‘Nobody helps the family.’ South Korean Cultural Identity in Bong Joon-ho’s *The Host* (2006)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Bong Joon-ho’s science fiction/horror film, *The Host* (2006) and interrogates its depiction of a contemporary South Korean family in crisis. The writer considers the film as a resonant cultural artefact and a manifestation of particularly new-millennial anxieties concerned with the continued involvement of the United States in South Korean affairs, fears of an erosion of traditional family values and mistrust of officious, state endorsed bureaucracy. The Host emerges as a profoundly visceral depiction of an ordinary family set against everyone with no one to turn to except each other.

Key Words
horror, science fiction, representation, monster, South Korea, United States, Imperialism, identity.

I

The monster represents everything people have to fight against: the social system, the government system, even the Americans, who were involved in the creature’s birth. Nobody helps the family in the film. And the implications of that are put into the creature.

- Bong Joon-ho (qtd. in Roddick 34)

Bong Joon-ho's 2006 film *Gwoemul* directly translates from Korean into English as 'the creature', a suitable title, one might think, for a film about a truck-sized fish monster which emerges from the Han River in Seoul to reek havoc on the surrounding population. However, for its international release the film was not titled *The Creature* or even *Gwoemul*; it underwent an intriguing name change and emerged as *The Host*, a title with significant associations to the turbulent political and cultural history of the divided peninsula. This article intends to read *The Host* as a particularly revealing cultural text, reflective of contemporary South Korean anxieties about prolonged American military, political and commercial presence, mistrust of intrusive and officious domestic authorities, increasing fears of environmental problems, generational gap anxiety and the pervading sense in contemporary South Korea that the traditional Confucian family unit is slowly being eroded by dominant, largely western, values. Leading South Korean film scholar Hyang-jin Lee regards the medium of film as uniquely able to reveal and comment on the myriad of complexities surrounding issues of South Korean identity. She states, "Post-war Korean cinema is a cultural text that vividly exposes the coexistence of political discontinuity and cultural continuity in contemporary Koreans' perception of their nationhood" (104). After all, what could be a more relevant cultural artefact than a film which became the biggest success in the history of Korean cinema? It was seen by ten million South Koreans in its first ten days of release, that is, by one in every five of its population of fifty million.[1)]

The Host functions both as a skillfully crafted horror film and a telling social document. It delivers the prerequisite thrills of the genre; Peter

1) The total revenue of the film reached $97 million on a budget of approximately $15 million. See Darcy Paquet, *Variety* "*Host* conquers fears, scares up profits," *Variety* (12/3/07) p. a6.

Hartlaub at the *San Francisco Chronicle* called it "a legitimate sci-fi/horror classic," while Peter Travers at *Rolling Stone* both asked and answered "Is it that scary? Yes. Will it reduce you to quivering jelly? Oh, my, yes!" Yet it is much more than a popular science fiction horror film and this might hold the key to its success. Like many of the most interesting films to emerge from the country, it is also an insightful exploration of the impact of post-colonialism and cultural alienation in South Korea in the first decade of the new millennium. Its change of title is indicative of the socio-political resonance of the text: *The Host* has both associations with America's continued involvement in Korean political affairs and resonates within the narrative which follows the outbreak of a SARS-type virus believed to be infecting Seoul. The fact that it transpires that there isn't actually a virus and the government has conspired to create a quasi-'War on Terror' to reinforce its grip over the populous has explicit connections to the current global political arena. This multifaceted metaphorical approach to the genre leads Joshua Clover to comment, "While *The Host* is surely as allegorically resonant as any Anglophone horror film, it resists schematic interpretation through something like a surplus of subtext" (6).

Somewhat predictably, many have decried the film as anti-American propaganda, displaying a characteristic lack of awareness as to the way Hollywood has portrayed Asians (or Arabs, African-Americans, Eastern Europeans or any racial group for that matter) onscreen since the birth of the medium. Such claims of bias ignore the film's treatment of Korean authorities, which is even harsher, and fail to recognize the satirical roots of the film. The director Park suggests that, "It's a stretch to simplify *The Host* as an anti-American film…. But there is certainly a metaphor and political commentary about the U.S" (qtd. in Koo). Such a culturally aware approach to *The Host* has become even more relevant in the years since the film's release. For much of its history South Korean film (like many other film industries around the world) has struggled against the increasing influence of Hollywood, but in July 2006 distribution policies

were dramatically changed when the number of days a year that cinemas are legally required to show domestically produced films was cut from one hundred and forty-six to seventy-three.[2] Some commentators expressed the belief that the effects would be disastrous for the future of the South Korean film industry, anticipating it would cut the number of films produced in South Korea from an average of eighty films a year to forty. The importance of the quota system is hard to underestimate; many believe it is one of the key factors behind the emergence of the New Wave of Korean cinema and its rise to international prominence around the world with films like *OldBoy* (Park Chan-wook, 2004), *Brotherhood* (Kang Je-gyu, 2004) and *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter and Spring* (Kim Ki-duk, 2005).

These changes have been blamed on the continued pressure placed on South Korean authorities by America on behalf of the Hollywood film industry. According to Paolo Bertolin, "Throughout the years, the persistent requests of Hollywood have been supported by the U.S. government, and each time bilateral economic treaties or agreements were discussed the issue was invariably raised" (Bertolin 2006). Despite the change already being in effect, some people who work for or support the South Korean film industry are continuing to protest. Hee-jin Koo

2) In actuality the changes to the quota system proved to be one of many problems facing the South Korean film industry after 2005. While a significant number of films continue to be made (108 in 2007) they are becoming less and less financially successful as rising costs and an audience turning back towards Hollywood films. In the boom years many people got into the industry and the quality declined. A recent study from the Korean Film Council (Kofic) suggests the average domestic film in 2007 earned back just 39% of its budget. In 2006, the average film earned 77% of its budget. In 2007 cinema admissions declined for the first time in 11 years Of the 108 films made in 2007 90 made a loss. See Jean Noh, "South Korea - The profitability factor" *screendaily.com* (11 January, 2008) http://www.screendaily.com/south-korea-the-profitability-factor/4036529.article.

argues,

> Since February [2006], the South Korean movie community has stationed one person each day at the ministry or the presidential Blue House to complain that the industry is being sacrificed to Hollywood for an agreement that may bring an extra $29 billion of trade with the United States each year.

Executive director of the Korean Coalition Yang Gi-hwan stated:

> Hollywood films account for about eighty percent of the global market, American TV products occupy about ninety percent of worldwide airtime, American music makes about eighty-five percent of the profits in the music business: such a situation should be regarded as dramatic for the whole of mankind! (qtd. in Bertolin 2006)

These fears naturally find their way into cinema and television narratives. At Cannes in 2006, perhaps the most famous South Korean actor of recent years, Choi Min-sik protested these developments alongside many other famous personalities from Korean film including the director of *The Host* Bong Joon-ho. The actor had this to say, which, in the light of *The Host* and its tale of a fractured family in peril, is very interesting:

> This is my third visit to Cannes. The first two were joyful occasions, as films I was starring in were selected for competition, but today it is different for me…. The situation is desperate and I feel like an orphan who has been deserted by his own parents (qtd. in Bertolin 2006).

II

> *The actual case is where I got the inspiration. Since I used that case literally, it just ran onto a line of American satire. If you look closely,*

> *there's social commentary, political commentary, regarding the Korean government. On the other hand, it is a tradition of the monster genre to have such commentary. If you look at the sci-fi films of the 40's and 50's, you might be like, "Okay. The alien here is representing or symbolizing the Soviet Union." Maybe years from now, somebody might look back at* The Host *and be like, "Ok. The monster of the time is America." But it's just too simple of an explanation to go with now.*
> - Bong Joon-ho (qtd. in Epstein 2006)

The Host begins with three atmospheric prologues, each establishing central narrative and visual motifs. In the first, the director dramatizes a real life incident and adapts it into a scene showing how the creature comes to be created. In 2002 at Yongsan military base in Seoul, a US military civilian, Albert McFarland illegally ordered a South Korean official to empty two hundred and twenty-seven litres of formaldehyde into the Han River. When Korean authorities instigated legal proceedings against McFarland, the United States government refused to cooperate and hand him over, arguing that United States citizens were not under the jurisdiction of Korean courts. The Korean press responded with calculated indignation and many regarded the incident as a symbol of America's hypocrisy, indicative of its belief that it is somehow above international law. Subsequently McFarland was convicted *in absentia*, but five years later when he actually appeared in a Korean court and was found guilty, he did not serve the jail sentence, instead he received two years suspended sentence and thirty days without pay.

The episode becomes realised as the first brooding prologue of *The Host*. The actor portraying McFarland (played by Scott Wilson) demands the Korean orderly dispose of out of date chemicals, menacingly stating, "The Han River is very broad Mr Kim. Let's try to be *broad-minded* about this." The implication is that American authority must be obeyed without question. With a dismissive and imperialistic air he continues, "Anyway. That's an order!" and his words linger as a slow tracking shot reveals the extent of the pollution, the bottles number in their hundreds.

The monster which appears as a result of these chemicals being poured into the Han River is directly created by continued American intervention in South Korean affairs. Since the nominal end of the war in Korea, which is in a permanent state of ceasefire not peace, the US has continued to have a significant impact on the country, "the South Korean armed forces – today, some 670,000 men, 461 combat aircraft, and a navy that includes 44 destroyers, frigates, and corvettes as well as 4 attack submarines, with a budget of around US$ 16 billion – is operationally part of a military command structure headed by an American general" (Johnson 105). Yongsan itself is just one of more than thirty US bases in South Korea.

Fig. 1: The spectre of the continued intrusion of the United States into Korean affairs

The second prologue sees two middle-aged men fishing in the Han River, presumably some time later. To their mutual disgust one catches a mysterious many-legged creature, which the audience do not see. "How many tails does it have?" yells the man, as he almost drops a cup, which, he remarks, was given to him by his daughter. The family unit, especially the father-daughter bond and the responsibilities of a parent, will be at the thematic centre of the film. Bong Joon-Ho comments, "They [the fishermen] could easily have killed the baby monster inside the cup with

their fingers. But they didn't. In real life, that kind of thing happens a lot. The disaster or terror starts with a trifle" (qtd. in Nayman 27).

The third and final prologue, like the previous two and much of the action of the film that follows, is also set on the Han River, which has a central place in Seoul's history, economy and culture. Nick Roddick observes, "It is both a symbol of the capital (the economic boom of the past fifteen years is often referred to as 'the Miracle on the Han River') and extremely ordinary: for Seoulers, it's the epitome of the everyday" (32). On top of the Han Bridge a distraught businessman commits suicide in front of his two moronic underlings. Just before he leaps he sees something large moving under the surface of the water. Far from a fantastical world, the Seoul of *The Host* is a believable recreation of the city, firmly connected to the reality of its present and past. Joon-bong Hoo suggests that this everyday quality is one he wished to observe within his film, "The Han River is the least likely place to witness sci-fi events. That's the contrast I wanted: to show the most realistic and the most unrealistic in the same film" (qtd. in Roddick 32). The suicide of the businessman introduces a socio-economic edge to the film which will become prevalent as the characters move away from the stereotypical hard-boiled detectives, soldiers or scientists of genre cinema. Instead they are just a fairly ordinary family, one, with which many Koreans will be able to empathise. It is no coincidence that they are called the Parks, the most common name in Korea. As the businessman sinks beneath the waves the title of the film emerges from the depths of the river, *The Host*.

The narrative of the film formally begins with the introduction of the protagonists, the Park family and its patriarch Hie-bong (played by Hie-bong Byeon), who owns one of many kiosks along the banks of the Han River. He is joined by his feckless son Gang-du (played by Kang-ho Song), the rather unlikely hero of the film. We first see Gang-du sleeping during the day with his head rested uncomfortably over the side of the counter.

He briefly stirs when he hears the word "papa", as he too is a father. Later Hie-bong reveals that Gang-du suffers from some sort of sleeping sickness as a result of malnutrition as a child; after his mother died he was left alone for long periods by his irresponsible father and had to fend for himself. Far from heroic in the conventional sense, Gang-du is a devoted, if resolutely incompetent, parent of a young teenage girl, Hyun-seo (played by Ah-sung Ko). Before having even spoken a word the mise-en-scène has coded him as immature; despite being in his forties he still has dyed blonde highlights in his hair, a practice which remains popular for Asian youths, eager to assert their individuality. This is an even greater sin, because being the eldest son he is supposed to be the responsible heir to the family business. South Korean films tend to "[...] explain society in terms of unity and responsibilities of family members. First of all, the burden of securing family welfare is put on the shoulders of the male protagonists. By extension, any disorder in society, be it political or cultural, is attributed to the male adults to perform their functions in their home and society" (Lee 138). Gang-du will be the focal point of the narrative and will fail his family frequently.

After stealing the leg of a customer's squid (the mention of the legs echo the events of the second prologue) and receiving a lecture from his father about taking what does not belong to you (introducing the concept of *sao-ri*), he trips and falls, his clumsiness foreshadowing the mistake that he is soon to make, which will ultimately cost his daughter her life. Gang-du and Hyun-seo both sit down to watch Gang-du's sister (also Hyun-seo's aunt), Nam-joo (played by Du-na Bae), on television as she is competing in a national archery tournament. Nam-joo fails to win the competition, even though she is evidently talented enough, because she obviously has some issues that prevent her from releasing the arrow within the set time limit. Indeed it transpires that each of Hie-bong's three children are dysfunctional in their own way: the bungling Gang du, the complex-ridden Nam-joo and their younger brother, Nam il (played

by Hae-il Park), whom we will meet later, a bitter, unemployed, alcoholic university graduate. It is Hyun-seo who is the pride of the family, the only one among them who seems 'normal' and well adjusted, she is their literal and symbolic hope for the future.

What can Bong Joon-ho be saying about the Korean family unit? The film is almost entirely bereft of mothers: both the wife of Hie-bong and Gang-du's wife are only mentioned briefly in passing. Of Hyun-seo's mother Hie-bong comments, "It's been thirteen years since she popped out the baby and ran off." What remains seems to be a generation of immature parents, with little ability to look after themselves, let alone their offspring. Gang-du even offers his fourteen year old daughter a beer while watching television and she incredulously asks, "Are you *really* my father?" Hyang-jin Lee argues that this generational rupture is a consistent thread in contemporary South Korean film, and that the family unit is the battleground on which contemporary Korean culture is portrayed. "The allegory of the psychic wounds engendered by Korea's division into North and South is presented through themes of ruptured families and motherhood" (Russell 60). The film proceeds to deconstruct the traditional Confucian family unit in South Korea. Yet despite being profoundly dysfunctional they are a family that loves each other and comes together when everyone else refuses to help them.

III

> *Just as the monster movies of the '50s came out of worries about the nuclear bomb and the Soviet threat, so The Host can be traced to fears about what the Americans are doing now. Having said that, it does treat the activities of the US military in quite a satirical way, perhaps not to be taken too seriously.*
>
> - Joon Bong-ho (Bong 2006)

In the middle of the day, in broad daylight, the creature alluded to in

the prologues emerges from the Han River only thirteen minutes into the film. By revealing the monster so early and in such a way Bong Ho refuses to adhere to the conventions of the genre: films like *Alien* (Scott, 1979) and *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) have hidden their creature in shadows or revealed only parts of its body, teasing the audience until well into the film. About this the director comments, "First I hated the monster film's convention or tradition that we have to wait for more than an hour to see just the tip of the monster's tail. I wanted to break that. Secondly, *The Host* is a sci fi film but it has a realistic mood. In real life when we confront disaster, we are never prepared in advance" (qtd. in Nayman 28). The monster is clear for all to see and is a decidedly Giger-esque creation, reminiscent of the creature from *Alien*. It manages to be both beautiful and grotesque at the same time; fish-like and about the size of a small truck, yet it has legs which enable it to move with grace and fluidity on land.[3)]

Emerging from the water it runs along the bank of the river, killing many as it rushes past. Gang-du and a young American soldier, Donald White, get swept up in the crowd but endeavour to fight back. Gang-du attempts to hit the beast with a heavy sign, but their effort ends with the American apparently being eaten and the beast's blood splashing all over Gang-du's face. Seeing Hyun-seo in the path of the creature he grabs her by the hand and attempts to flee, but in an echo of his previous slip, he falls over again. On standing up he reaches for her hand only to find that it belongs to another girl (with both mother and father visible). Turning around he sees that the monster has taken Hyu-seo and leapt

3) Strikingly realised by the San Francisco based special effects company The Orphanage who had previously worked on *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich, 2004), *Hellboy* (Del Torro, 2004) and *Sin City* (Rodriguez, 2005). Indeed it has been stated that forty percent of the films budget went on the digital effects alone. See Nick Roddick, "Red River" *Sight and Sound*, v.16 n.12, (Dec 06) pp.32-34.

into the river with her. While Gang-du attempts to follow, flinging himself into the water after them, he cannot catch up; he has failed in his duty as a father.

Fig. 2- The creature captures Hyun-Seo and returns with her to the River Han

The aftermath of the attack is shown in the next sequence which is situated in a large hall. Photographs of those killed in the incident line the walls, the moans and wails of the anguished families fill the soundtrack. The Park family, which has become separated over the years, are all present. The grandfather calls to the picture of the deceased Hyun-seo, "Thanks to *you* we're all together." Despite the tragic nature of the scene, Joon-ho Bong also plays it for comic effect. Such juxtaposition has been hard for western audiences to process, but might be considered as one of the defining characteristics of contemporary South Korean cinema. In this sequence the satirical nature of the film begins to emerge. Amongst the grieving relatives, an official enters loudly calling for the owner of an illegally parked car, Park suggests, "There have been a lot of disasters in Korea where we have to set up funerals for all the casualties. And

there's always someone calling out the car number" (qtd. in Rodick 34). Another overbearing official, dressed in a yellow Hazmat suit, enters exuding an aura of pomposity, before slipping momentarily and unsuccessfully trying to mask any slight on his abilities. The survivors are treated more like suspects than victims, and it becomes immediately apparent that even the government has no idea what has transpired. The official signals that a news report will explain to them the nature of their predicament, but he cannot find the correct channel on the television. His colleagues then rush in spraying disinfectant over the confused and scared crowd, while he continues to yell "remain calm!"

Yet, unbeknownst to the family, Hyun-seo is not in fact dead, but alive in a sewer somewhere in the city. She manages to briefly telephone her father, but the authorities do not believe him and even refuse to trace the call. She has been marked as dead on a piece of paper, and therefore, despite evidence to the contrary, she officially remains dead. Hers is what Judith Butler described as a 'precarious life' in her book about trauma and loss, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. Butler contended that western society regards some lives (largely those of westerners themselves) as being more valuable than others, and that thousands victims of violence and war in third world, developing or distant countries simply do not have the cultural capital of even a single death in the west. Yet the Parks revolt against the lack of value placed on Hyun-seo's life and having been failed by the system they set about taking her rescue into their own hands. On numerous occasions throughout the film the authorities (both South Korean and US) are categorised by their refusal to listen to ordinary people, treating them as criminals, suspects and worthless rather than victims, citizens or individuals of value.

The Host frequently features news reports which act as an ironic commentary on the progression of the narrative and often do not equate with the reality what we have seen the Park family experience. Not only

are the Park family labelled as dangerous fugitives after their escape (something they are quite clearly not), but Gang-du's role in fighting the monster is ignored in favour of the American Sgt Donald White, who, the newsreader asserts, dies from his wounds, when in actuality the narrative shows that he dies after being operated on by a US military doctor in an attempt to find evidence of the virus. When a US Official states, "I cannot give any of that information without the approval of the United States", the statement accentuates the involvement of America in the affairs of the South Korean government. Later the news reveals that the US is imperiously taking over the search for the creature after the South Koreans have failed to successfully contain the threat.

In the sewers Hyun-seo takes care of a little boy, Se-jin, who has also been captured by the monster, in the process ironically becoming a mother figure herself, perhaps the only one in the entire film. For those watching carefully the homeless boy had been introduced at the beginning of the film attempting to steal from the Park kiosk before being stopped by his brother, who has now also become one of the victims of the monster. When he hears that Hyun-seo's family own a kiosk, something she had taken for granted, he is amazed at the thought of not being hungry and being able to eat whenever and whatever you want. He is a stark contrast to contemporary children more concerned with the latest video games, trainers and mobile phones. When the boy asks what *she* would like now most of all, she remembers her father's inappropriate offer of a cold beer. Despite his ineptitude she knows how much her father loves and cares for her.

At exactly the same time the rest of the family have paused in their search for Hyun-seo and are sitting around a table eating an improvised meal. Nam-joo and Nam-il have spent much of their time blaming and criticising Gang-du for the kidnap of his daughter, but the grandfather asks his two younger children to be kinder to their elder brother as they could never understand the heartbreak of a parent who has lost a child,

"When a parent's heart breaks, the sound can travel for miles." Miraculously Hyun-seo appears to emerge from under the table and starts to eat with them, it takes a moment for the audience to realise that she cannot possibly be there in the reality of the film, that it is an eloquent fantasy of reunion, "that communicates loss without a single word of dialogue uttered" (Nayman 27). Shortly after, the patriarch Hie-bong is killed by the monster, and once again it is partially Gang-du's fault, as he makes the mistake of inadvertently giving his father a gun with no bullets. As the creature rears up, Hie-bong gives his hopeless son an affectionate smile of forgiveness before he is killed. Nam-il and Nam-joo flee, but the distraught Gang-du is unable to leave his father's body and is caught by the authorities.

Fig. 3- A family reunited. From left to right, the patriarch Hie-bong (played by Hie-bong Byeon), the feckless Gang-du (played by Kang-ho Song), and the unemployed alcoholic Nam il (played by Hae-il Park).

Gang-du is taken to an ominous looking laboratory where he is strapped to a chair. He explains his family's predicament to the surrounding scientists,

but once again no one listens, “Why won’t you listen to my words?” he asks. In a conversation in English the American general, who is obviously in charge, reveals they have yet to actually find the virus in question. But, in an echo of the United States’ protracted search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, despite the lack of evidence, the authorities are still convinced that it exists. The general states, “The late Sgt Donald, the first one classified as a victim of the virus, was given an extensive autopsy, and no virus was found. He died of shock during the operation. Also no traces of the virus were found in any of the patients quarantined, simply put, so far, there is no virus whatsoever.”

Even with his limited understanding of English Gang-du understands the words “no virus” and repeats them “No virus”? He is frustrated and powerless, “Why won’t you let me speak?” After they have taken a sample from his brain in a painful looking process against his will, Gang-du escapes using a syringe of his own blood as a weapon against his abductors; then he heads towards the river again to continue the search for his daughter.

At the same time Nam-il has also been looking for his niece, it has given him a purpose that his life had been lacking. He had railed, “I sacrificed my youth for the democratisation of my country and now the fuckers won’t give me a job,” to which his working class father had answered “I put you through college selling ramen.” Nam-il must have participated in the 1980’s democracy demonstrations and is bitter at being excluded from South Korea’s prosperity boom. In this respect he is typical of a generation of Koreans, disillusioned with what their protests have brought them. Yet Nam-il’s experiences come in useful in the search for Hyun-seo when he visits a friend who works at a telecommunications office. His friend also used to be a protestor, but has now found himself a lucrative position. Nam-il is jealous of his friend’s high salary and status, but the friend reveals, although he earns seventy thousand a year; he owes a fortune on credit cards. Even those who have become part of the prosperity boom have not necessarily become happy. Nam-il discovers

the location of his niece and that his friend has sold him out for a reward offered by the authorities, but he manages to escape using his old protestor skills, improvising a distraction using a safety pin and an electrical plug.

The climax of the film is now set as Gang-du, Nam-il and Nam-joo all converge on the monster's location. They discover that a huge protest is going on, many are wearing orange, flying banners and proclaiming 'free Gang-du' who has become an inadvertent symbol of the human rights activists. The authorities order them to leave the area and threaten the use of a biological substance called Agent Yellow, a thinly veiled reference to Agent Orange which was used extensively during the Vietnam War. During the conflict 4.8 million Vietnamese were exposed to the toxin leading to the deaths of half a million people.[4] When the monster emerges from the river, the authorities use Agent Orange on it, even though it is a heavily populated area. The chemical weapon seems to have little effect on the monster, but causes the protestors to vomit and bleed from their eyes and their ears. The Park family unite and finally kill the monster; Nam-joo is able to release her arrow at the right time, in doing so finally overcoming her complex, Nam-il targets the beast with homemade Molotov cocktails and Gang-du it with another sign, this time successfully.[5]

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4) See Geoffrey York and Mick Hayley, "Last Ghost of the Vietnam War" *The Globe and Mail* (Tuesday, Mar. 31, 2009). http://www.theglobeandmail.com/archives/article697346.ece. In 1999 South Korean veterans of the Vietnam war (expand) filed a lawsuit connected to the use of agent orange which led to the 2006 verdict of the Korean Appeal Court against the manufacturers Monsanto and Dow which ordered them to by $62 million dollars in damages.

5) In the fracas a small fish flies from the beast's body leading me to believe that the monster is a mother herself. The process of feeding has been a motif and somewhat unlikely connects Gang-du to the monster: the monster feeding itself in the sewer, gang du eating squid as a midnight snack, the crowd feeding the animal in the water, the connection of the word host to feeding. Gang du pretends to be the creature in the hospital to show them

But it is too late; Gang-du pulls Hyun-seo from the monster's mouth only to discover that she is dead, despite his almost superhuman effort he has failed as a parent once again. Unlike the protagonists of the Hollywood films *Apocalypto* (Gibson, 2006), *Children of Men* (Cuarón, 2006), and *War of the Worlds* (Spielberg, 2005), where in each film the father (either literal or symbolic) rescues a child from imminent death and reunites the family in so doing, Gang-du has not been heroically redeemed in the search for his child. However, lying next to Hyun-seo is the homeless boy, Se-jin, who is still alive. Behind them the protest continues ineffectually, the beast has been defeated not by the Korean or American military, but by a small, dysfunctional and fractured Korean family, the Parks.

IV

> *[...] the film's more focused on the struggle of a family faced with a situation that's totally beyond their control. These people are weak, they're under-achievers, but the system doesn't help them - it fails them.*
>
> - Joon Bong-ho (Bong 2006)

The film ends with a poignant epilogue. Gang-du has returned to the family kiosk which he had once despised. Behind him is his newly adopted son, Se-jin, sleeping peacefully. In the boy Gang-du has found a surrogate child and an image of himself as a boy, just like him Se-jin had been neglected, left alone to search for food and had lost members of his

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what might have happened. The audience begins to feel sorry for the monster as well as Gang du as the film progresses. Director says "In some sense, Gang-du is the monster of the family. You can tell it by how his brother and sister regard him." Adam Nayman, "A Relay race of the Weak. Bong Joon-ho's *The Host*" *Cinema Scope* n30 (Spring 2007), pp.28-29

family. In adopting the boy he has given himself a purpose and the Park family a future. As soon as Gang-du says "time to eat", the boy immediately leaps up and starts to ravenously consume the food in front of him. In the background the ironic commentary of the television news continues, "The recent crisis in South Korea occurred as a result of an error...Ultimately the virus was not discovered and we conclude that the cause of the crisis should be wholly attributed to misinformation." Unlike most children of his age the boy asks Gang-du to turn *off* the television, so they can concentrate on eating. Gang-du has adopted his rightful role of eldest son and is now patriarch of the Park family. Tellingly his hair is no longer dyed blonde, it has returned to its natural black. The kiosk is adorned with photographs of the family: especially of Hyun-seo and Hie-bong, newspaper clippings and even their 'Wanted' poster. He gazes out at the Han River expectantly with a rifle in his hands. The film has effectively dramatised the fears of new millennial South Korea and projected them onto the cinema screen. The threat that the Park family faced was not just from the creature, but from the United States and South Korea. The authorities themselves did everything in their power to hurt and hinder them, but Gang-du readies himself for their return. He has learned that nobody helps the family and that the family must help itself.

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