

Life, Death and Liberty

Whilst capital punishment sits in tension with democratic beliefs, the commitment to free speech allows arguments for it to be heard. I will discuss how the media expresses the freedom of these retribitional arguments and how they are represented in criminology. Although the death penalty is a common theme in film and tv, not many have presented the level of bravery seen in Park Chan-Wook's 'Lady Vengeance' (2005). Presented at first as a crime-thriller, this South Korean film of a woman seeking vengeance soon reveals itself as a moral complexity towards capital punishment. Whilst it is subjective whether Lady Vengeance is "pro-death penalty" or not, the film's ending does take a dark turn when the protagonist, with fictitious authority, grants the victim's families the opportunity to execute the serial-killer antagonist themselves. This plot turn finally sees the families agreeing, through a democratic vote, to take turns punishing the antagonist until his death, asserting authoritarian dominance in a country where the death penalty remains legal. While South Korea distinguishes their liberalisation away from North Korea, this culture-shock-ending links to Ki-Sung Kwak's argument of the South's right wing agenda, despite the two country's separation, *"Since South Korea achieved partial democracy in 1987, the country has moved away from authoritarian political control. However, after two decades of democratic transition, South Korea still does not have a strong liberal, individualist culture"*. (Kwak, K 2012, *Media and Democratic Transition in South Korea*, Taylor & Francis Group, Oxford). So by romanticising the family's ability to execute someone with authoritarian privilege, Park Chan-Wook questions just how liberated South Korea truly is. Furthermore, the director mirrors

the link between vengeance and retribution, which Syd Golston argues was one of the leading factors for the death penalty's long life in the West. "*Certain horrible crimes should be punished with equal violence in order to uphold the values of society*" (Golston, S 2009, *Death Penalty*, Greenhaven Publishing LLC, New York). However, Park Chan-Wook challenges the family's voyeuristic hunger when their sensationalist excuse to even out the crime only brings more brutalisation. In addition to this, he cleverly uses the 'Heroic Vigilante' trope to justify violence and ultimately sell the crime, similarly seen in pop-culture icons like Batman who hide fascism in their reputation. 'Lady Vengeance' draws to an end when the protagonist remains unsatisfied with the brutality behind her decision, displaying the meaninglessness behind her so-wanted vengeance as she continues to navigate through her depression with a new need for purity. Furthermore, by allowing the protagonist to approach their voyeurism and kill the antagonist, only for his death to not resolve the family's trauma, the film becomes anti-sensational, arguing that vengeance is a flawed ending to law and order, rather than the answer to moral equalisation which retribution claims it is. In conclusion, by linking the arguments of Kwak's liberalism theory and that of Golston's retribution theory to Park Chan-Wook's criticism of the death penalty, I have shown how 'Lady Vengeance' critiques capital punishment to subvert sensationalism in criminology.