

Re-release of Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder* (2003): A picture of South Korean society

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The success of Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, which won four major awards at the Academy Awards in February 2020 (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay and Best International Feature Film), has prompted distributors to release the director's earlier film, *Memories of Murder* (2003).

The digitally remastered movie has been shown in Italy, Russia, Greece, Taiwan, Canada and Finland over the past year. Bong's work was screened for two nights in theaters nationwide in the US October 19–20, and is now available on the various streaming services. *Memories of Murder* is well worth watching.

The film, as explained below, concerns a real-life serial murder case that occurred in South Korea in the late 1980s and early 1990s—a series of crimes that was finally solved only in 2019. Bong—director of *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000), *The Host* (2006), *Mother* (2009), *Snowpiercer* (2013), and *Okja* (2017)—issued a statement in September in advance of the release of the older film in the US.

Bong noted in his comment that the murder case “was severely traumatic to the Korean public ... The victims and their families, innocent suspects who were hauled [in] and tormented, failed detectives who found themselves in despair, people of those times who trembled with fear ... This case occurred in the dark era of military dictatorship in the 80s, and truly created a further and darker abyss.”

The director added that *Memories of Murder* “is an uncanny, yet natural, mixture of horror and comedy because we were truly living in such times. The actual case and this film have passed through a long tunnel of time ... and now my eyes are on how this film will plow through the long tunnel of time as it greets a new

chapter in the fall of 2020 in the US.”

We originally viewed Bong's film at the 2004 San Francisco International Film Festival, and commented on it in an article headlined, “For greater complexity, more uncovering.” The piece argued that modern society was “extremely complex and it demands an artistic response of equal or comparable complexity. It is one of the difficulties of our time that many artists with their ‘hearts in the right place’ either feel the need to simplify reality, in the name of a misplaced populist accessibility, or genuinely see the world in rather primitive terms.”

In search of such complexity, we explained, we seized upon *Memories of Murder* as one of the more commendable efforts along these lines. The review continued:

The film bases itself on a real case, of South Korea's first serial killer, who raped and murdered 10 women in a small town outside Seoul over the course of six years (1986–1991).

According to the film's production notes, “Other than the victims, the killer left not a single shred of evidence. Over 3,000 suspects were interrogated. At least 300,000 police took part in the massive investigation. There was no profiling mechanism, nor any idea of preserving the crime scene for forensic investigation. Not a single person was indicted for the crimes.”

The director acknowledges his attraction to crime films, but adds, “I found that the actualities of a murder case don't conform to the conventions of the crime genre. Only something like *Silence of the Lambs* could have produced an intellectual thriller pitting the detective against the criminal. Reality is nothing like

this. I wanted to show reality.”

A worthy ambition.

In a rural area in Gyeonggi province the body of a young woman is found, murdered and sexually assaulted. Two months later, a series of rape-murders begins. A special task force is established. Local police detective Park Doo-man (Song Kang-ho), who believes in his intuition (“I can read people”) and in terrorizing the usual (and obvious) suspects to gain results, is joined by Seoul detective Seo Tae-yoon (Kim Sang-kyung), a more cerebral and sophisticated type.

They are beset by difficulties from the outset: crime scenes that are inevitably compromised (by crowds, children and, in one case, a tractor that drives over footprints) and a relatively primitive technology. But more than that, by the stupidity and brutality of a police force used to beating up prisoners under decades of military dictatorship. (We witness in passing the police thrashing demonstrators protesting the appearance of the country’s president.) They have no problem extracting confessions from a number of suspects, but none of these “admissions of guilt” have any value.

Indeed, the cops have no difficulty in finding suspects, people melancholy or vulnerable enough to commit any number of strange and unhappy acts. One man goes mad in interrogation; another admits to masturbating at a crime scene; a third, chronically lonely individual admits to requesting a certain song, which has appeared on the radio every night a murder has been committed. But he’s no more guilty of the horrible crimes than the others. Even after the police brutalize him, he tells them to their faces, “People know you torture innocent people ... You’ll never victimize me.”

In the end, the killer is never caught. A potential eyewitness is hit by a train, trying to avoid what he thinks will be another beating from the police. The series of rape-murders eventually ends. Years later, one of the investigators goes to the scene of the initial crime and encounters a young school-girl, who tells him that someone else had recently visited the spot—presumably the killer. What did he look like? he eagerly asks. “Ordinary,” she says.

The picture drawn is of a society so dysfunctional, so dominated by violence and the “memory” of previous violence and repression—decades of ruthless and cruel military dictatorship—that a mere serial killer disappears

in its midst. The savage methods of interrogation, the backwardness in every regard, the use of the police primarily to control and oppress the population—all of these make “solving the crime” an impossibility. Which crime would that be? And which criminal? Too much damage has already been done to the population and its psyche. The 10 rape-murders inevitably get lost in the shuffle.

Song Kang-ho is remarkable as the local detective, Kim Sang-kyung equally fine as his Seoul counterpart. In the former’s overwhelmed, confused state and the latter’s sadness and even despair, something more than the mentality of two police detectives is captured. The film suggests that if any hope is to be found, it must lie in expunging from the entire society the stench of its crimes.



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