VENGEANCE, VIOLENCE, VAMPIRES: Dark Humour in the Films of Park Chan-wook

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ABSTRACT

This essay places the South Korean film *Thirst* (2009) within Park Chan-wook's oeuvre as a filmmaker notorious for graphic depictions of violence and revenge. Park's use of dark humour in his films, which is emphasized in *Thirst* perhaps more than ever, allows for a more self-aware depiction of violence, where both the viewer and the protagonist are awakened to the futility of revenge. This ultimately paints his characters as fascinatingly crazy – simultaneously heroes, villains, and victims. Film theorist Wes D. Gehring's three themes of dark humour ('man as beast,' 'the absurdity of the world,' and 'the omnipresence of death') become most obvious in Park's most recent film, which pays closer attention to character development through narrative detail. Rather than portraying the characters as sentimental, dark humour depicts their misfortunes in an alternative way, allowing for consideration of such taboo subjects as religion, adultery, and death/suicide.

These issues are further tackled through *Thirst*'s portrayal of its vampire protagonist, which ultimately de-mystifies the traditional vampire figure. While this character has more often been associated with romance, exoticism and the mystical powers of the supernatural, *Thirst* takes relatively little from the demons of *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922) and various other *Dracula* adaptations, nor the romantic figures of *Interview with the Vampire* (Jordan, 1994), and *Twilight* (Hardwicke, 2008). Instead, it is part of a much smaller group of contemporary vampire films,

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which are rather informed by a postmodern reconfiguration of the monster. Thus, this paper examines *Thirst* as an important contribution to the global and hybrid nature of those films in which postmodern vampires are sympathetic and de-mystified, exhibiting symptoms stemming from a natural illness or misfortune.

Park's undertaking of a vampire film allows for a complex balance between narrative and visuals through his focus on the Western implications of this myth within Korean cinema. This combination of international references and traditional Korean culture marks it as highly conscious of New Korean Cinema's focus on globalization. With *Thirst,* Park successfully unites familiar images of the vampire hunting and feeding, with more stylistically distinct, grotesque images of violence and revenge. In this sense, dark humour highlights the less charming aspects of the vampire struggling to survive, most effective in scenes depicting the protagonist feeding from his friend's IV in the hospital, and sitting in the sunlight, slowly turning to ash, in the final minutes of the film.

The international appeal of Park's style, combining conventions of the horror/thriller genre with his own mixture of dark humour and non-linear narrative, is epitomized in *Thirst*, which underscores South Korea's growing global interest with its overt international framework. Furthermore, he portrayal of the vampire as a sympathetic figure allows for a shift away from the conventional focus on myth and the exotic, toward a renewed construction of the vampire in terms of its contribution to generic hybridization and cultural adaptation.

Key Words

Vampire, Film, South Korea, Park Chan-wook, Dark, Humour, Globalization, Violence, Revenge

"Revenge is good for your health,
but pain will find you again."
- Oh Dae-su, *Oldboy*

This line from South Korean filmmaker Park Chan-wook's third feature film, *Oldboy* (2003) comes at one of the rare times when dialogue directly conveys the moral of his film, rather than his tendency to rely on the visuals. Best known for his onscreen displays of graphic violence, especially

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in his Vengeance Trilogy, Park is recognized as an auteur for his blending of horror and action with more than a hint of dark humour. Irony is especially important in his use of violence because it highlights the fact that his films are ultimately about the failure of revenge; rather than depicting the satisfaction resulting from seeking vengeance, Park's protagonists tend to end up suffering just as much as their victims. While the use of dark humour in all of Park's films draws attention to the futility of the revenge and graphic violence being portrayed, he has, more recently, begun to move away from pure visual excess to more closely considering the psychological effects of violence and revenge. In his most recent film, *Thirst* (2009), Park adapts the Western vampire narrative to portray a more globalized take on violence and a more concentrated form of revenge: his protagonist, Sang-hyun (Song Kang-ho) is up against himself in this battle, after travelling to Africa and subjecting himself to vampire cells that lead him to question his morals as a Catholic priest. While the use of graphic violence in all of Park's films can be read as a response to the nation's tumultuous past, the barbaric vengeance of his earlier films is distinctly different from the primarily internal dilemma of *Thirst*, which deals with conflicts of man versus himself and man versus nature in place of the man versus man battles of the Vengeance Trilogy. Before delving deeper into the context of Park Chan-wook's use of dark humour and onscreen violence, however, a brief situating of the relationship between South Korea's political state and film industry is warranted.

In "Globalisation and New Korean Cinema," Jeeyoung Shin notes that it was in 1994 when the Korean government began to take a special interest in globalization, introducing the concept of *segyehwa* ("*segye* meaning 'world' and *hwa* meaning 'becoming/turning into'") as part of a renewed political campaign (53). Part of this policy drew attention to a statistic showing that profits from *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993) equaled the export revenue of 1.5 million Hyundai cars, urging President

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Kim Young-sam "to promote the high technology media industry as a strategic national industry" (ibid). This led to the development of the Film Promotion Law in 1995 and the Busan International Film Festival in 1996, both of which continue to promote the making and distribution of Korean films. Shin points out that the introduction of the festival not only opened up an occasion for showcasing Korean cinema, it also led to more Korean films being invited to festivals in other countries, which created more opportunities for foreign co-productions (55). Darcy Paquet, in *New Korean Cinema: Breaking the Waves*, also acknowledges the increasing number of film production programs at Korean universities around this time,[1] another factor responsible for the growth of Korean cinema during this period. This increase was matched by the number of young aspiring directors who also chose to go abroad for a more international filmmaking perspective (Paquet 67-8).

Yet, Michael Robinson's consideration of global awareness in Korean cinema in his article "Contemporary Cultural Production in South Korea," suggests that Korea's concern for globalization actually came prior to Kim Young-sam's 1994 *segyehwa* campaign, with the 1993 film *Sopyonje* (Im Kwon-taek). This film marked a distinct change in local reception, which was a precursor to the increased international perspective within Korean cinema. While the government had put a lot of money into restoring Korean traditions after being occupied by Japan, there was little room for creativity amongst filmmakers, as they were expected to incorporate as much traditional content as possible. South Korean cinema began to gain international recognition into the 80s, perhaps because of the exotic nature of the customs being portrayed for non-Korean audiences, but domestically, interest was fading. Robinson suggests that *Sopyonje*, however, turned out to be the perfect balance of tradition and creativity.

1) "The number of film production departments at Korean universities stood at nine in 1989, 17 in 1996, 29 in 1999 and 52 in 2007" (Paquet 67).

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Koreans were attracted to both the film's realism and its cultural roots, placing tradition in the contemporary context of the 1990s. It seems the greatest factor for the success of this film was its timing: it came at a point when Koreans were simply looking for some kind of acknowledgment of the Japanese occupation, tired of pretending it had not happened. *Sopyonje* also hit home with its portrayal of traditional concepts such as *han*, the Korean cultural concept of lament from repressed bitterness. As Robinson's description notes, "one of the film's main plot lines in which the student-daughter in the fictive family of singers is blinded by the father so that she might gain the *han* necessary for her singing to reach its ultimate power in some way seemed to sublimate the collective *han* in 1990s Korea itself" (27). *Han*, Robinson writes, is "deeply seeded [in the] Korean experience of oppression and unrequited resentment borne of generations of struggle" (ibid). Connecting this fading Korean tradition to a contemporary situation allowed both domestic and international audiences a renewed faith in Korean cinema, finally able to embrace their own culture having the possibility of globalization. Robinson concludes:

> Koreans, now reveling in the lightness of liberation from the master narratives of their past, are now willing to laugh both with and at themselves. Perhaps this joy is taken for granted by Koreans under the age of forty but, for elders, this must feel strange – a strangeness borne of finally receiving permission to view the past without regret and banish its pain from the present. (28-29)

Following the success of *Sopyonje*, Koreans began to watch more of their own films, with *Shiri* (Kang, 1999) outgrossing *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997) at the Korean box-office. The following year, *Shiri*'s domestic success was topped by Park Chan-wook's *Joint Security Area* (2000), a military drama depicting tensions surrounding the North-South border

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of the two Koreas.

As suggested by its title, *JSA* takes place within the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), in a village designated as a neutral meeting place for both sides of the border. The film follows the investigation of a Swiss military officer (born to a Swiss mother and a Korean father), who has been brought into Korea to resolve the mystery of the death of two men, one from each side of the border. Using a *Rashomon*-like narrative to depict both sides of the story, the shift between past and present is not always clear, but comes together in the end with the discovery that neither account is reliable. Much like its predecessors, *Sopyonje* and *Shiri*, *Joint Security Area* was partly successful due to its combination of contemporary Korean culture and global representation through the Swiss officer, Sophie (Lee Young-ae).[2] Although Park had already directed a few (less popular) films prior to the release of *JSA*, this was the film that launched his career. As noted on Koreanfilm.org, the film broke various records, including the one set by *Shiri* the year before – a million viewers in 21 days – managing, instead, to break a million admissions in only 15 days ("Korean…2000"). But this was only the start of a bright new future for Park Chan-wook.

Two years later, the much-anticipated *Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance* (Park, 2002) was released, marking the first of three films in Park's Vengeance Trilogy, to be followed by *Oldboy* (2003), and *Lady Vengeance* (2005). It was with this series that Park began to craft his signature focus on revenge and violence. In an article entitled "Love Your Enemies," Steve Choe points out that it is in this trilogy that Park begins to push "the logic of revenge to its breaking point, radically problematizing its

2) Not long after the release of *JSA*, Michael Atkinson, in an August 2001 issue of *The Village Voice*, observed of Korean cinema: "The movies – from South Korea (the North's still lost in the fairy-tale forest of socialist propaganda) – naturally demonstrate both an eager-to-please Americanism and a distinctly Korean taste for jugular wine" ("Blood Feuds").

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vulgar ethics of retribution as an impossible aporia" (31). Although *JSA* touches on themes of revenge with the unreliable accounts given by soldiers from each side of the border, it is the Vengeance Trilogy that really brings light to the issue as a mystifying human instinct. While Choe cites various critics who find Park's extreme take on both violence and revenge over the top and unjustifiable, he also refers to an interview with Park that suggests his vengeance films distinctively highlight the fact that revenge is often the most foolish choice, while, on the contrary, most revenge films tend to avoid admitting this altogether (34). Park's use of dark humour allows his protagonists to come across as fascinatingly crazy − simultaneously heroes, villains, and victims. This approach allows the films to critique rather than support "everyday depictions of revenge in the cinema, where revenge is all too easily justified and even celebrated as such" (35). Instead, the Vengeance Trilogy presents the worst-case scenarios − revenge gone terribly wrong − which leave few, if any, admirable characters. In *Mr. Vengeance*, we end up pitying rather than sympathizing with either of the two avengers after the maddening effects of their spite have overcome them both, and the same is true for the protagonist throughout *Oldboy*. *Lady Vengeance*, slightly more emotional in its depiction of a mother-daughter relationship, also portrays the gruesomeness of its protagonist's intentions, even if forgiveness for the vengeful act is closer to the forefront of this film than the others.

The concept of forgiveness in *Mr. Vengeance*, on the other hand, is inconceivable. The film tells the story of a deaf factory worker in search of a kidney to save his dying sister. When the hospital is unable to find a suitable one, Ryu (Shin Ha-kyun) resolves to trade all of his savings, as well as one of his own kidneys, to black market workers who have promised a match for his sister in return. Following the surgery, however, Ryu wakes to find both his money and his kidney missing, only then learning that the hospital has found one, but requires the same amount of money he has just lost. In response, his anarchist girlfriend, Yeong-mi

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(Bae Doona) schemes up a plan to kidnap the daughter of Ryu's boss's friend, Dong-jin (Song Kang-ho) and hold her for ransom, but when the girl accidently drowns just before being returned to her father, the revenge plot suddenly thickens. The father vows to kill Ryu and his girlfriend, and they are equally adamant about getting revenge on the black market gang who ripped Ryu off. In the end, everyone winds up dead and the extremities of revenge draw attention to its futility. This "uncompromising violence, black humour, and degradation" portrayed in *Mr. Vengeance* leads Anthony Leong to suggest that Park's style was influenced by Japanese filmmakers Takeshi Kitano and Takashi Miike, both of whom have gained auteur status for their recurring exploitation of nihilism, violence, and sexual perversity (159). Likewise, Park's style has been recognized internationally, particularly through the success of *Mr. Vengeance,* which initiated his signature revenge theme. This created much anticipation for the release of his following film three years later.

Upon release, *Oldboy* grossed over $3 million in Korea alone, with a nine-week run and a fifth-place ranking for highest grossing films of 2003 ("Korean…2003"). *Oldboy* is set up as a revenge film much faster than its precursor, spending twenty minutes situating protagonist Oh Dae-su's (Choi Min-sik) purpose for revenge.[3] A mere five minutes into the film (immediately following the opening credits), it becomes clear that Oh Dae-su has been kidnapped and the following fifteen minutes are spent summarizing his fifteen years held in an isolated room, unsure of who his captor may be or what his motivation is. Then, just as suddenly as he was taken, Oh Dae-su is released, but continues to be taunted by the captor, who urges him to work out his identity and purpose. Having spent the past fifteen years preparing to take revenge on whomever imprisoned him, Oh Dae-su readily takes on the challenge, adopting a

3) This can be compared to the hour – half the film – that passes before the various plotlines of *Mr. Vengeance* come together to justify its title.

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young sushi chef, Mi-do (Kang Hye-jeong) as his sidekick and girlfriend. The film's over the top fight scenes, where Oh Dae-su manages to take on dozens of men at once and still come out on top, highlights Park's deliberate emphasis on the foolishness of violence and revenge, contrasting such unlikely scenes of escape with pathetic ones in which the senselessness of his search is focused upon.[4] Although both manage to survive in the end, it is not framed in such a way that any character comes out on top. Instead, Oh Dae-su and his captor, Woo-jin (Yu Ji-tae), are both made to look pathetic in their respective endeavors to seek revenge.

This notion of the futility of revenge is carried over into the final film of the trilogy, in which a mother tries to simultaneously gain her daughter's approval and pay back the man who forced her to spend several years in prison for a crime she did not commit. *Lady Vengeance*, as the title suggests, switches to a female protagonist who has falsely admitted to murdering a young boy in order to protect her newborn daughter whose life has been threatened by the real murderer, Mr. Baek (Choi Min-sik). After obtaining a reduced sentence due to years of good behaviour in prison, Lee Geum-ja (Lee Young-ae) seeks out her now teenaged daughter, Jenny (Kwan Yae-young), who has been adopted by an Australian family and only speaks English. In addition to her struggle to bond with Jenny, Geum-ja actively seeks out Mr. Baek to avenge his crimes. Yet, as Steve Choe argues, *Lady Vengeance* takes the revenge theme in a new direction by offering "an interpretation of revenge that opens up a different logic altogether, one dictated less by punishment and payback and more by the possibility of forgiveness" (31). While Geum-ja has the opportunity to kill her victim early in the film, she chooses to wait, and, even when he is finally killed near the end, the focus is on whether or not Geum-ja can be forgiven by her daughter for her own act of violence. In a *Cineaste*

4) Such as halfway through the film when he and Mi-do are ambushed in their hotel room and handcuffed to the furniture.

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review of the film in 2006, Robert Cashill suggests

> what lifts *Lady Vengeance* over standard avenger movies is Geum-ja's agonizing need for atonement. The Bride, in Tarantino's *Kill Bill* saga, doesn't waste time fretting about past crimes as she goes on a rampage that references little besides her creator's storehouse of movie clichés. (58)

Instead, Park's film is more about repentance than sheer violence.

The theme of atonement ultimately dominates over violence in Park's most recent film, *Thirst*, as well. Despite the continued presence of the director's trademark gore, *Thirst* also focuses more on forgiveness than revenge. Invoking the religious concept of absolution, Park reinterprets the traditional Western vampire narrative as the basis of his story, portraying a Catholic priest who is infected by vampire blood cells at the beginning of the film. After volunteering to participate in a medical experiment in Africa, Sang-hyun (Song Kang-ho) is given a blood transfusion that leaves him craving human blood. But, because he is the only person to survive this experiment, his faithful parishioners regard Sang-hyun as a miracle worker and his vampiric symptoms seem to go unnoticed. When he encounters an old childhood friend, Kang-woo (Shin Ha-kyun), and his mother, Lady Ra (Kim Hae-sook), he begins to make weekly trips to their home to play Mahjong. It is not long, however, before he is unable to control his desires and begins an illicit relationship with Kang-woo's wife Tae-ju (Kim Ok-bin), leaving him incapable of maintaining the values he was raised on by the church. Tae-ju, innocent though she looks, manages to fool the sympathetic Sang-hyun into believing her husband abuses her, and the two plot Kang-woo's demise, death by drowning, to be executed on a late night fishing trip. The remainder of the film depicts the psychological effects this murder has on both Sang-hyun and Tae-ju, and as the latter becomes increasingly devious

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in her attempt to justify her participation in the crime, Sang-hyun resolves to kill her, but at the last minute turns her into a vampire instead. In the end, finally coming to terms with the fact that he cannot conquer his conflict with himself or Tae-ju, Sang-hyun surrenders both of their bodies to the sunlight.

Despite this shift from focusing on the sheer brutality of violence in *Mr. Vengeance* and *Oldboy* to the justified terms of vengeance in *Lady Vengeance* and *Thirst*, all of Park's films contain an undertone of dark humour. This encourages the viewer to question what they are being shown rather than accept it at face value. Furthermore, these films get increasingly dark as they move into psychological exploration. Although the use of dark humour on screen is often less obvious than other forms of comedy, Wes D. Gehring notes three key themes of dark humour narratives in his book *American Dark Comedy*: "man as beast," "the absurdity of the world," and "the omnipresence of death" (166). These themes can be found in all of Park's films, especially in the later ones, which pay more attention to narrative detail. The use of the "man as beast" characters (in most of Park's films there are more than one) emphasizes the non-heroic aspect of vengeance. Dong-jin, Oh Dae-su, and Geum-ja all come out looking desperately pathetic as they sink deeper into their vengeance missions, while Sang-hyun, the more obvious beast, becomes increasingly troubled by the conflict between his Catholic morals and his vampiric desires. "The absurdity of the world" is played out through characters who provoke these revenge plots (in *Mr. Vengeance* it is both Ryu and his girlfriend's anarchist scheme and the black market gang; in *Oldboy*, Woo-jin; in *Lady Vengeance,* Mr. Baek), as well as the absurd circumstance of Sang-hyun's blood transfusion in *Thirst* that leaves him with such strange desires. Finally, "the omnipresence of death," or perhaps in Park's case, the *obsession* with death, is at the forefront of these films, especially in the first contribution to the trilogy, where all the main characters wind up dead, as well as in the most recent film

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where Sang-hyun exposes himself and Tae-ju to the sun at the end to obtain absolution for the other deaths they have caused in order to satisfy their thirst (for both sex and blood).

It is really only in this last example, however, that a coherent resolution to the outcomes of violence and revenge is presented. The ambiguous endings of the Vengeance Trilogy films may suggest the futility of revenge, but the end redemption in *Thirst* comes through a relatively coherent path of cause and effect. Although widely praised for marking Park's signature style, the Vengeance Trilogy has often been criticized for having one particular flaw: critics argue that, while the films are striking (in the most perverse way possible) to watch, the narratives are less than engaging due to their overly ambiguous and often redundant nature. *Thirst* is still in some ways tedious in its tendency to show a series of individually impressive scenes that do not always fit smoothly together, but the film still manages a balance between image and narrative.[5] Whether or not this comes in response to prior criticism, *Thirst* remains unquestionably easier to follow than Park's earlier work.

This sense of balance is also pertinent to Michael Robinson's analysis mentioned above, as well as the "hybrid cultural forms" noted by Jeeyoung Shin, which "provide an important means for their [Koreans'] self-definition, a self-definition that not only distances itself from a xenophobic and moralizing adherence to local cultural 'tradition' but also challenges Western cultural hegemony" (57). Likewise, Park's films seem increasingly aware of this hybrid form, an awareness that peaks in *Thirst*, his most recent film. Bringing the Western vampire tradition to Eastern screens via Africa, where Sang-hyun has acquired the diseased blood cells, the film takes on more of a cross-cultural perspective to draw domestic and international audiences alike. Although Sang-hyun was not infected in the traditional

5) Not to mention its captivating use of sound to highlight the slurping and sucking of both the feeding and sex scenes.

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Western sense, the film does acknowledge his symptoms as a result of being given a blood transfusion containing vampire cells (though, the word vampire is used sparingly – and in English – throughout the film). As Hyangjin Lee points out in "South Korea: Film on the Global Stage": "imitation of Hollywood tends to be suggested as the most effective way to challenge Hollywood's dominance in Asia and lead the successful 'internationalization' of Korean national cinema" (185). This can be seen in the readiness of many Korean filmmakers to sell the rights for Hollywood re-makes, as well as the success of many Korean films within other Asian countries, such as Hong Kong and Japan. Lee also recognizes the blending of art-house and commercial styles of filmmaking as another source of South Korean cinema's success overseas, particularly in Europe and America (185). While these influences are reflected in Park's earlier films, which typically combine conventional aspects of the horror/thriller genre with his own artistic mix of non-linear narrative and dark humour, *Thirst* epitomizes South Korea's growing global interest with its overt international framework.

The portrayal of the protagonist as a Catholic priest allows for immediate recognition of the film's connection between Korean characters and a traditionally Western religion. Despite the fact that many of the characters appear to be over-the-top followers, Tae-ju makes it clear that she is not a believer, thus explaining her lack of concern for the outcomes of their adulterous relationship: "I don't have faith. I'm not going to hell." However, because their opposing beliefs are not debated to any extent, it is ultimately unclear throughout the film whether it intends to support or deny the Catholic faith. This allows Park to portray both sides of this situation, which goes much further than the context of the film,[6] by presenting a more ambiguous portrayal of the Catholicism at the center

6) Though most religious Koreans have converted to Christianity, some still remain Buddhist and many do not claim any religious affiliation.

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of it.

Other references in the film also draw attention to the blending of local and global practices without preoccupying itself with religion. The use of traditional Korean pop music ('trot') is predominant throughout the film, as is the playing of a classic Chinese game, Mahjong, above a traditional Korean dress shop. Furthermore, when Tae-ju takes over the house, she tells the comatose Mrs. Ra that they will wear shoes in the house now, "like in the States." These aspects of the film, amongst others,[7] represent *Thirst*'s contribution to the New Korean Cinema, which aims to find a balance between the portrayal of global values to appeal to both domestic and international audiences.

Joseph Tomkins and Julie A. Wilson argue that South Korea's response to globalization "provid[es] a representational site that intimates the very essence of historical struggle in the face of global capitalism" through his recurring portrayals of violence and revenge (69). In their article "The Political Unconscious of Park Chan-wook," Tomkins and Wilson examine how several of Park's films (pre-*Thirst*) "sadistically drag[…] his spectators into a blood-thirsty world where unspeakable acts and invisible assailants announce a near total experience of existential and environmental alienation" (ibid). While *Thirst* is less about revenge than the films in the Vengeance Trilogy, the violence that is portrayed is no less explicit. Furthermore, the alienation Tomkins and Wilson refer to is, perhaps, even more prominent in this most recent film, which portrays Tae-ju as an orphan, forced into marriage with her adopted brother; Sang-hyun as a priest, forced to go against what he preaches because of his vampiric ways; and other, secondary, characters, such as the blind priest, alienated by his own disability and Sang-hyun's inability to continue helping him. Yet, rather than portraying these characters as sentimental, the film's use of dark humour helps to

7) Is it, perhaps, no coincidence that the vampire's name is "Sang" – French for blood? The film is, after all, meant to be an adaptation of the French novel *Therese Raquin* (Emile Zola, 1867).

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emphasize their misfortunes in a more realistic way, by de-romanticizing and de-mystifying the vampire, as well as allowing for the consideration of taboo subjects such as the questioning of religion, the act of adultery, and the contemplation of both suicide and death in general.

In *Thirst,* Park Chan-wook's signature style meets the traditional Western vampire film, by presenting a narrative full of sex scenes without portraying the vampire as a romantic character. Sang-hyun becomes somehow increasingly passionate as his vampiric qualities set in, yet his sexual encounters with Tae-ju are, at best, awkward and even at times vulgar. As a priest, Sang-hyun lacks any sexual experience, so the first time he is with Tae-ju, she takes control. This scene depicts Tae-ju explaining herself as she climbs on top of unsure, but clearly aroused, Sang-hyun. Neither of their facial expressions match their moans of pleasure – they both look incredibly uncomfortable. Their second encounter is no less awkward, though significantly more intense: Sang-hyun begins by admiring Tae-ju's blistered feet and proceeds to suck her toes passionately for no less than a minute of the film, before moving up to bite her neck. Tae-ju appears to be aroused by both of these actions, but, again, their facial expressions suggest confusion rather than comfort. In their final sex scene, Sang-hyun moves from caressing Tae-ju to licking her face like an animal and then leaning in to sniff and lick her armpit, as they both continue moaning. Their repeated sounds of sex, mismatched with their uncomfortable, even bored, facial expressions, are complimented by an undertone of dark humour to highlight the "absurdities of the world," (as Gehring would phrase it) in the form of priest-turned-vampire desires.

Thirst also uses dark humour to de-mystify the vampire by presenting Sang-hyun's methods of obtaining blood as a more realistic feat than the simple routine of the traditional vampire that preys on innocent victims by night, specifically by using his comatose friend, Hyo-sung, who "loved helping the hungry." One scene, particularly effective in its use of dark humour, focuses on Hyo-sung looking peaceful in his coma, in a dark

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hospital room. As a faint slurping sound begins to grow louder, however, the camera slowly lowers, first revealing blood moving through an IV tube attached to Hyo-sung's arm, and then continuing to move downward. When the blood temporarily stops flowing, it becomes obvious that it has been travelling out of his arm rather than in, and the moving camera reveals Sang-hyun's hand holding onto the tube, which leads to his mouth. A medium close-up of Sang-hyun shows his bandaged face sucking ferociously at the tube of blood, and then the camera moves overhead to piece the picture together: Hyo-sung lies quietly breathing on the bed, while Sang-hyun lies on the floor beside him, consuming his blood. This scene does not offer an obvious cue for laughter, but it is difficult to refrain from smirking at the sight of this priest, perplexed in his mission to find a balance between his Catholic faith and his intense desires as a vampire. The darkness of the scene is in keeping with the traditional vampire style, while the ironic humour allows for a de-mystified version, depicting more realistic means of obtaining blood, in an exceptional example of "man as beast." This combination of darkness and humour to portray the repulsiveness of man is similarly used to address the subject of adultery.

While Sang-hyun's concern for the outcome of their relationship is fairly obvious ("We can both go to hell for this"), Tae-ju's guilt is only apparent when they are both haunted by the dead Kang-woo, after his death. What has the potential to be a passionate lovemaking scene between Sang-hyun and Tae-ju is interrupted by an apparition of Kang-woo watching and laughing hysterically at them. This extended scene begins by introducing their new fear of water – after touching Tae-ju, Sang-hyun asks why she is so wet and then looks around for a leak in the waterbed. After Tae-ju tries to convince him it is psychological, they continue to embrace but she seems to be hiding her own hesitation. Following a shot of Sang-hyun trapped in his coffin, Tae-ju is shown in her room, turning the lights on, frightened. Suddenly she is splashed by water and the camera moves up to reveal Kang-woo, drenched, sitting over her with a pair of scissors.

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The camera cuts to Sang-hyun's coffin, where water is gushing out as if he is drowning inside, and then cuts back to Tae-ju's room where Sang-hyun comes to see her. They begin to have sex, but suddenly Kang-woo is lying in between them. Finally, it cuts to the two of them on the bed, awake but facing opposite directions, with Kang-woo in between, holding the rock that drowned him, appearing to be at peace. This marks the last depiction of intercourse between Sang-hyun and Tae-ju, implying they are too affected by their guilt to continue sleeping together.

In the end, *Thirst* offers little hope – even when Sang-hyun tells Tae-ju they will be together in hell, her response is: "When you're dead, you're dead. It's been fun, Father," highlighting the dark humour of the film until its final moments. Tae-ju's last words are followed by silent anticipation (for both the characters and the audience), as Sang-hyun and Tae-ju sit in the middle of nowhere and wait for the sun to come up (three continuous minutes of roasting) before the suffering finally ends and we see the ashes of what were once their feet fall to the ground with their shoes. This is, no doubt, how Gehring would define death as the heart of the dark comedy.

The success of *Thirst* both domestically and internationally speaks simultaneously to the significance of the contemporary vampire film, Park Chan-wook as a filmmaker, and South Korean cinema in general. As an addition to the vampire film canon, *Thirst* offers a renewed interpretation of familiar conventions by emphasizing the conflict of religion inherent in vampire symbolism. While earlier vampire narratives have focused on religion as the source of opposing forces of good and evil, *Thirst*'s unique portrayal of a Catholic vampire presents contradictions that encourage audiences to reconsider the implications of this disease. The film is also stylistically distinct in its use of dark humour to compliment grotesque images of blood and violence. Furthermore, Park's addition of a vampire narrative to his oeuvre shows audiences that he has not limited his filmmaking style to scenes that merely look 'cool,' instead

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unifying image, sound, and story in his unique interpretation of a traditionally Western narrative, connecting South Korean cinema to a global perspective. This has allowed for international recognition of his films, targeting them as important sources for Hollywood re-makes.[8] With this in mind, Julian Stringer, in "Putting Korean Cinema in its Place," points out: "Hollywood, as the global capitalist film industry *par excellence* [···] represents everything that the new commercial Korean cinema either promises or threatens to become" (97). Park has long-since attracted the attention of Hollywood audiences through director and avid fan Quentin Tarantino,[9] and his upcoming film, *Stoker*, slated for release next year, is currently being made in the United States, starring Australian and British actors Mia Wasikowska, Colin Firth, and Nicole Kidman. Being amongst the first Korean films to feature the Western vampire tradition, *Thirst*, if nothing else, will likely be regarded in years to come as the stepping-stone for Park Chan-wook's rise (or fall) to the fame and glory of Hollywood filmmaking.

8) There were rumours back in 2009 (NowPublic.com, AintItCool.com, Drama Beans.com, Mubi.com) that Steven Spielberg was planning to direct an adaptation of the same manga Park's *Oldboy* was based on, starring Will Smith. It appears, however, that this plan has been cancelled due to some kind of legal issues (blog.ningin.com). In January 2010, several sources (TheFilmStage.com, ScreenRant.com, ScreeningLog.com) also announced that Warner Bros. had acquired the rights to *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, and Imdb.com currently has a listing for a new *Oldboy*, without a release date, to be directed by Spike Lee and star Josh Brolin and Samuel L. Jackson.

9) Tarantino also happened to be the jury head for the Cannes Film Festival when *Oldboy* received the Grand Prix in 2004.

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