

# Alien Abjection Amid the Morning Calm: A Singular Reading of Horror Films from Beyond Southeast Asia

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Although Korean cinema managed to ride the crest of Western appreciation (and appropriation) of Asian horror, Korean horror films had to struggle for recognition within the nation. Horror film production, in fact, was downgraded so severely by the government that during certain years, including an extended period starting in the late 1980s, no horror film project was undertaken. This article seeks to look into the causes of the difficulties experienced by horror film production outside Southeast Asia (specifically in Korea), and to posit that a hybridic relation with other Asian cinemas—including, as a specialized case, the Philippines—has contributed to the stabilization and mainstream acceptance of Korean horror film production since the genre's revival in the late 1990s. It also attempts an answer to the useful question of the reciprocity of film influences in the larger Asian region i.e., that as much as East Asian horror has impacted other national film cultures, Southeast Asia, via the Philippines, has also managed to signify as a spectral presence in East Asian cinema.

**Keywords:** *Hybridity, Korean horror cinema, folk tales, migrant Filipinos*

Postmodernism, during its early introductory phase, was seen as a means by which marginal groups could deconstruct, at least theoretically, structures oppressive to their existence, including literary and cultural canons, if not the act of canon-formation itself (Harper, 1994). Only later would the theoretical dilemma of there being no center emerge, where the loci of power become invested with the same significance as those in the margins, resulting in a relation of interdependence, thereby negating the need not just for scholarly destruction (a notion contrasted with deconstruction) but also for institutional dismantling.

Critical perspectives on postmodernism proceed from the issue of the artificiality of constructed boundaries. Hence the principle of synchronicity, manifested in literary applications through the reiterability of certain forms and practices that just-as-insistently undergo shifts and transformations in their transitions from one sociocultural context to another, has become one of the central concerns in postmodernism. Just as emblem theory recognizes that what is depicted means more than what it portrays and that the original

classical texts function differently for latter-day readers (Daly, 1982), the condition of literariness maintains the anchoring of generic forms in socio-historical processes; equally important for purposes of this article is the fact that “a dominant ideology and hegemony...is the project of the literary performance to unveil and perhaps overflow” (Bolongaro, 1992, p. 305).

The coexistence of irresolvable differences has been applied to what once had been opposed to the ideal of literariness itself i.e., the literary genre. In *The Political Unconscious* (1981), Jameson characterized genre as consisting further of the irreconcilable properties of modality on the one hand and fixed form on the other, or a tension between the semantic and the structural respectively. His proposed manner of resolving this binary was to allow structural analysis to open out onto the semantic raw materials of social life and language, the constraints of determinate social contradictions, the conjunctures of social class, the historicity of structures of feeling and perception and ultimately of bodily experience, the constitution of the psyche or subject, and the dynamics and specific temporal rhythms of historicity (Jameson, 1981). Elsewhere, in *Signatures of the Visible* (1990), Jameson invoked Pierre Bourdieu in ascribing to a “legitimation crisis’ in the Hollywood aesthetic” as the cause of what he termed “the end of genre” (p. 182) in film, as a result of the twin consequences of rationalizing aesthetic activity and consumption as well as the privileging by classes in power of the prerogative of defining and imposing aesthetic concepts in cinema. This article, however, posits that while Jameson’s pessimistic viewpoint is crucial in understanding the limits faced by the politicization of genre discourse, it would be even less productive to abandon the politicizing project altogether. A measure of encouragement can in fact be drawn from Derrida’s (1993) critique of the application of dialectical principles to postmodernity:

As soon as one allows the notion of the “positive” or “progressive” to reappear in analysis, the object one has in view is not postmodernity but a stage on the historical journey to the light.... In order to name postmodernity as a cultural dominant expressing itself in postmodern artifacts Jameson has to assume the coming to power of neo-imperialism, and to inflect postmodernity positively he has, for a moment, to become complicit with it. (p. 451)

A different way of expressing this predicament—from the position of the marginalized sectors—would be in the arrival of postmodernism and its message of the inevitable futility of radical action just when the marginalized

themselves had managed to acquire the realization and means through and within modernism to effect institutional change (Lovibond, 1993).

In order to better demonstrate the cultural machinations in the postmodern process, this article will be inspecting the hybridization of horror films from a national context that is regionally removed (East Asian rather than Southeast Asian) yet historically related because of its exceptional postcolonial status. The national context would be the Republic of Korea, more popularly termed South Korea (and to be referred to from hereon as simply Korea). In order to arrive at a specific reading (not a telos, but rather a provisional exploration) of contemporary Korean horror-film entries, we will recount the fairly short history of the Korean horror filmmaking genre, attempt to build on a framework for cultural hybridity, and evaluate a handful of selected titles, circa the present millennium. Although this study will be focused on Korea, the increasing emphasis will be on the foreign presence in Korean cinema, as emblemized in Philippine female and/or feminized bodies which function effectively as structuring absences in roughly the same manner as the gazed-at woman functioned in Classical Hollywood narrative—i.e., as decentralized presences who provide crises or turning-point motivations for one or more primary character or characters. Through this study, a deeper understanding of not just Korean horror cinema but also the always difficult, occasionally horrific conditions of Philippine-ness in Korean society could be fostered. Our reference to the country as “Land of the Morning Calm” may be anachronistic in terms of time and space, since the term was not only derived from a typically awkward Western translation of the self-description of the long-defunct Joseon dynasty (1392-1897), but is also known among contemporary Koreans as the dynastic term appropriated by North Korea; nevertheless, “Korea” itself (meaning the democratic South) remains wed in the Western imagination to the “morning calm” phrase, paralleling the description of Japan as the “Land of the Rising Sun.” Given the tolerance for anachronisms in postmodernism, we proceed with the use of the term in our title, with our cautionary explanation duly proffered.

## Fear and Loathing

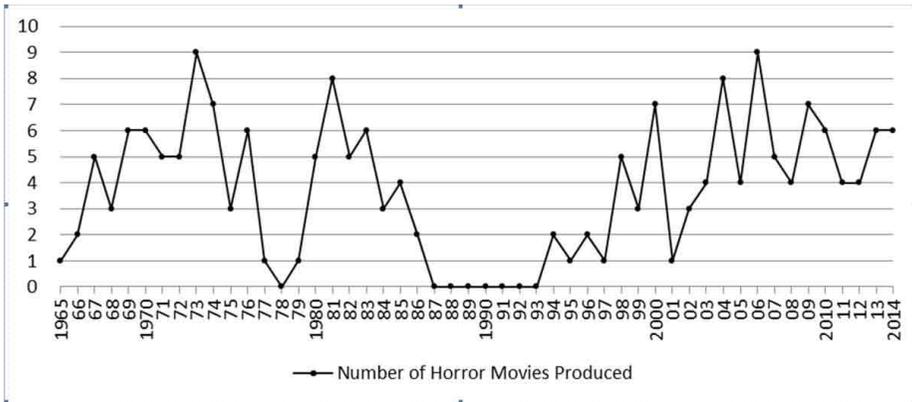
In Korea, movie-going has become a major cultural activity and an important cultural phenomenon. Mainstream movie genres mean either melodrama or comedy, or a combination of both. Nevertheless, horror movies have also long endured (Kim & Lee, 2005). The first Korean horror movie is acknowledged to be *Jangwha Hongryeon Jeon* [*The Tale of Janghwa and Hongryeon*] (Kim, 1924) which is based on a ghostly tale of two sisters,

and this film has been remade five more times using the same title—in 1936, 1956, 1962, 1972, and 2003. Its most recent incarnation, *A Tale of Two Sisters* (Kim, 2003), was in turn remade by Hollywood and released as *The Uninvited* (Guard Brothers, 2009).

In its earlier stage, Korean horror movies were based on ghost stories and folk tales that were handed down as folk legends (Kim, 2008; Kim & Lee, 2005). These tales were mostly about a dead body, a ghost, or evil spirits that are usually female. The main cause of fear in older Korean horror movies would be the specter of a victim who had died bearing a personal grudge. This ethos would be drawn from interrelated religious beliefs derived from shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, wherein the soul or spirit of a person who did not die peacefully refuses to depart the earthly sphere of existence (Kwak, 2003). Fear would be invoked from the rage (whether controlled or released) of the ghost of a person who had died with a deep-rooted rancor; In this respect, the objects of horror differ from those in Hollywood films where terror comes from monsters, zombies, and other unknown or alien objects.

Concomitant with the modernization of Korean society during the 1960s and early 1970s was the Korean movie industry's fast growth. The number of horror movies increased. In the early 1960s, only one or two horror movies were produced each year. This went up to five or more per year after 1967. In the 1960s, various experiments in the horror movie genre were attempted. During the 1970s, however, the rapid spread of television as well as other forms of entertainment led to a drop in audience attendance. After 1976, Korean horror movie output declined, and no horror film was produced until the mid-1990s. What made it worse was that policy-wise, horror movie proposals were not qualified to avail of a government subsidy called the "Good Movie Grant" because horror films were not considered as "good." Moreover, the Korean movie industry as a whole was in deep recession during the 1980s and suffered from the strong presence of imported Hollywood movies made accessible in the country by direct foreign distributors, who were given permits by the government starting 1988. It was only in the 1990s that Korean films began its period of reconstruction, when they began to be recognized as a profitable business and not just works of art. The infusion of government support and large capital investments contributed to the revival of the industry. With a wider array of subjects and narratives, Korean film in the 1990s managed to mobilize a new generation of viewers (Kim & Lee, 2005).

Horror movies produced in the 1960s and 70s could be classified into



**Figure 1.** Number of Horror Movies Produced in Korea from 1965 to 2014. (Data from Naver Movie Directory, 2015. Chart created by Ju-Yong Ha.)

two types: those that dealt with supernatural phenomena in traditional Korean social settings, and those that addressed the psychoanalytic, usually psychotic, challenges of the modern middle-class nuclear family. The typical storylines, as mentioned, revolved around victims who died with unresolved grudges and re-emerged as malevolent spirits, with themes focusing on promises and betrayals, resentments, and vengeful and remorseful acts among the main characters. In movies such as *The Maid* (Kim, 1960), it was the nominally harmless “normal” people that caused fear. Ordinary human beings (e.g., a housemaid) were depicted as the source of anxiety and torment. Utilizing also a seemingly average family, these movies tried to reveal the conflicting relations between the rural-based working class and the middle class’s emergent sense of impending crises in the modernization of Korean society (Kim & Lee, 2005).

Another characteristic of the 1960s-’70s Korean horror movies that linked them with the preceding era was their portrayal of the woman as an object of fear. Oppressors and perpetrators of potentially tragic confrontations were all women—ghosts who died bearing deep-seated grudges, destroyers of happy families, and informal sex workers (called “hostesses”) targeted by their pimps or masters for abusive treatment. Anything that was seen as a threat to the patriarchal order was considered a source of monstrous injustice and required consequent comeuppance (Kim & Lee, 2005). Curiously, horror movies were hardly produced in the 1980s—a setback that could be attributed both to government policy as mentioned earlier and to the reality of real-life traumatic historical events building up to the apocalyptic confrontation between military dictatorship and democratic ideals, that externalized the citizens’ perceptions of excessive fear and loathing.



**Figure 2.** *Wolha-ui Gongdong Myoji* or *Cemetery Under Moonlight* (Gwon, 1967). After a rich couple plots against a woman, forcing her true love to marry someone else and conspiring to poison her, she avenges herself on her tormentors. Image retrieved from <http://movie.naver.com/movie/board/>

## Passage to a New Era

Horror film production was revived in the late 1990s. One of the main characteristics of the 1990s horror film was the inclusion of the confrontation among forces that interfered with the characters' personal desires. Although women were still depicted as ghosts, their source of resentment expanded from patriarchal oppression to contradictory strictures by society and various individuals. Conflicts between the desire of individuals and social oppression became the more dominant theme. In the series of *Whispering Corridors* films (1998-2009), for example, the conflicts between the social repression brought about by the educational system and adolescent sexuality became narrative concerns. This kind of conflicts suggested that

resentment is caused by social and structural problems, rather than by the negligence or wrongdoing of an individual.

The fragmentation and sometimes absence of family were also identified as the origin of the problem that led to the horrific situation. In this regard, a specific form of postmodernity, one where the concerns of the individual are magnified and regarded as equal in stature as national and even global concerns, comes to the fore. Unlike the pre-90s trends in horror, where the personal concerns of the characters were intended to allegorize social and political situations, the contemporary thrust of horror-film production has expanded to include identity issues, some of which do not automatically convey anxieties beyond the strictly psychological or sexual. As a result, "foreign" issues appear in the text as incidental elements, with the potential of being more powerfully developed because of their seeming nonchalance, as well as the danger of being completely subsumed in the films' heroic or romantic requisites.<sup>1</sup>

The 1990s marked the period when the life of the individual, in contravention of traditional East Asian belief systems, became more important than that of the social (or community) collective. One's preferences and personal events eventually assumed greater importance than even historical changes, at least as initially reflected in horror cinema. Individuals were no longer constituted as part of a larger collective (or community) in the narrative, as pop-culture products started recognizing and appealing to the value of each individual. This trend grew with the inevitable consumerism which attended and eventually characterized popular culture. New narratives were further developed through the interaction of individuals, who tended to significantly influence one another (Song, 2011). A growing number of TV channels and blockbuster movies attracted more individuals to participate in popular cultural production and/or consumption. The 1990s, however, was also the time when it was difficult to guarantee the safety of an individual due to the increase in crimes and accidents that occurred virtually everyday. News reports of such incidents caused anxiety and worry about the citizens' safety and welfare (Song, 2011).

Korean horror movies of the late 1990s also reflected a social atmosphere where different values were in conflict and exhibited a tendency to reflect the anxiety and fear inherent in the process of introducing new, i.e., Western-sourced social ideologies. *Whispering Corridors* (Park, 1998), a high-school ghost story, is considered a turning point in this history of Korean film horror. It emphasized the 1990s perturbations in Korean society (Song, 2011). Unlike previous horror movies, terror in *Whispering Corridors* was derived from familiar spaces, instead of from typical spaces where supernatural creatures were expected to dwell in such as a cemetery. Moreover, the movie shed light on the bully system in Korean education, rooted in the discrimination and violence committed by teachers and the pressure imposed on students by their own peers. The unfair death of Jin-ju, the suicide of Jung-Sook, and the murders of two teachers were not only allegories but also reflective of a familiar reality that existed in women's high schools. Because *Whispering Corridors* successfully embodied a theme and a storyline which the youth could empathize with, young audiences became enthusiastic supporters of the movie (Kim, 2008). The movie brought audiences back to horror-genre screenings when it was released, signifying not just the revival of Korean horror movies, but also the emergent new grammar that would typify contemporary Korean horror. Instead of the traditional Korean ghost story in which spirits of those who died in misery could not proceed to the otherworldly resting-place of the dead, the movie

effectively introduced a transforming genre which exploited elements of the thriller by delaying the real identity of the ghost.

The sequels that follow brought to the fore other issues that had been considered taboo in East Asian traditions. *Whispering Corridors II: Memento Mori* (Kim & Min, 1999) focused on lesbianism. When the sexuality of young women in the film was denied because of existing social prejudices, it transformed and became embodied in a specter. Moreover, since that sexuality happened to be that of lesbians (a combination of femininity plus queerness), the degree of oppression was amplified, and the spectral presence consequently also increased. The third version of the ghost stories in the women's high-school setting, *Wishing Stairs* (Yun, 2003), dealt with traditional folk tales that were familiar to most Koreans. *Wishing Stairs* delineated young women's psychologies by focusing on their self-love and the sense of rivalry that emanates between two close friends who join a ballet contest. Meanwhile, the fourth installment of the series, *Voice* (Choi, 2005), was a subject-specific horror film, in which "a voice without body (organs without bodies)" became the main agent for inciting terror. This movie posited the transference of a voice from one person to another, with the killing and disappearance of a girl as catalyst: her friend managed to listen to the voice of the now-dead person. In this film, the main plot goal was to seek the identity of the ghost and the truth behind the murder case, including the identity of the criminal (Kim, 2008).

### **Millennial Concerns**

An exceptional number of Korean horror films were released in the 2000s, with evident shifts in terms of characteristics and grammar (their generic properties, in short), as well as in terms of subjects and themes. By changing their representational strategy, Korean horror movies in the 2000s reflected the audience's new tastes and psychological needs (Kim & Lee, 2005). Whereas the kind of fear that is based on the collapse of familial and patriarchal values was embodied in ghosts or evil spirits (in earlier horror instances), in the 2000s, audiences' fears were transmuted into the oppression of the main characters on a subconscious level. Thus a substitution of the overtly personal for the apparently social was effected. This strategy coincided with the finding of scholar Kwang Woo Noh (2009), that a combination of retrospection and nostalgia became the major driving force in Korean films after the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98 affected the country and marked a turn on the part of media practitioners to seek lessons in and insights from the past.

The process by which this occurs begins with conflicts within the family unit. In contemporary Hollywood movies the conflict that threatens the

family typically comes from without, with these external causes fomenting fear. Family is configured as sacral territory that must be defended. In contrast, the family in Korean horror movies is a site where conflicts and resentments (or grudges, in alignment with previous horror texts) arise, ultimately leading to the institution's disseverance. As shown in *A Tale of Two Sisters* (Kim, 2003) and *The Uninvited* Lee, 2003), the kitchen table is the symbolic space of Korea-centric "familism." The family unit is portrayed as a space where pseudo-relationships (or fictitious familism) can be formed or as a potentially vulnerable social target, which may be destroyed by various contending forces at any time. This depiction reflects a specific reality in current Korean society—the destabilization of social units, specifically the fall of the middle class and the dissolution of several families after the financial crisis of 1997.

No traditional ghosts appeared in these two movies. Instead, what bothered individual characters was not a sadistic object emanating from the external world, but rather the trauma induced by guilt or sometimes greedy acts that caused tension and fear in a proscribed social circle. And the perpetrators of these acts also suffered from inflicting harm on others. Conflict was not the sole responsibility of the person who caused the tragic incident, but it could be attributed to the conflictual relationships among the members of a social circle. It would thus be considered reciprocal in nature. Moreover, there was no longer any binary opposition between absolute good and absolute evil inasmuch as none of the characters were inarguably evil; thus, conflicts between main characters were dismantled. The narrative structure moved beyond the binary opposition to the conflicts that raged within individuals. What these conflicts were going to destroy was self-consciousness or desire hidden in the subconscious that individuals possessed. While previous horror movies were characterized as having closed-ended narrative structures, recent Korean horror films frequently had open endings that maintained further reserves in the conflicts in the characters' subconscious.

### **Intrusion of the Global**

At this stage it may be pertinent to bring up further theoretical issues. Does this turn from the social to the personal preclude any sense of society, considering how, in relative terms at least, East Asian culture has nevertheless been (and arguably remains) more other-centered than individualistic? We venture to respond in a manner that has heretofore been unexplored, and therefore the answer we proffer must necessarily be measured against the film samples mentioned earlier and the handful of film-texts to be discussed. The speculative nature of this discussion will proceed from standard Asian-

cinema presentations, and the country that will constitute Korea's "foreign" presence will be the Southeast Asian nation that has become, for almost a decade, the primary destination of Korean nationals: the Philippines.

In the anthology *Contemporary Asian Cinema*, Korea was depicted as a successful example of "cultural resistance to the power of Western-led globalization" (Lee, 2006, p. 182), navigating in the process a transition from "a Hollywood-dominated market...[to become] the world's third largest film exporter, after the US and France" (p. 182). In affirmation of the psychoanalytic turn in horror cinema, Hanyang Lee described contemporary Korean cinema as infused with "new identity politics" owing to the process of democratization built upon a foundation of rapid economic growth. The specific brand of identity politics in movies, at once both familiar and novel, was complemented on the level of film form by a "hybridism of commercialism and artistic experimentation" (p. 184):

The creative adaptation of Hollywood dramatic conventions flavored by the locality is essential to capture the audience. The filmmakers exploit history and cultural tradition to make national [popular films]. The audience appears to experience the escapist pleasure in the new imaginary space, exposing the resentment to the hegemonic ideologies of global powers. Also, the physical and cultural similarities strike a chord with audiences. They can easily associate with the fictional and cultural stories set in familiar landscapes.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of hybridity links up with the anthology's depiction of Philippine cinema, specifically in Capino's (2006) ascription of hybridity's origin in "colonial discourse, particularly in engendering fear and hatred of racial degeneration or degradation through interracial mixing...or, more rarely, in evoking the beneficence of colonial occupation" (p. 33). Capino then proceeded to discuss the recuperation of hybridity in postcolonial critiques, connoting as it does an intrinsically uncontrolled, if not always unwieldy, mediation that both doubles and splits the combinatory elements and results in a distinct third object. The concept is also supple enough to embrace the differences between the effective assimilation of influences on one hand and the unstable juxtaposition of elements on the other, between wholesale piracy and creative—or even subversive—appropriation.

To refine the concept further, Capino (2006) considered two areas of application: first, generic—actually transgeneric or multigeneric—with a "preponderance of mixed genres [that] evolved not only out of Filipino cultural hybridity but also as overcompensation for the ubiquity and strength of foreign films" (p. 34); and second, cultural, derivable from Homi Bhabha's (1994) formulation of "the cultural tactics of mimicry and appropriation" (p. 36), with mimicry described as "the often detrimental

result of the colonizer's desire to refashion the natives after his image...[but with the natives' imitation] reflecting back to the colonizer an unflattering and fractured image of himself," and appropriation regarded as involving "a gesture of violence: the forcible taking of a [foreign] cultural object, the attendant process of subjugation and repurposing, and the object's resultant transformation (its radical incommensurability to the source)" (p. 38).

Considering how these two loci of potential appropriations, Korea and the Philippines, have never actually had colonial relations with each other, but in fact had been occupied by the same forces (Japan and the US) in various periods and to differing extents but with similar degrees of acceptance (the US) and resistance (Japan), we would like to posit a third type of hybridity, after the generic and the cultural: the historical, specifically definable as politically neutral exchanges that occur among states that find themselves subsumed, regardless of their willingness, within the same hegemonic sphere as determined by imperialistically capable national forces, especially when the subjugated states initiate attempts to critique their imperial master in order to reclaim their own respective sovereignties. We can see some of these dynamics at play during the several periods of resistance to Soviet hegemony in the East bloc (specifically in the Hungarian, Czech, and Polish reform movements) and the Latin American "Third Cinema" denunciations of US imperialism. Hedetoft (2000) emphasized the role of "the national optic' in culturally transcribing, translating, and mediating this global/American text to national audiences, and in decoding it so as to 'make sense' of it within the interpretive palimpsest of specific national knowledges, cultural identities, and aesthetic and philosophical traditions" (p. 279). In his specific inspection of the European reception of the Hollywood film *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998), Hedetoft (2000) also aimed to provide an indication of the extent to which—and how—"globalization" in the cultural cinematic arena factually spells "homogeneity" at the receiving end, i.e. what kinds of tension, continuity, and hybridity exist between national cinema as a cultural- and identity-related phenomenon and the global reach of the medium from the point of view of technology, distribution, and consumption.

### **Korean Horror Reconfigured**

From this concept of historical hybridity, with the Philippines, as represented by its citizens, as a specific site for inspection, we might be able to arrive at certain refocused readings that can help enrich our understanding of Korean horror cinema. In fact, if we wish to consider the Philippines as a presence that "haunts" Korea, we could proceed from the argument developed by Yu (2013) in "Reincarnation of the Pinay Subaltern in Korean Cinema"

that Filipinos maintain a presence on Korean movie screens, owing to the aforementioned preference of Koreans in visiting the Philippines (whether for education, business, pleasure, or retirement), alongside the unequal exchange of Filipinos traveling to Korea primarily as overseas workers, secondarily as migrant wives, and incidentally as visitors.

Yu (2013) mentioned the Korean film *Punch* (Lee, 2011) as an example of a recent Korean blockbuster that effectively acknowledged the Korean movie-going public's interest in the presence of Filipinos in the country, in this specific case a migrant wife, who was played by Jasmine Lee, a Filipina whose Korean husband had died and who eventually became popular enough to become initially a media star and currently the first non-native born member of the Korean National Assembly. Yet Filipino presence could be traced even earlier to a 1993 film, made not in Korea but in Japan, in a genuinely hybrid product titled *All Under the Moon*. Directed by a Korean Japanese Sai, the film was based on a novel written by a North Korean who had migrated to Japan and narrated the semi-autobiographical story of a Korean Japanese working-class character (a taxi driver) and his Filipina girlfriend (a taxi dancer, pun incidental) (Yu, 2013). Although definitely non-entries in the horror film canon, these two films as well as other films demonstrate for us the inroads made by a different kind of Asian Other in Korean cinema i.e., not the usual Chinese or Japanese (or even North Korean), who are occasionally configured as non-Other by virtue of them sharing in the larger culture and having historical supremacy as former invaders and/or colonizers, but Asians living outside East Asia who aspire for the First-World income and lifestyle in Korea as well as Japan and, to a lesser extent, China. If we were to force a hierarchization of foreigners in Korean films, we may find Euro-Americans at the top, other white people (Russians as well as East Asians) in the middle, and “people of color” including non-East Asians below. The schema may appear race-based but is actually more class- or wealth-determined and the fluidity of the categories is realized when we ask the question of where the (South) Korean characters fit—as we have seen in some of the more progressive texts enumerated in this paper, Koreans may find themselves generally in the middle group, but occasionally also at either extreme.

In terms of “foreign” appearances, which may be configured, following this line of discussion, as alien residents, we can bring up the case of the all-time blockbuster of the 2000s, *The Host* (Bong, 2006), an update of the environmental-monster movie exemplified by *Godzilla*. In the case of *The Host*, however, the monstrous figure is not so much the Han River's mutant creature, which is depicted as nothing more than an abject killing machine. Per Carroll's (1990) definition of “the monstrous” as something that incites

fear and disgust, the actual monster then in the narrative is the more abstract threat of globalization, which initially promises to bring well-being and prosperity but actually results in industrial pollution, militarization, and Western intervention. The movie positions a working-class family, alongside political activists and homeless individuals, as unlikely—and unacknowledged—heroes, but it also openly gestures toward Korean society's Others during the crucial scene of the monster's emergence: along the banks of the Han River can be seen a weekend crowd comprising not just the poorer residents of Seoul but also Southeast and South Asian figures, presumably migrant workers, as well as an American soldier who, in contrast with pernicious US military officials, leads the charge against the creature.

It may be argued that foreignness in *The Host* (Bong, 2006) is calibrated in subtle but careful ways: the person who causes the mutation of the creature is an American army general who (based on a real-life scandal) orders his Korean deputy to dump pollutants into the river; the group of foreigners clustered on the banks of the river during the monster's first attack is as randomly victimized as the rest of the Korean citizenry; and the monster itself, in generating concern among such institutions as the World Health Organization and the Center for Disease Control, represents interests directly inimical to those of marginalized Koreans and non-Koreans. A specialized amplification of this framework is demonstrated in *The Yellow Sea* (2010), directed by Hong-Jin Na, who had previously made his mark with a serial killer procedural. Utilizing the detrital style made famous by David Fincher in *Se7en* (1995), *The Yellow Sea* tracks the course of a Korean Chinese migrant convinced by a gangster to perform an assassination in Seoul in exchange for recovering his wife and canceling his debt. The circulation of a character whose Otherness is largely undetected but who later gets regarded, usually mistakenly, as monstrous has become an effective trope in the transmutation of the historically hybrid Korean horror film.

## **Alien Abjection**

The figure of the Other who has successfully managed to insert herself in everyday Korean life actually preceded the aforementioned production of *Punch* (Lee, 2011), and was initially expressed in horrific terms.<sup>3</sup> In 2003, Ki-Hyeong Park, who had directed *Whispering Corridors* (1998), came up with a fairly successful follow-up, *Acacia* (2003), wherein terror literally resided in a conventional family's decision to adopt a young male orphan (Kim & Lee, 2005). The foundling identifies with an apparently barren acacia tree in the family's yard, but his adoptive parents' success in bearing a biological

child leads to a series of uncanny occurrences, including the tree springing back to life. The ultimate tragedy, where the parents share the guilt of fatally abusing the orphan, points to the then-emergent social-media concern over the same kind of “hybrid” child in *Punch*, whose parents are arguably alien—the mother (a Filipina) literally so, the father a disabled itinerant rural worker (Yu, 2013).

Even closer to the release date of *Punch*, an earlier horror film, Ki-Young Kim’s *The Maid* (1960), was remade as *The Housemaid* (Im, 2010). As in *Acacia*, the alien, this time in a prominent family’s household, is also of indeterminate origin although identifiably one of “them”—i.e., Korean in appearance. The horror in the narrative is entirely psychoanalytic, but the level of abjection matches that presented in *Acacia*, particularly in terms of delineating the extreme, inhumane treatment the “regular” (though highly yuppified) characters visit on their domestic help. It is instructive to note, though that *Punch*, in foregrounding a character who is literally a foreigner as the Other and succeeding, box-office-wise, in the attempt, enabled the literalizing of foreignness the way that *Acacia*, *The Housemaid*, even *The Yellow Sea*, could not. The crucial moment, if we were to follow this logic, would be the revelation to the main character of *Punch* (actually the title character, Wan-deuk, in the Korean version [*Wan-deuk-i*]) of the nature of his matrilineal origin: when told that his mother was not only alive (contrary to his father’s claim that she had died) and that she was a Filipina, Wan-deuk undergoes an upsetting outburst that leads to his cutting class and pleading in church prior to finally exploring the history and circumstances of his mother’s situation (Figure 3). The assumption that the audience



**Figure 3.** *Punch* (Lee, 2011) with Jasmine Lee and In Yoo Ah. After the son makes a reconciliatory gesture to his mother by buying her a new pair of shoes, she asks permission to hold him. (Produced by UBU Film & Another Pictures. Frame capture by Ju-Yong Ha.)

would be identifying with Wan-deuk may be bolstered by the filmmakers' decision to change the nationality of the mother, who was Vietnamese in the source novel, to one who would be more familiar to Koreans inasmuch as Jasmine Lee was by this time a well-known television host, and Korean citizens had succeeded in supplanting the Japanese as the Philippines's top foreign visitors. The success of such a strategy necessitated by the conflictive realization that the acceptance of migrants' presence would jeopardize a "pureblooded" racial ideal, yet the necessity for foreign labor (both public, especially dangerous industrial work, and domestic, including procreation) would be inevitable in a country with increasing wealth and a declining population growth rate (Lee, 2012).



**Figure 4.** *Thirst* (Park, 2011), with Kim Ok-bin and Mercedes Cabral. The deranged lover of a morally conflicted vampire, a former priest, attempts to feed on the migrant wife of a family friend but is prevented from doing so by her boyfriend. (Produced by CJ Entertainment et al. Frame capture by Ju-Yong Ha.)

The signaling of the acceptability of a non-East Asian character in a major Korean film was achieved also prior to *Punch*, via a prestige horror production. *Thirst* (Park, 2009), a vampire film, was an entry to Cannes Film Festival, where it won a special jury prize. One of the film's secondary characters is Evelyn, a migrant wife (played by Philippine independent-cinema actress Mercedes Cabral), whose significance in the final bloodbath is both subdued and moving: she remains the sole survivor in the monstrous household, possibly infected by the virus (although just as possibly prevented from infection by the solicitous and ethically worried alpha-vampire) that causes the condition, and presumably, outside of the film-text, the person who might be able to capably spread the disease in Korea, if not the larger Asian region. The question of whether Evelyn was bitten or not was one of the movie's several unresolved issues, since the male vampire was depicted

as ambivalent toward his superhuman capabilities; on the other hand, he and his partner had just participated in a ferocious feeding frenzy, and a means of ensuring that a victim could survive an attack (by allowing her to drink vampirical blood) had earlier already been established. Such narrative uncertainty, allowing for either a PC interpretation or an apocalyptic possibility, may be the closest that Korean film artists have gotten to a transgressive depiction of a foreigner in their midst.

On the heels of *Thirst* and *Punch*, the director of *The Housemaid*, Sang-Soo Im, presented his follow-up, *The Taste of Money* (2012), again with a domestic help character, but this time a Filipina (played by the half-British mainstream Philippine performer Maui Taylor). Although not overtly a horror film, it nevertheless traces its genealogy to the genre, specifically in two reflexive instances: first, when the members of the family watch *The Housemaid's* 1960 source film, K.-Y. Kim's *The Maid*, in their home's mini-auditorium, and second, when later the lead female character describes her childhood exactly as the little girl in *The Housemaid* experienced it. Although less well-received than *The Housemaid*, *The Taste of Money* unfolds as a satirical attack on the social elite, with a corrupt American foreign-investment adviser named after the late director Robert Altman played by Korean film specialist Darcy Paquet. More pointedly, this same character (her mother's rival for the affection of the bodyguard, who later turns against the family's selfish interests) drops the remark, in answer to Altman's observation of how extensive corruption can be in Korea, that her family's unscrupulous money-making methods were no different from those of America's now-respectable robber-baron descendants; significantly, this exchange occurs during a family dinner where her husband is fondling Eva, the Filipina maid assigned to service (in the fuller sense) the family's patriarch-grandfather, but with whom the lead character's own husband, also an outsider in the sense he was born poor, would eventually obsess over, causing a series of tragic incidents. The aforementioned bodyguard not only serves the family in menial capacities (including, like Eva, providing sexual services) but also functions in the narrative as the outsider whose epiphany derives from his realization of how the "other half" lives; he also falls for the maid, albeit in an idealistic unconsummated manner, and serves as a means for the audience to foster an identification with the foreigner via class politics (see Figure 5).

The interface of horror films and alien characters is clearly seen in *Flu* (Kim, 2013), arguably the most problematic among the mainstream releases listed. The movie departs from the psychoanalytic orientation of the other films and attempts a link-up with science fiction, also observed in *Thirst*. The difference this time is that the lone survivor of an outbreak of avian flu



**Figure 5.** *The Taste of Money* (Im, 2012), with Kang-woo Kim and Maui Taylor. The exploited bodyguard retrieves the lifeless body of the abused domestic helper in the rich family's indoor swimming pool. (Produced by Above the Line Productions. Frame capture by Ju-Yong Ha.)

is a Filipino male rather than female, and he becomes the target of gangsters and government operatives because of the possibility that he might possess antibodies that could save the entire Bundang district of Seoul. Despite imagery that resonates with the so-called May 18, 1980 Democratic Uprising in Gwangju, Korea (Lee & Bishop, 2000), when an entire city was blockaded and placed under martial rule and its protesting residents suppressed with gunfire, *Flu's* narrative veers insistently toward the personal heroics typical of Hollywood cinema—the type of disadvantage that postmodern approaches are capable of inducing. By these standards, ruptures in the narrative premise become even more evident. The infection begins when an intermodal container full of illegal immigrants is shipped from Hong Kong to Korea, initially with only one infected member. By the time the container arrives, everyone inside is dead except for a single character (played by Lester Avan Andrada), who despite a name, Mong Sai, more South Asian than Southeast Asian, speaks in Tagalog and in a smattering of English.

The awkward handling of the abject alien element in *Flu* evinces uncertainty on the part of Korean film practitioners, especially when contrasted against recent Korean movies set in more “equal” (i.e., developed nation) contexts such as Germany and Hong Kong. The narrative errs in its excessive political correctness, depicting the indeterminate figure of Mong Sai as victimized by both his poverty (assuming that such a subject would somehow have the resources to get from Luzon island to Hong Kong, where he could have found profitable employment closer to home, only to aspire to reach Korea in a manner already dangerous even without the risk of abject infection) and the extensive military capability of Korea to enforce an extensive lockdown and conduct an intensive search, with him as object. A happy ending is also illogically imposed on the film. Despite the



**Figure 6.** *Flu* (Sung-su Kim, 2013), with Lester Avan Andrada and Min Park. The innocent native takes a shine to the fugitive illegal migrant worker, who eventually “rewards” her with the antibodies he unknowingly possessed. (Produced by iLoveCinema and iFilm Co. Frame capture by Ju-Yong Ha.)

death of Mong Sai, since the antibody he organically generated had already been injected into the daughter of the lead female character, the daughter’s survival is taken as a signal that the whole population is saved, without any explanation of how an antiviral product can be developed fast enough to preempt an already widely spread, highly contagious, and swift-acting fatal illness.

## Conclusion

It is apparent that the depiction of the abject alien in Korean cinema might have already reached a point of saturation, and that its continuance might require further generic innovations, if not generic cross-overs, whether as hybrid or pastiche projects. The argument advanced in this article, however, concentrates on an awareness of the viewing public that territories outside Korea’s traditional East Asian allies and/or enemies are beginning to stake their claims on Korean history, whether as the source of migrants or visitors, or as places for Koreans to visit and/or migrate to. A qualified postmodernist assumption of hybridity, drawn from shared historical experiences with “superpower” entities (specifically the US and Japan), enables us to trace the emergence of foreignness in Korean movies. The terms of such hybridity become obvious in what may be termed “fringe” samples, i.e., outside Korean cinema as in *All under the Moon*, or outside Korean horror films as seen in the melodrama *Punch*. But even in horror films, hybridity is facilitated via the abject, as seen in *Thirst*, *The Taste of Money*, and *Flu*.

The framework of postmodernism also helps us understand why the element of abjection in horror films which typically has “the monstrous” present, has become easier for audiences to accept. One might be able to argue that excess (as the more “acceptable” expression of abjection) has

characterized all the other successful local genres, whether melodramas, comedies, and action films; the less-visible audiovisual experiences of massively multiplayer online role-playing games and internet pornography are also always-already premised on the purveyance of excesses; however, this ought to constitute a different study altogether, possibly as area for further research. The fact that the images of abjection generally appear in horror contexts and at the same time exempt foreign figures from fully assuming monstrous aspects points to a combination of fear and fascination on the part of Korean audiences. But after an extended period of increased familiarity with these images, a new stage in the handling of the literal foreign presence in Korean film culture may be anticipated.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The authors would like to acknowledge the suggestions for improvement advanced by one of our anonymous reviewers for developing the postmodernism angle in the paper. We also thank Taeyun Yu for providing leads to several film titles, many of which were discussed in the course of the paper.
- <sup>2</sup> The stronger buzzword in Korean media is that of multiculturalism, where the homogeneity of Korean language and culture is supposedly being transformed by the presence of a large community of foreigners. The concept of multiculturalism is too fraught and slippery to be workable for the type of intercultural inspection being attempted in this article. South Korea, for example, may seem thoroughly multicultural to a North Korean, but the issue of its openness to foreign influence might depend on the origin of the foreignness in question. Americanization, to provide comparative examples, has definitely been on the rise for decades, but Filipinization will probably be confined to certain exceptional examples, and Pakistanization or Ethiopianization might be virtually non-existent. In this regard, hybridity (although also bearing its own set of complications) might prove more useful in tracking down specific influences and effects without necessarily jettisoning the existence of multicultural dynamics and, because of its acknowledgment of postcolonial experience, serves to defer “essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of cultures which, when inscribed in the naturalistic sign of symbolic consciousness, frequently become political arguments for the hierarchy and ascendancy of powerful cultures” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 58).
- <sup>3</sup> Worth mentioning at this point, although strictly not part of the survey, are three films. The first (in chronological order) is *R-Point* (Kong, 2004), a movie that deals with overseas Korean military exploits during the Vietnam War. Referencing several massacres involving Korean troops (Armstrong, 2001), *R-Point* provides a twist on the Hollywood Vietnam War movie narrative by depicting how the ghosts of the Vietnamese massacre victims who haunt a certain unexplored territory possess the foreign soldiers who wander there and drive them insane, to the point where they wind up killing one another and (as specters) calling on more foreign troops to add to their number. The second is the blockbuster entry *A Bittersweet Life* (J.-W. Kim, 2005) by the director of *A Tale of Two Sisters*. In this film, the henchmen of a less-scrupulous mobster speak two foreign languages, Russian and (inexplicably, considering the near-absence of Filipino gang activity in

Korea) Tagalog. The third is *Tropical Manila* (2008), directed by Sang-Woo Lee, an actor-prodigy of Ki-Duk Kim. Shot in the Philippines rather than in Korea, the film was never exhibited outside of the specialized festival circuit, and has been so far unavailable on video anywhere. The narrative of *Tropical Manila* also depicts extremely abject situations, though more in line with K.-D. Kim's psychosexual excesses than with horror. Questions of credibility may be raised about the movie's premise of a Korean, on the run from gangsters, living anonymously in a slum area and working as a wet-market butcher, unable to speak the native language, yet completely unnoticed by the residents, despite his propensity to engage in kinky sex in daylight with his bedroom windows wide open.

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