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,
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.

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**Key Words**

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

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“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