

No Other Choice from South Korea: Doesn't "necessity knows no law" cut both ways?

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No Other Choice is a semi-comedy, semi-tragedy, directed by veteran South Korean filmmaker Park Chan-wook (*Joint Security Area*, *Oldboy*, *Lady Vengeance*, *The Handmaiden*). It is inspired by Donald Westlake's 1997 novel *The Ax*, previously adapted as a film by Greek-French film director Costa-Gavras (*Z, Missing*) in 2005 (also *The Ax*).

Park's film has been widely praised by critics associations and honored at the Toronto and numerous other film festivals. It received a nine-minute ovation at the Venice festival.

The vibrant, abrasive film, complete with colorful personalities and performances, largely deserves the praise.

No Other Choice follows a paper-making employee, in a lower management position, Yoo Man-su (Lee Byung-hun), discharged after many years at the same firm, who decides to find a comparable, well-paid job at any cost. "To put food in my family's mouths ... there's nothing I won't do," he explains early on, with what turn out to be menacing implications.

At the outset, Man-su is rather pleased with himself and his life. "I've got it all," he mutters in the film's opening sequence. He has managed through hard efforts to acquire his charming childhood home, he has a pretty, athletic wife, two children (including one possible musical genius) and two dogs.

Needless to say, as we largely expect, Man-su hardly has time to count his blessings when his paper firm is hit with job losses after a takeover by an American corporation.

Before a group of workers slotted to be laid off, Man-su rehearses his speech of protest to the new owners:

As soon as you take over, you say you'll cut 20 percent of the production line? And you ask for a list of names to fire? Names of veterans who taught me their craft? Names of young men who came of age in this factory. Innocent workers who lovingly cared for these machines, you want me to point a gun at their heads? I can't do it. Guns are meant to be aimed at one's enemies! I cannot give you that list. You Americans say to be fired is to be "axed"? Know what we say in Korea? Off with your head! So being fired is having your head chopped clear off with an ax! "If you don't start a union we guarantee a job for life." That beautiful tradition tossed out like old shoes!

A company official ultimately responds: "I'm sorry, no other choice." That line, the title of the film, is repeated various times under disparate circumstances.

Man-su promises his wife Mi-ri (Son Ye-jin), adopted teenage son and young, cello-playing daughter that "in three months, I'll get hired again!" More than a year goes by, however, and he finds himself still working at a low-paying job in a retail store. He interviews nervously and

unsuccessfully for a position in the paper industry. Things go from bad to worse. The family has exhausted his severance pay. Mi-ri sternly announces that "anything non-essential must go," including the beloved golden retrievers. The family also faces imminent foreclosure on their house.

Man-su decides upon desperate measures. He places a false want ad and calculates who are likely to be his competition for a job at Moon Paper. He plans to murder the two men who qualify, plus the current holder of the desired position. The rest of the film centers on the unfolding of this mad, but to Man-su entirely commonsensical plan.

In one of the longer sequences, Man-su spies on drunkard Goo Beom-mo (Lee Sung-min) and his restless wife A-ra (the highly amusing Yeom Hye-ran). She is a former or currently unsuccessful actress, unhappy with her husband's obsession with returning to the paper industry and his neglect of her. "How many times must I say it? Losing your job isn't the problem! The problem is how you deal with it!"

A-ra also complains, "What about me? I failed my audition again! My skin's too firm to play a woman wailing over her husband's death." She reminisces about their first meeting. "Remember what you said? 'A-ra, your lips are softer than the highest quality Okamoto tracing paper.'" He: "Akimoto. Okamoto is a condom brand." She: "A-ra, your lips are softer than the highest quality Akimoto tracing paper."

A-ra urges her unemployed husband to open a "music café." But Beom-mo can only reply, "Paper has fed me for 25 years ... It's how I'm meant to be, I've no other choice. You've been fed by the money I earned from paper, too. That money was printed on paper I made, and the cigarette filter you smoke is paper, too. If we don't use paper, who will?"

Various confusions and confrontations ensue. Man-su tries to divert Beom-mo away—to a fake job interview—from returning to his own house, where A-ra is entertaining a lover, but without success. Beom-mo goes mad with rage and jealousy. Somehow, in the midst of everything, Man-su receives a snake bite on his leg, whose venom A-ra attempts to suck out.

—Keep the bite wound higher than your heart.

—Shouldn't it be lower?

—Don't worry. I did this in a play once.

After much commotion, A-ra shoots and kills her husband, which mildly surprises her. "You're going to die from [just] two bullets?"

In any case, Beom-mo's death allows Man-su to move on to his next rival and target, the unassuming Ko Si-jo (Cha Seung-won), now stoically employed in a shoe store. And, finally, he befriends Choi Seon-chul (Park Hee-soon), who presently works as a manager at Moon Paper. They drink and drink at Seon-chul's home, including "bomb shots" (a shot glass of whiskey dropped into a stein of beer). Man-su plans to dispatch this rival as well. Will success clear the path for a renewed career at a time of accelerated automation, including Moon Paper's AI use and so forth? The police have meantime become intrigued.

There are various subplots, including the illicit efforts of Man-su's son to help out financially, Man-su's jealousy about his wife and her dentist

employer, the couple's daughter and her unique approach to playing the cello, and more.

No Other Choice captures something of the instability, convulsiveness and insecurity of life under capitalism today. Secure, decent, "guaranteed" employment is a thing of the past.

Man-su:

"After slaving for 25 years, they gave me 25 minutes to clear out. I walk out of the office, and the security guard had my things in a box already and was standing there, holding it. They wouldn't let me go down the hallway, where I'd always walked." "Sent you out the back door?" "Exactly."

At a time of widespread job destruction, with far more to come, Park's film has struck a chord and not only in South Korea. The final sequence occurs in a "fully automated factory" equipped with a "lights-out system ... Since AI doesn't need lights turned on." So, the workforce "will have to be reduced, right?," an official is asked. "That's the whole point of the system, No other choice." "How can you go against the times?"

Park works amusingly, and broadly, farcically at times but not with cartoons. There is enough time and space here for characters with complexities, dimensions, contradictions. The actors strongly, sensuously seize hold of their opportunities. We recall the raucous A-ra, the hapless Si-jo, the fierce cellist daughter, the smug, drunken Seon-chul, a costume party gone wrong, a toothache that won't go away, etc. And Man-su murmuring to himself, as he perpetrates his crimes:

"No other choice. No other choice. No other choice. No other choice. No other choice."

And he justifies it all: "The tastiest things grow on filth."

If "dog eat dog," "every man for himself," "force works," is the official and generally celebrated credo, what can the official guardians of morality expect? Man-su is following the logic the social order has set out as its recipe for prosperity and happiness.

The original source here, as noted above, is a novel by American fiction writer Donald Westlake (who also wrote bleakly "hardboiled" books as Richard Stark, including the basis of John Boorman's *Point Blank*, 1967). *The Ax* is narrated by Burke Devore, a laid-off, middle-aged manager at a paper company, who matter-of-factly determines to eliminate the men in his area who are his rivals for similar positions.

"This has to work," the book opens with, more or less. "I have to get out of this morass, and soon. Which means I'd better be capable of murder."

Later: "I'm not a killer. I'm not a murderer, I never was, I don't want to be such a thing, soulless and ruthless and empty. That's not me. What I'm doing now I was forced into, by the logic of events; the shareholders' logic, and the executives' logic, and the logic of the workforce."

Devore, after committing a series of murders, legitimizes his actions by referring to the zeitgeist of the late 1990s:

Every era, and every nation, has its own characteristic morality. ... Today, our moral code is based on the idea that the end justifies the means. ... Our government leaders always defend their actions on the basis of their goals. And every CEO who has commented in public on the blizzard of downsizings sweeping America has explained himself with some variant on the same idea.

I want to take care of my family; I want to be a productive part of society; I want to put my skills to use; I want to work and pay my own way and not be a burden to the taxpayers. The means to that end has been difficult, but I've kept my eye on the goal, the

purpose. The end justifies the means. Like the CEOs, I have nothing to feel sorry for.

The 62-year-old Park told *The Guardian*, "I did not mean it [*No Other Choice*] to be a realistic portrayal of Korea in 2025. I think it's more accurate to view it as a satire on capitalism." And further: "The audience desperately wants to cheer him [Man-su] on and for him to find a job, but at other times, they realise that his choices are wrong," says Park. "Those two feelings coexist, and the audience switches between them. That was the goal behind the making of this film."

One might object that at times the "blackly comic" misadventures, including in the dazzling Beom-mo/A-ra segment, threaten to overwhelm the social substance and anger, but, as a whole, Park has worked his themes through in a serious and artistic manner. He has been wanting to film the Westlake novel for years, and the dedication to that goal makes itself felt.

Of course, Man-su has choices, as do all the characters. And not simply to accept a decline in living standards. He can choose to fight, along with others. Writing in the 1990s, in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR and in the midst of all the nonsense about "the end of history," Westlake never permits Devore to seriously consider such a possibility, although the latter arrives at certain social insights. After killing the first three of his victims, it suddenly occurs to Devore, "We shouldn't claw each other, down here in the pit, fight each other for scraps, while they laugh up above. Or, even worse; while they don't even bother to notice us, up above." With that in mind, he writes a confession, but, later, in the cynical and cold light of day, decides, "I'll burn it [the confession] later, somewhere else."

The capitalists say they have "no choice" except to do what they do. Along the same lines, in more verbally elevated times, the various rulers declared on the eve of World War I, that "necessity knew no law," that war and violence were their only choice. Trotsky had an answer for that, noting that such ruthless, lawless claims and conduct on the part of the ruling elites would bring about "a profound change" in popular thinking. And, what's more, the possessing classes, "to their consternation, will soon have to recognize this change." Workers who have gone through harsh experiences, as soon as the first serious obstacle faces them, will cry "We have no other choice!" when the attempt is made to hold them back at the command of bourgeois law.



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