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***The Host (Gwoemul)* (Dir. Bong Joon-ho) South Korea, 2006**
Optimum Asia

Many aspects of the premise of *The Host (Gwoemul)* will be familiar to viewers of a number of cinematic genres. As a 'monster movie' it draws from East Asian influences such as *Godzilla (Gojira, 1954)*, as well as Hollywood outings such as *King Kong (1933)* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954)*. Similarly, as an ecological parable, it is reminiscent of Larry Cohen's *The Stuff (1985)*, in which an occurrence of toxic waste causes an ecological disaster that is played out with gleeful B-Movie absurdity. Finally, *The Host's* individual take on instances of monstrous terror is also indicative of its links with the work of Steven Spielberg, in particular *Jaws (1975)*, *Jurassic Park (1993)* and *War of the Worlds (2005)*, an influence that is further apparent in the film's portrayal of varying types of dysfunctional families, from which children are cut off. The related trope of the child in peril is a mainstay of Spielberg's work; it is also at the centre of Bong Joon-ho's film.

The Host focuses on the Park family as they are thrown into a battle to rescue Hyun-seo (Ah-sung Ko) who is abducted by a mutated amphibious monster that emerges from the Han River. After Hyun-seo's capture, the disparate family are brought together to mourn their loss, but her father Gang-du (Kang-ho Song), Grandfather Hie-bong (Hie-bong Byeon), Uncle Nam-il (Hae-il Park) and Aunt Nam-joo (Du-na Bae) are reunited only to be quarantined by draconian government officials in biohazard suits. Gang-du soon receives a mobile phone call from the missing Hyun-seo, who is trapped (surrounded by corpses) in the creature's lair in the sewers of the Han. They escape in a desperate bid to save her, and are pursued by the inefficient yet heavy-handed authorities, who instigate widespread panic by circulating the lie that the creature and the family are contaminated with a virus, thereby adding to the public's existing fears over the SARS outbreak.

This reference to SARS is one of many aspects of the film that reflects its aspiration to offer a critique of contemporary Korean society. The creature has spawned and mutated due to the dumping of formaldehyde into the water system under orders from an American scientist working in South Korea (a premise that is drawn from an incident in February 2000 in which Albert McFarland, a mortician employed by the US Forces in Korea (USFK), directed his staff to dispose of 120 litres of embalming fluid down a drain at a US Army base at Yongsan in the centre of Seoul). There are also signs of a revolutionary spirit when Nam-il uses the Molotov cocktails that he learnt to make as a student demonstrator to battle the creature. Another prominent criticism can be seen in the depiction of the state authorities who are without exception portrayed as totalitarian, opportunistic and (in part due to American influence) corrupt. In these ways, *The Host* functions as a socially-informed monster horror, in which the creature acts as a catch-all metaphor for whatever social injustice the viewer chooses to give primacy.

This social awareness adds a layer of cultural commentary to *The Host*, but it also proves effective as an aesthetically-accomplished genre movie, which boasts impressive cinematography, editing and special effects and has an outstanding score. However, there are some other aspects of the film that are spectacularly and jarringly unnerving, and which relate to the codes and conventions of the horror genre. One of these is the often bizarre tonal shift employed by Bong Joon-ho, who seems to revel in not letting the audience settle into generic comfort zones. For example, after a well-delivered and fast-paced opening sequence in which the creature wreaks havoc after emerging from the river (reminiscent of the

introduction of the invaders in Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*), the next scene involves an absurd depiction of the grieving family as they meet at a shrine to the victims of the creature. They begin by crying together, before writhing on the floor of the mourning centre and punching and kicking one another in a fit of histrionics as the media gleefully film and photograph them. What begins as pathos quickly becomes ridiculous, a satirical portrait (almost a self-contained comedic sketch) of the media's appetite for recording the grief of those affected by mass trauma. ****SPOILER BEGINS**** Later, the Grandfather makes an emotional plea that Gang-du's siblings be tolerant of their dim-witted brother, only to be killed because of the hapless Gang-du's inability to count in a scene that mixes a balletic slow motion action scene with cartoonish slapstick. ****SPOILER ENDS****

These tonal shifts help generate an unsettling yet intriguing feeling that the narrative may not follow the generic conventions of the monster movie, and it is in the disavowal of such conventions that *The Host* is at its most effective. ****SPOILER BEGINS**** For example, the impetus behind much of the plot is the need to save the vulnerable Hyun-seo from the lair of the monster, a driving force that is a mainstay of so many popular dramas as to appear mundane. When she is seemingly killed in the last act of the film and is held in the arms of her family, it is palpably easy to imagine an impending *denouement* in which she regains consciousness, thus fulfilling the quest that fuels the narrative and restoring balance to the disrupted family dynamic. *The Host* offers no such resolution, instead killing off Hyun-seo and in the process offering a challenge to the absurdities of narrative closure and the 'Hollywood ending' on which we are weaned. ****SPOILER ENDS****

However, this refusal to follow generic narrative conventions is not merely a means of making the film stand out from the crowd; rather, the brutality of the film's resolution draws attention to the notion of responsibility and consequence that can be traced back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). As in Shelley's novel, the creature is born out of man's disregard for nature and it is significant that it is an arrogant scientist that engenders the beast. This is further accentuated when the creature is stirred by onlookers at the banks of the Han River who throw fast food and beer cans into the water in order to attract its attention. Once provoked, the creature's wrath is mighty and it is demonized by the public and the authorities, becoming a scapegoat for the wrongs of the world. Director Bong Joon-ho has stated that the creature's aggressive behavior results from the fact that it is in pain from the effects of the chemical mutation. The scene in which the lake-siders throw garbage at their discovery is reminiscent of the angry mob scenes in numerous cinematic adaptations of Shelley's novel; in each case, the arrogance of man leads to the destruction of innocent lives: just as Frankenstein's creation kills the beatific William and Elizabeth, the child and new bride of the Frankenstein clan, the creature kills Hyun-seo. Perhaps the most significant link to *Frankenstein* though, is the central theme of responsibility that runs throughout both *The Host* and *Frankenstein*. Just as Victor turns his back upon his family to indulge in his obsessions, refusing to answer the letters and pleas from Elizabeth, the family of *The Host* also struggles to maintain their responsibilities to others. Each character is challenged to face up to the threat of the creature's relentless hunger (itself born out of an irresponsible act) and must also begin to try and fend for others in a dangerous world. For example, one of the most touching elements of the film involves Hyun-so taking a vagrant child under her wing after his brother is killed by the beast, an act that lies at the moral centre of the film and underlines the concept of facing up to the social discrepancies that are depicted throughout. Whereas in many other monster-themed films the creature seemingly comes from nowhere to attack an unwitting populace, the 'monster' of *The Host* comes from within society itself.

Significantly, the last scene reveals that Gang-du has become the guardian of the vagrant child and that he is also now responsible for the shop formerly run by his father. The film ends with him turning off a television showing the US media's response to the crisis and sharing a meal with his new son, metaphorically turning his back on media spin and connecting now in human terms. Tellingly, although others seem to have deserted the Han, Gang-du's home and business remain and it seems that he refuses to abandon his link to the river and perhaps the creature itself. In this way, although much of the film concerns the attempts of society to expel the creature as scapegoat, its closing moments underline the plea for acceptance and the scrutiny of social injustice and ultimately suggests that the by-products of blinkered individualism are monstrous to behold and thoroughly resilient.

Keith McDonald

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