical appearance follows the androgynous pattern of the 'flower boy' that is only overcome and masculinized when violent behaviour occurs.

Memoir of a Murderer presents killing as something innate to some men. For Byung-soo killing his father made him realize that 'obligatory murder existed in our world. I continued to kill after that day. That was not murder; let us call it cleansing. There were plenty of people who deserved to die, and I started to clean them from this world.' Saving the world from depraved people is Byung-soo's ethical justification for his serial killings which he remembers in

² It was not until 1997 that the South Korean government passed the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Victim Protection Act and the Special Act on the Punishment of Domestic Violence Crimes.

short and fragmented sequences. Although Byung-soo's memory is failing and he cannot remember many things about his past, he claims that 'my head may be losing its memories, but my hand remembers like an old habit.' By locating killing as a habit that survives in the body, the film associates murder with an embodied instinct that allows the old serial killer to recognize and hunt down other serial killers despite memory loss.³

From this point onwards, memory loss due to Alzheimer's disease becomes a twofold plot tool: on the one hand, it serves the purpose of creating tension and doubts around what is, in fact, real or just the product of Byung-soo's imagination and memoir writing; on the other hand, it enables the character to reflect on the ethics of killing in a corrupted society. In addition, and related to writing, Byung-soo attends poetry lessons in which he is capable to express the sublime emotions of killing. Within this context, Nietzsche's famous lines from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 'all that of which you speak does not exist. There is no devil and there is no hell. Your soul will be dead even sooner than your body: fear nothing henceforth!' (2003, 13) recited by the poetry teacher⁴ infuse the film with Nietzsche's discussions around concepts such as the *Übermensch*, 'God is dead', and the 'eternal recurrence of the same'. Thus, these three concepts are the philosophical pillars that sustain the thriller both at the formal and content levels. On the formal level, the circularity of the film connects with the concept of the eternal recurrence of the same, whereas the main character, despite his illness and old age, is constructed as a person who can overcome his deficits and infinitely returns to murder. On the content level, Nietzsche's concepts permeate the ethical reflections deployed by the film, as well as the actions narrated: Byung-soo is depicted as an *Übermensch* whose memory loss permits him to save his daughter from the hands of another serial murderer to continuously redeem himself and to project himself in the future regardless of

³ Drawing on Bourdieu's habitus, Pia Kontos and Wendy Martin (2013) consider the body as the place where discourse is inscribed, and subjectivity is constituted. Eric Matthews (2006) indicates that aspects of identity are sedimented in the body's habits and consequently persist despite severe cognitive impairment.

⁴ Eun-hee enrolls his father for adult poetry lessons because she has read that poetry helps people with dementia to engage with others and to keep focused. In fact, it is interesting to note that poetry also becomes a focal point in other South Korean film, *Poetry* (2020) by Lee Chang-dong. Beyond the middle-age flirting male poetry teacher, both films illustrate the corruption of the police force, the patriarchal nature of society, and the violent masculinity impregnating South Korea. Likewise, both films highlight poetry as an intense and emotional way of communication that people with dementia seem to master.

the circularity of time. Like Zarathustra, Byung-soo acknowledges that all events in one's life will happen again and again. Within this context of the eternal recurrence, Byung-soo wishes the return of his murderous instinct embodied in his hands and symbolized by the white sneakers. As shall be explored later, his will allows him to emerge victorious (at least in his mind) from his fight against a young and healthy Tae-joo, while his memory loss warrants him to return to the beginning. In consequence, stopping Tae-joo from killing again, as well as exposing the corruption and the inefficiency of the police force, become some of the ethical justifications for Byung-soo to resume killing.

2. Memorizing and forgetting the past

Reacting to his daughter's request to use a voice recording device to remember the things he needs to do, or the things he has already done, the first words spoken by Byung-soo in the film are: 'That is why I write in my journal. Remembering yesterday is pointless.' Through his writing, the audience, and Tae-joo within the film itself, learns that he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease three months before he had started writing the journal. As will happen many times in the film, Byung-soo's voice-over is telling the story while he is shown typing it into the computer. The viewers can read his writing on the screen as he types, action that is quickly followed by the images of the scene as he is recalling it: that is, the audience is made to follow the process of (volatile) remembering, making it permanent (writing), and then re-imagining the past.

Byung-soo's decision to write his memoirs does not seem to respond to the need of changing any intradiegetic readers' attitudes towards him and the horrific crimes he has committed. Although he explains the reasons for becoming a murderer, the goal is to capture his long-term memories to narrate himself, to maintain his identity, and to not forget his acts. Contrary to what scholars have highlighted about confessing murderers' life-writing (Lovitt 1992), the 70-year-old veterinarian has no intention to re-enter society as he had already done so by stopping killing seventeen years before he starts writing his memoirs. In addition, he shows very little remorse and, therefore, the only

judgement he fears is that of his daughter. Byung-soo's life-writing has not the intention to present a justification of his killing beyond his beliefs that his killings responded to innate male instincts, social corruption and vulgarity. Life-writing in this film allows the person living with Alzheimer's to memorize his long-term memories when they start to disappear, so he does not commit any unnecessary mistake and kill again. In the same way, the voice recorder is employed as a short-term memory aid that assists him with his daily life and his investigations of Tae-joo's murders. Hence, the journal and the voice recorder machine become both a sort of prosthetic memory that permits him to keep long and short-term memories at hand and, as a result, to maintain his agency. Similar to what Martina Zimmermann has argued with regard to dementia patients' life-writing, this film proposes an 'illness presentation that matches their attention span, live within their remaining abilities, and, thus, authoritatively claim their continued independence' (2017, 21).

Byung-soo's journal writing becomes a tool to emphasize the lack of correlation between words and actions. When a new killing is covered in the TV news, Byung-soo quickly reacts by checking if his white sneakers are dirty, a sign that could mean that he has started killing again and he does not remember. For instance, after stating that he is glad to be able to work as a veterinarian even with dementia, he unwillingly kills a cat with an overdose of medication. Immediately after the scene of the poetry lesson, Byung-soo tells/writes about and shows the viewer his last killing, seventeen years before the time of the narration. He claims not to remember why he killed that woman, but he remembers burying her and then having a car accident, which he considers to be the reason for his dementia. His memory then seems to be affected not by forgetting the vivid details but by losing the reasoning behind his actions. The latter assigns credibility to Byung-soo's dementia, but this credibility is many times neutralized by other moments in which his cognitive impairment does not seem to be a problem for understanding/justifying his behaviour. This constant play between remembering and forgetting, and between reasoning and not understanding the motive of his actions, drives the viewer slowly not to trust the old man's narrative. Thus, every single element in the film is directed towards creating disbelief of Byung-soo's storytelling. His memories are fragmented and unreliable, but the viewers do not know if the cause is truly dementia or if he is deceiving them through his journal writing.

Curiously enough, the old veterinarian's killings and lack of emotions work to write poetry about killing. As he will say, 'killing is poetry'. His poem about killing flawlessly describes his actions when dismembering the bodies and the stains caused by the blood of his victims. Asked by one of his classmates what metaphor is, he replies by saying 'it is a comparison'. At this point, the viewer understands that the old man's way to narrate himself is based on the comparison he makes between himself and those other men around him. The three generations of men presented on screen are comparable to each other because they are all inherently violent; they are all killers. In Byung-soo's mind, Tae-joo's murders are comparable to his: women are normally the victims, they are dismembered and buried in the woods. Tae-joo's killings are comparable to his; similarly, Byung-soo's violence against women resembles the actions of his father.

As the cognitive impairment progresses, the character of the daughter, Eun-hee, becomes pivotal to the plot, thus standing as not only the enhancer and subject of her father's memory loss and the resurgence of the killing habit linked to the memory of the hand, but also of his final 'redemption'. Byung-soo's fragmented memories become even more disjointed as the film progresses, with short-term memory gaps that last longer and make him violent towards his daughter. Likewise, he starts to experience hallucinations which complicate furthermore the plot and the viewer's understanding of what is happening; the viewer can only guess their true nature when the same scene is shown from the perspective of another character. As his memory vanishes, Byung-soo's killing habits reappear stronger and more frequently; he even tries to strangle his daughter because in his mind (a mind living in his long-term past) she was a loose woman. But paradoxically, dementia is also presented as the retrieval of traumatic memories, such as happens with the suicide of his sister whom he has kept fictionally alive as a nun in his hallucinations. The same goes for his last killing, which he finally remembers as that of his unfaithful wife, a moment in which he also learns that he is not the biological father of Eun-hee.

The traumatic memories retrieved make Byung-soo believe that he is the perpetrator of the recent killings in the area, subsequently confessing his past murders to the police. His attempt to change the role of the killer for that of a detective while having all the above-mentioned memory problems is exploited

by Tae-joo, who has covered up his killings as the ones by Byung-soo after reading his memoirs. This role reversal is the turning point for Byung-soo's change in terms of cognitive skills as presented to the audience. More importantly, this reversal of roles intensifies the audience's doubts about Byung-soo's memory. On the one hand, the old veterinarian is now capable of remembering very specific details such as the precise time and place of some events, the blood type of the blood recovered from Tae-joo's car after the accident, etc., although he still needs to record them in the voice recording device. On the other hand, after the audience learns that Tae-joo has found Byung-soo's journal in the computer and is reading its content loud while keeping Byung-soo captive, both the audience and Byung-soo are made to wonder if Tae-joo has somehow altered the memoirs or if all the memories that the 70-year-old man has been writing have already been distorted due to his memory loss and hallucinations. Once more, however, his daughter and the voice recorder become crucial elements in restoring Byung-joo's agency and self: on the one hand, she finds in the voice recorder that Tae-joo confesses to having covered up his killings and that she is his next victim. On the other hand, listening to her recorded voice stops Byung-joo committing suicide and, by doing so, allows her father to hunt down Tae-joo.

The ending of the film takes the audience to the very beginning of it and without making explicit if Byung-soo has killed Tae-joo or if it has just been his imagination/hallucination. Tae-joo's picture is not only carried by Byung-soo, but he (and the viewers) can see Tae-joo looking at him while Byung-soo's voice-over says 'Do not trust your memory. Min Tae-joo is still alive.' If Tae-joo is still alive, Byung-soo has a purpose to live for and to continue to narrate himself, and therefore memory and agency are preserved – despite Alzheimer's disease.

3. Dementia: Time and temporality

Repetition and recurrence are two aspects of temporality that *Memoir of a Murderer* aesthetically and thematically presents, hence departing from the definition of time as a progressive structure that establishes a linear ordering of past-present-future. This linearity determines that time is usually

experienced and understood in its chronicity. From a philosophical perspective, temporality has been explored from many perspectives but always as a notion of how time is understood. McTaggart in 'The Unreality of Time' in 1908 claimed that time is unreal and the notion of time as a continuum is an abstraction. However, he also stated that our perception of temporal order is based on a linearity that conceives the past as being always earlier, the future as being always later, and the present as being always a temporal position that is at all times earlier or later than some other temporal position. Close to the conception of time is Paul Ricoeur's (1984) understanding of the narration of a story: the story progresses sequentially by starting frequently in the past, continuing to the present, and normally arriving at a resolution while moving on to the future. Hence, in order for a story to make any logical sense, the reader/viewer has to be able to perceive the cohesion of the story and to believe the conclusion.

The film seems to be formally constructed around a structure that replicates the memory deterioration of the person living with dementia. Thereby, flashbacks, circularity, repetition of events, white and black screens and abrupt cuts are all used to parallel symptoms of the disease such as repetitive behaviour, memories that are constantly recollected, memory gaps, loss of short-term memory, achronological storytelling (among others). In addition, all these techniques and themes are employed in the film to create not only suspense but also to impel the viewer to identify with the main character's loss of temporal orientation. However, this loss is finally transformed into temporality by employing repetition as a temporal indicator of time progression instead of time stasis.

For instance, repetition is the main structural factor in the film. Sequences are repeated across the film in no chronological order, although in some cases they add an element to assist the viewer in understanding Byung-soo's psychological state of mind. Likewise, repetition of a concrete body response to a psychological state of mind is used for instance with the main character's nervous twitch of his right eye every time his embodied memory of a killer takes over his cognitive functioning. Although this twitching is presented in the first scene of the film, the audience will not realize that it is used to warn them that Byung-soo's killer persona has taken over until he recalls wanting to kill his daughter after the car accident. The repetitive and fragmented nature of

the film makes of it a sort of jigsaw puzzle that the viewer, along with Byung-soo, is impelled to solve in a progression of time. Solving this puzzle is what generates a possible future.

Fragmentation of memory and achronological storytelling in people with dementia is one of the main issues explored in the film. Hence, the notion of time and temporality in *Memoir* permeates everything, from characters to objects and spaces; everything and everyone is charged with temporality or its problematization. In the film, contrary to general understanding, forgetting that something has happened is to maintain one's temporality: Byung-soo's forgetting having killed Tae-joo (recent past) drives him to preserve his own life (present) instead of committing suicide because his goal is still to hunt down Tae-joo (future).

As the previous analysis of the fragmented nature of memory in the person living with dementia has shown, the temporality deployed in *Memoir of a Murderer* problematizes the sequential character of temporality. In this sense, the film addresses the culturally and socially constructed notion of dementia as a condition of progressive decline, thus predicting an unavoidable absence of the future. As has been addressed earlier on in this chapter, Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return is not only made explicit in the film during the second poetry lesson but seems to have been consciously used as the structural element of the storytelling: the film starts and finishes at the same point in time and place. This recurrence, whether triggered by Byung-soo's dementia or not (repetitive memories) confers to the old veterinarian's existence by generating his subjective impression of time passing. Byung-soo's journal writing indicates both the inscription and understanding of the past from a present in which the progression of time towards a future seems to be vanishing. Therefore, in order to maintain temporality and consequently his existence, Byung-joo's repetition of memories always leads him to return to the same starting point. However, this return makes possible the concept of future, even if repetitive, and Byung-joo's own existence. That is, his forgetting murdering Tae-joo grants Byung-soo the possibility of continuing to hunt him down and, as a result, generates a recurrent future time that can repeat indefinitely.

The repetitive character of memory and of time in a person living with Alzheimer's disease are also replicated at the formal level with the use of the

same type of camera angles, shots, light, and colours. Similarly, mirroring the fragmented nature of memory in a person living with dementia, the film is constructed in fragments that sometimes do not follow a chronological order or which are showing Byung-soo's disjointed perspective and subjectivity. These sudden jumps recreate the memory gaps of the person living with Alzheimer's disease and are normally either presented through long fades to black or just instant cuts. The editing enables switching from the subjectivity of the character to an objective camera that shows what is happening, and thus has a double effect: on the one hand, it creates confusion in the viewers, who are subsequently unable to distinguish between reality and imagination; and, on the other hand, viewers are prompted to also experience the subjectivity of the character emotionally.

4. Conclusion

Memoir of a Murderer is a complex film that brings together different cultural and social issues related to contemporary South Korea. Following the conventions of the psychological thriller, the film presents a story that revolves around violent masculinity in patriarchal South Korea and the limitations of memory. The three generations of men presented in the film are all depicted as inherently violent due to their dependence on a patriarchal society that influences their actions and social roles. All three men are defined by their violent masculinity that resulted from the effect of social and political matters: Byung-soo's father's violent behaviour is presented as a result of the Vietnam War, while Byung-soo's violence is justified by himself as the normal consequence of his father's abuse. His subsequent killings are justified to himself based on the corruption that permeates society: prostitutes, adulterous women, womanizers, alcoholics, etc. Despite this explanation of his killings, Byung-soo also admits that killing has become a habit linked not to the mind but to the memory of the body. In Tae-joo's case, he adheres to the new look of feminine or soft masculinity, although this new look only disguises the existence of a violent masculinity. In fact, his killings are again justified by the harm made by an abusive father and a mother who accepted the abuses as

normal behaviour.⁵ His soft masculinity is shown to be at odds with his profession, his killings, and his sadistic behaviour. Hence, with respect to both characters, the audience is positioned to make moral judgements about whether some killings are acceptable due to the traumatic events that impelled the killers to commit them. In doing so, the film places the audience in a very contentious position as empathy towards Byung-soo may be felt by some viewers. This empathy is constructed through the comparison and contrast between Byung-soo and Tae-joo. Byung-soo, despite all his killings, is depicted as a weak old person with memory loss and hallucinations who requires his diapers to be changed and his shoes to be laced. The weakness of this character due to age and cognitive impairment is contrasted with Tae-joo's youth, strength, and beauty. However, the unequal fight between the two murderers makes evident that youth and strength are not sufficient qualities to be a good killer, and therefore it makes the viewer feel empathy towards the older character.

Alzheimer's disease is employed in this film both as a plot device and as a philosophical discussion around the notions of time and temporality as experienced by the person living with dementia. In accordance with societal expectations of what a person living with dementia can and cannot do, the successful narrative articulation is positioned as 'central to the perception of identity, social assertion and self' (Zimmermann 2017, 75). Memory loss due to Alzheimer's generates suspense because of the absence of a 'normal' narrative articulation. It also makes the viewer take an active role in discerning whether what is shown on screen is real or just a defective memory or a hallucination. Similarly, the limitations of memory presented in the film as lived by Byung-soo are depicted at two levels: firstly, forgetting long-term memories prompts the old veterinarian to write his memoirs, while short-term memories are captured in a voice recorder. Secondly, it makes the character and the viewer question whether recollections are based on hallucinations and therefore

⁵ It will be important that future research on this film addresses the place and roles assigned to women. A feminist approach to the film would most probably uncover a clear patriarchal concept of the role of women in South Korean society and the dangerous influence that capitalism may inflict on them. Therefore, despite being sexually, physically, and psychologically abused by men, women are either depicted as adulterous, flirtatious, and highly sexualized, or as mothers, daughters, and nuns. Similarly, this film can also be approached from the role played by carers of people living with dementia.

faulty. By writing his memoirs, Byung-soo is not only inscribing his past but also allowing himself to narrate himself within time, as well as assigning temporal status to his lived experience. Likewise, repetition is employed as a temporality notion linked to Nietzsche's concept of eternal return. It is this notion that warrants temporality to Byung-soo's existence, regardless of his forgetting the past.

Memoir of a Murderer places the audience in a very unstable position in terms of understanding what is real and what is just the product of Byung-soo's cognitive impairment. It is this unpredictability about twists and turns of the plot that not only creates suspense, but also reflects the lived experience of the person with Alzheimer's disease and those caring for them. In this way, the person living with Alzheimer's disease in the film claims his independence and his quality as an authoritative narrator who emerges victorious despite his cognitive impairment.

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