

The Profanation of the Priest: Park Chan-wook's *Thirst*

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Abstract

This paper examines Park Chan-wook's film, *Thirst* (2009), drawing attention to the figure of the undead vampire and its liminal ontology between human life and death, as well as the key role of Christianity, embodied in the main protagonist of the film, the Catholic priest Sang-hyun. Throughout the film Sang-hyun agonizes over the question of life and death. His vampire body needs the blood of other living beings in order to survive. The priest agonizes whether his own liminal existence is ethically defensible if it must come at the cost of the lives of others. The paper argues that Sang-hyun's inability to decide, to provide a conclusive response to this aporia, reflects his inability to fully embody the position of the sovereign as he who decides (on the exception). The paper also emphasizes how the deconstructive thought so crucial in Giorgio Agamben's work may be manifest through the philosophical powers of the cinema.

Keywords

South Korea, Park Chan-wook, film studies, pure means, vampire

While South Korean director Park Chan-wook has addressed ethical and moral issues in his films—one thinks of the problem of revenge in the so-called “Vengeance Trilogy” (2003-2005) and the affirmation of the mentally ill in *I’m a Cyborg, But That’s OK* (2006)—none of them address the problem of religion and the ethical responsibility to the other as insistently as *Thirst* (2009). In this essay I would like to draw attention to the figure of the undead vampire and its liminal ontology between human life and death, while taking into account the metaphysics of Roman Catholicism, in order to show how Park’s film may be read to prepare the way toward an ethics that exceeds the linear, calculative notion of the law constituted as a set of binding norms. I would like to address these aesthetic and ethical problems through the medium of film, allegorically figured as itself a kind of undead creature that occupies a zone of undecidability between technology and life.

Park’s *Thirst* tells the story of Sang-hyun (played by Song Kang-ho), a selfless Catholic priest who serves as a chaplain in a hospital. He prays for the sick and blesses the terminally ill, yet Sang-hyun remains concerned that he is not doing enough for those who suffer from their physical ailments. In order to relieve his perennial guilt, the good priest volunteers to take part in a dangerous experiment in Africa to find a cure for the Emmanuel Virus, a disease that we are told, curiously, victimizes only “Asians and Caucasians.” When infected with the virus, the sufferer breaks out in gruesome blisters that form first on the surface of the face and then spreads to the eyes, nose, and finally to the internal organs. The blood-filled blisters burst open, leading to hemorrhages throughout the body. The victim will cough up blood and eventually die from excessive internal bleeding. Before subjecting himself to the virus, Sang-hyun clarifies that he volunteers for the experiment, not for the sake of martyrdom or to commit suicide, but out of purely selfless motives (Figure 1).



Figure 1.

The experiment is not successful, however, and the priest dies a gory death. He is resurrected through a blood transfusion. Lying on the operating table, with his face covered by a white sheet, Sang-hyun recites a prayer as he returns to vital life: “Grant me the following in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: like a leper rotting in flesh, let all avoid me; like a cripple without limbs. . . .” The priest returns to Korea and Catholic followers rush him, believing that the revived man, covered in bandages, has been granted the divine power of healing. They plead for his prayers and desperately request that he heal their loved ones, sick with terminal disease.

The chaplain returns to his duties in the hospital, and one day Mrs. Ra (Kim Hae-suk), a middle-age woman who has known Sang-hyun since childhood, approaches him and demands that the priest visit her son. He is claimed to have cancer. Sang-hyun visits the young-looking man, Kang-woo (Shin Ha-kyun), in the hospital. He is a pathetic hypochondriac and is wedded to Tae-ju (Kim Ok-bin), who Mrs. Ra took in as an orphaned child and provided for until adulthood. Scoffing at his prayers and at her mother-in-law, Tae-ju is clearly trapped in a relationship she detests, marginalized by the family she has been married into. Mrs. Ra invites Sang-hyun to their house for their weekly mahjong game. It is situated above their store, “Happy Hanbok,” which sells the traditional Korean costume of the store’s name. Sitting around their kitchen table, she claims that Kang-woo’s esophagus cancer somehow vanished through the priest’s blessings.

Meanwhile, Sang-hyun is strangely drawn to the oppressed Tae-ju. Later that night, he begins exhibiting the symptoms of the Emmanuel Virus once more. The only remedy for this condition, he soon discovers, is to consume the blood of another human being. The viewer also begins to realize that Sang-hyun's blood transfusion, which had cured him of the virus and granted him renewed life, had also turned him into a vampire. His body has been infected, not only with the virus, but also with vampire cells.

At first, Sang-hyun is fascinated by his undead status, but he becomes despondent when he begins committing sins that transgress his Catholic morality. Not only is the continuation of his life contingent upon taking the life of others, but the priest experiences primal physical desires that must be satiated. Driven by lust, Tae-ju and Sang-hyun have a torrid affair, and together conspire to kill the hypochondriac Kang-woo by taking him fishing and drowning him in the water. Shocked by the death of her beloved son, Mrs. Ra suffers a stroke and succumbs to locked-in syndrome. In this state she remains aware of her environment, but is unable to move the muscles in her body except for her eyes. While Mrs. Ra is paralyzed, Tae-ju is inspired to act out on her repressed resentment, which has been building as a result of her being treated like a slave in her family. At one moment, the adopted daughter slaps her inert mother-in-law for never having celebrated her birthday. Tae-ju is shameless in expressing her affection for Sang-hyun before Mrs. Ra's unceasing gaze (Figure 2). Meanwhile, the priestly vampire continues to prey on the living in order to survive, and he continues to agonize whether his own existence is morally defensible if it must come at the cost of the lives of others. Sang-hyun increasingly feels the burdens of his sins, and becomes increasingly anxious and delusional.



Figure 2.

In a rich and illuminating essay called “Park Chan-wook’s *Thirst*: Body, Guilt and Exsanguination,” Kyu Hyun Kim contextualizes Park’s film within long-standing literary, historical, and cinematic traditions around the figure of the vampire. Acknowledging various readings of the film—critical, symptomatic, Orientalist, and otherwise—Kim aims, above all, to “illuminate some possible paths that readers/viewers can navigate in order to reach their own interpretations of the film” (200). His essay is extremely helpful in teasing out the misreadings and misunderstandings that have ultimately reduced the film text to a “few profound meanings, psychoanalytic or otherwise” (200). Instead, Kim holds out for readings of Park’s film that can affirm its hybridity in terms of genres and genders, between ostensibly “monstrous” females versus rational males, modernity and anti-modernity, and between the spiritual and earthly worlds. Kim however does not venture further than this, and does not offer an elucidation, philosophical or otherwise, of the hybridity that Kim believes lies at the essence of the film. He writes that *Thirst* is “a multi-layered work of art that deals seriously with the corporeal and spiritual realities of our lives, which we would rather sweep under the carpet, expertly making use of the seemingly irreconcilable vocabularies and idioms of more than one cinematic genre” (213). To assert this irreconcilability is one thing, but to think it—that is another thing altogether, and this is the problem I will attempt to articulate in the rest of this discussion. If *Thirst* is indeed a work of art,

we can learn much about this form of thinking from the medium in which it is expressed.

In 1995, Giorgio Agamben offered some key comments on the nature of the film medium in a lecture called “Difference and Repetition,” where he addressed the work of the Situationist thinker, Guy Debord. Agamben makes explicit that the ontological possibilities for the film image are first and foremost implicated in messianic historiography. On the one hand, the cinema restores the possibility of becoming that is intrinsic to the past through the image of its repetition. The image does not simply repeat the past, but projects possibility into that which is by definition impossible: that is, the impossibility of perfectly repeating what has already taken place. Through this the cinema finds its corollary in human memory, which, according to Agamben, “is the organ of reality’s modalization; it is that which can transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real” (316). On the other hand, the film image, in its juxtaposition with other images through montage, gives rise to a disruptive noncoincidence between what the image shows and its meaning within the flow of the film’s narrative. Agamben calls this “stoppage,” in that the power of the image to interrupt upends narrative continuity so that the image is made to exhibit itself as such. Both of these features, which belong to the cinema and not to what Agamben calls the “media” (by which he means commercial television), aims toward a history to come: one that is salvational and at the same time an eschatology. Confounding the dominant use-value of images in commodity capitalism to merely to show and tell a given reality, Agamben aims to realize how the cinema can exhibit the basic ontology of the film image itself, to foreground the everydayness of the medium as it disappears in what it signifies, and to allow the appearance of its own “imagelessness.” In the last line of his lecture Agamben writes that, “It is here, in this difference, that the ethics and the politics of the cinema come into play” (319).

Thirst seeks this ethics and politics of the cinema through the figuration of the vampire. Park’s undead creature reiterates familiar conventions associated with the vampire genre in film history: they drink blood, are sensitive to sunlight, they have the capacity for regeneration, are physically immortal, and have superhuman strength. Most significantly, the vampires in *Thirst* have died and been brought back to life, continuing to exist as undead creatures. Through their having overcome death in the past, the vampire, like the image itself, restores a possibility intrinsic to their past lives as lived, of what is and what may become. The cinema image is not itself life, but is a kind of vampiric afterlife that redeems the body of the human being that once lived. Indeed, the allegorical connection between the undead cinema

image and the undead vampire is one that has become increasingly important in our interpretation of cinematic vampires. In his reading of F. W. Murnau's famous film from 1922, *Nosferatu*, Anton Kaes makes this connection with a concise formulation: "Nosferatu, a purely cinematic creature (with no life outside the movies), rules the kingdom of shadows, which is none other than the kingdom of film" (125). Like Murnau's vampire, Park's undead creatures in *Thirst* self-reflexively foreground the ontology of the film medium, in that their status as both living and dead corresponds allegorically with cinema's own uncanny nature as well as its capacity to animate and bring dead things to life.

In a scene following his murder by Sang-hyun and Tae-ju, Kang-woo returns as a ghost, disturbing their lovemaking and causing strife between the priest and the dead man's wife (Figure 3). His appearance evokes uncanniness in most viewers, as Kang-woo's specter lies between the couple sleeping away from each other, drenched in water and holding a large rock. His undead appearance seems to defiantly mock those who murdered him. At the same time, his reappearance underscores the capacity of the film image to memorialize the dead. In another scene, when Mrs. Ra sees Sang-hyun after her son's funeral, the mother mistakes him for her dead offspring. The misrecognition of the good priest so traumatizes her that she becomes paralyzed. Throughout the second half of the film, Mrs. Ra herself, donned in a hanbok, allegorizes another kind of undead life through her shut-in state, lifeless yet living, conscious yet unable to interact with the outside world.



Figure 3.

Before her paralysis, Mrs. Ra is portrayed as overprotective, overbearing, emotional, and whose self-worth is wholly dependent on raising her son—characteristics stereotypical of the middle-aged Korean mother. The year Park's film was released, Bong Joon-ho released his *Mother*, whose story revolves around a mother who loves his mentally challenged son unconditionally, so much so that she brutally murders the man who reveals a profoundly uncomfortable truth about her boy. In her essay on the “monster-mother,” Eunha Oh explains the uncanny dichotomy between the loving and phallic mothers as an allegorical figuration of conflicting ideals of womanhood existing in modern Korean culture—specifically, the continuing marginalization of women that goes back to traditional patriarchal Chosun society over-against their revered status as self-sacrificing mothers of sons. Indeed, this tension informs the relation of the mother-in-law to her son's wife. As Oh writes, “Thus, when her son marries, the mother-in-law finally sees herself as privileged, as opposed to feeling solidarity with the oppressed female group of which she was formerly a part” (66). Mrs. Ra's cold and indifferent relationship to her daughter-in-law, Tae-ju, cannot be separated from this patriarchal context. In becoming undead, Mrs. Ra relinquishes her privilege of the mother-in-law, making way for Tae-ju's pent-up revenge.

Thus the vampire's ambivalent ontology, constitutive of a being that lives only in the movies and which in turn constitutes the projected, moving image itself, exists in the heterotopia of the film theater. In contrast to the fundamentally unreal space that is defined by utopia, Michel Foucault defines a heterotopia as “a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (24)—indeed, a kind of state of exception to the discursive law that separates reality and illusion. After both Sang-hyun and Tae-ju have turned into vampires, they remain indoors, excluding themselves from the world of the humans. They sleep when the sun shines and are awake throughout the night. The walls of their living room are painted bright white while video footage of what happened during that day is played on a flat-screen television. This bright space allegorically imitates the space, “both mythic and real,” that characterizes the film set, and the technique of what is called “day for night,” where daytime scenes in the cinema are filmed at nighttime, and vice versa, through the use of lens filters and carefully placed lighting (Figure 4).



Figure 4.

In this, Sang-hyun and Tae-ju may remind us of Agamben's explication of sovereignty and *homo sacer*, whose precarious existence is situated precisely in the state of exception. As vampires, they exist at the margins of the world of the living. Their exilic condition, internal and external to the juridical order as well as to the order of the diurnal cycle, cannot be separated from the constitution of the sovereign subject. I refer here, not only to the priest-vampire who wields an uncommon power of life and death over the other, but also to the gaze of the sovereign cinema spectator sitting in the heterotopia of the cinema theater, and whose look is situated at the position of mastery in relation to the visual field laid out before her on the screen. Christian Metz calls this idealized viewer "the All-Perceiving Subject" (45) whose right of knowability and power of judgment is contingent upon the denial of difference—sexual, racial, historical, ontological, and otherwise. This subject, moreover, is encouraged to enjoy the privilege of the decision and of making ontological distinctions through her voyeuristic position in relation to the film's diegesis. Because the viewer remains safe from the judgmental gaze of the characters on screen, she enjoys her state of exception with respect to the dichotomies operative in the world of the film. In her essay on film spectatorship in the age of global digital cinema, Hye Jean Chung warns us against enjoying such an experience of perceptive plentitude in the heterotopia of the cinema. "In fact," she points out, "heterotopias self-reflexively reinforce their otherness and expose all other real spaces as illusory, or inversely, reveal that all spaces are based on complex material conditions of lived experience" (90).

Typically, in the name of narrative legibility and continuity, these layers of myth and reality are made distinct from each other by the judgmental gaze of the sovereign cinema viewer. Correspondingly, Sang-hyun decides who will die so that his life may continue, and this sovereign power is bestowed upon him at the moment he withdraws himself from the life of human beings. Distanced from the world, the priest enjoys the possibilities of the world in a sovereign manner, making judgments about the souls of others, and their deservedness of punishment and salvation.

Film scholar Kim Soyung reads the young Tae-ju similarly, whose figuration constitutes a hybrid ontology that troubles stable, generic understandings of the Korean housewife. Reminding us that the figure of the vampire has traditionally allowed Gothic concerns to mingle with Enlightenment modernity, Kim suggests that Tae-ju's transformation into a "feminine monstrous" may be understood as a mingling of premodern and modern concerns revolving around gender. Echoing Oh's argument, she writes that, "The representation of a female vampire opens up a site where the usual pairing of pre-modern/modern with East/West and feminine/masculine (with positive values attached to the second term) is suspended" (266). This suspension is precisely the means by which Tae-ju realizes an exhilarating liberation from the social constraints of her gender. The *ressentiment* that has built up from years of taking care of her pathetic husband is released when she becomes vampiric, undead, and inhuman. Through this, she frees herself from generic representations of women in Korea melodrama as tragic, nationalist tropes of modernity and the post-colonial condition. Her ambivalent ontology as a woman allows her to choose "to become a vampire and turns her boring domestic labour into a carnivorous play, a vampirism game in which the body opens up to the full range of cannibalistic *jouissance*" (267). For the first time, Tae-ju is allowed to relish in her freedom and experience an elation, previously unknown, associated with sovereign power.

Returning to his 1995 lecture, Agamben notes that key to the ethics and politics of the cinema, beyond that which produces the narcissistic spectator, is the task of making visible two potentialities inseparable from cinema's basic ontology. He associates this use of the medium, this visibility, with a gestural "'pure means,' one that shows itself as such" ("Difference and Repetition" 318). With this phrase Agamben seems to refer to Walter Benjamin's essay, "Critique of Violence," where the Weimar thinker juxtaposes the politics of what he calls "mythic" and "divine" violence. The former is implicated in a means-ends logic and the latter is non-teleological, a "pure means" without a predetermined end (248-52). (Coincidentally

Benjamin's essay was published one year before Murnau's vampire film screened in German theaters.) Throughout his career, Agamben has attempted to articulate and capture this non-metaphysical possibility, this means without end, by making legible a politics that stands at the discursive threshold between the operable and the inoperable. Thinking aesthetics with this politics in mind enables us to think the pure means of the cinema as a potentiality that makes visible, however fleeting, its own ontological essence. When speaking about Debord's own intervention as a cinema of potentiality, Agamben notes that his use of the film medium to repeat and disrupt the past constitutes, to reiterate one of his favorite formulations, "a zone of undecidability" between the singularity of what was and its repetition in the film image.

We might further elaborate Agamben's politics and aesthetics in relation to gesture. It is important to think the moving image, not simply as a signifying medium, but as first and foremost persisting in the course of time, creating a world as the image unfolds, and not simply depicting a given reality. To do so would be to put the image in service of a predetermined telos. Image as gesture is a "means without ends," and as such Agamben writes, in his essay "Notes on Gesture," that, "if producing is a means in view of an end, and praxis is an end without means, the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes morality and presents instead means that, *as such*, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends" (56-57; emphasis in original). Gesture is a pure means, without a given end. A "gestural cinema," rigorously conceived, thus evades all metaphysical ends—narrative, aesthetic, or otherwise—and aims only to express its persistence as a medium, its formal specificity. As such, a cinema of gesture expresses its means of expression, it is "*the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such*" (57-58; emphasis in original). And as a pure means, gesture is the enactment of a politics that does not aim toward a given end, but exhibits itself as a pure means.

The writer and director of *Thirst* has expressed a similar aesthetics of pure means—undecidable, irreducible, and heterogeneous—that I would like to parallel with a point raised by Kim Soyoun above: that is, between Asia and the so-called "West." In an interview with *The New York Times*, published in July 2009, Park was asked about his use of what the interviewer calls "Western influences" in *Thirst*. "When you consider the concept of vampirism," the filmmaker acknowledges,

it is inherently part of Western culture. And also Catholicism is also part of the Western tradition that comes into Korea. So you can say

also that my film is about things that are coming from the outside entering in, such as this virus that enters into the priest, changing him. So we're looking at things from the exterior entering into the interior and whether our inside can accept this thing that has entered from the outside or whether it will reject it.

In other interviews conducted around this time, Park reiterates the metaphor of vampiric contamination that constitutes a zone of undecidability between the outside and inside, between native and foreign. Indeed, this point may be underscored in a scene from *Thirst* involving Sang-hyun and the blind bishop of his diocese. The priest tells his superior that the vampire cells from the blood transfusion have now become necessary in order to suppress the Emmanuel Virus and continue his form of life, and that his continued existence is now dependent on the irreducible comingling of the virus and vampirism. "I didn't choose the blood that was transfused into me," Sang-hyun remarks, "you know I went there to do good! Now, I thirst after all sinful pleasures. But how can I get human blood without killing!" Yet in his interviews Park seems to suggest that the priest's body, as a site of contamination by foreign bodies, functions as an allegory for the problem of hybridity in a much larger philosophical sense. Sang-hyun's corpus is not only a zone of undecidability between human and not human, life and death, modern and premodern, but, more essentially, it is a means of troubling precisely these binary oppositions and for raising questions both ethical and political. Park's comments should thus be seen in light of Korean historiography, and the resistance to otherness that characterizes Korea's modernization process—resistance to Japanese colonialization, American neo-colonialism, and also the infiltration of foreign capital and regulation, such as the IMF, into the national economy.

We might thus ask ourselves with respect to the specificity of *Thirst*: what does it mean when a Korean director appropriates genre conventions of the vampire film, ostensibly sourced from American or European cinematic traditions? And to what extent is Park's film an Asian film at all, when its narrative is derived from the external "contaminants," such as the novel *Thérèse Raquin* by Zola from 1867, as well as set against a hybrid, cosmopolitan *mise-en-scène* ostensibly depicting contemporary South Korea, yet remains nevertheless, according to Kim Kyung Hyun, "anonymous" (194)? Finally, what does it mean when an Asian director makes a film whose narrative is rooted in the moral precepts of Roman Catholicism, an institution whose regime of power and inscription of the law is always already

globalized, the condition of what Jacques Derrida has called “globalatinization” (67)?

Catholicism entered into Korea around 1784, when a young man called Yi Seung-hoon (이승훈), a noble *yangban* influenced by *sinhak* ideas, traveled to Beijing and came back baptized, having taken up the Christian name, Peter. In 1801, Yi was martyred by beheading for refusing to perform the rites of ancestor worship, a practice linked to Buddhist and Confucian beliefs already existing in Korea. It is clear that the Chosun government, unlike Park, was not interested in seeing whether dynastic culture could accept this “virus” entering from the outside. Catholicism eventually did infect modern Korea by disseminating its conviction of a universal truth, the equality of all humans before God, and the intertwined concepts of sin and redemption. These beliefs gained momentum through their dialectical relationship with the process of modernization and democratization, dismantling rigid social hierarchies of the dynastic order while ideologically grounding anti-colonialist and populist movements throughout Korea’s turbulent history of the twentieth-century. According to historian Cho Kwang, the Catholic Church contributed “to the formation of a political and legal culture that was entirely different from those which had premodern aspects. In addition, the church urged right recognition of the universal nature of truth and the open nature of culture” (25). Following liberation from Japanese colonization, the first Korean convent was established while the number of Catholics steadily increased, from 530,000 in 1962 to over 5.3 million in 2012, constituting about ten percent of the South Korean population. The Catholic Church in Korea was active in developing social services for unemployed workers after the financial crisis in 1997. Today, Catholicism has been “Koreanized” perhaps most visibly in the allowance for the performance of ancestor worship. The ethical aporias in *Thirst* play out against this social-historical backdrop. Park himself grew up in a Catholic household and up until high school he attended weekly Catholic services. “That is where I started to take an interest in religion,” the director remarks in his *NY Times* interview, “although currently I have no faith. I had been made aware of a sense of guilt that is unique to Catholics.”

It is this sense of guilt that I would like to turn to now. As in the vengeance trilogy, Park utilizes melodramatic violence to compel his audiences to feel the anguish of his characters, not in order to induce a perverse, fetishistic visual pleasure, but in order to lay bare its ontological and ethical contradictions. Pushing mythic violence to the limit, Park’s films perform a critique of its formulaic repetition in genre cinema. Throughout *Thirst*, Sang-hyun’s faith is taken to the limit, as he searches for a way to live with the comingling of his Catholicism and

vampirism within himself. In an interview with the Korea Society from 2009, Park elaborates:

He's a vampire, but he does everything possible to avoid killing. Even if he has to commit a sin, he tries to make it a lesser one, and so forth. The greatest tragedy of this character is that he is unable to throw away either his vampire desires or his religion, and he has to struggle to make these very incompatible elements co-exist somehow. That's the greatest tragedy. If there is any comedic segment in the film, it's in those scenes where we see Sang-hyun struggling to make this co-existence happen.

Indeed, certain moments in the film acquire a sense of black humor when we see the personal anxieties of the vampire-priest play out in "real-world" situations. When Sang-hyun explains to Tae-ju that he pilfers blood from an overweight, comatose patient, the good priest assures that, "He loved helping the hungry." However the patient, Hyo-sung, meant that he wanted to provide service to the poor and unemployed, not give his own blood. Nevertheless Sang-hyun re-appropriates Hyo-sung's words to justify his irresistible thirst, and remarks that, "He'd offer me his blood if he wasn't in a coma." Violence against the other, taking the life of another, quickly takes on a means-end rationalization through this re-appropriation. It is not clear whether one should laugh or feel repulsed when Sang-hyun drinks Hyo-sung's blood through an IV tube, sucking on it as if it were a straw. In a similar scene, this one having a much more serious tone, a woman commits suicide by voluntarily giving her blood to the vampire-priest. Wearing a black dress and lying on a bed, she says, "I don't feel like I'll die doing it this way, but more like I'll live again inside you." Sang-hyun inserts an IV needle, lays back, and quietly quenches his thirst.

Throughout *Thirst*, morally ambivalent moments like these attest to Park's virtuosity in his appropriation of film genres. Such appropriations aim, not to superficially reproduce their cues and conventions, but to think their limits, to draw out their grounding metaphysics, and to allow one genre to infiltrate another like a virus. For this seems to be the meaning of Park's adoption of popular American and European cinematic practices into his films: he aims to delineate zones of undecidability between discursive regimes, between comedy and horror, in order to heighten their melodramatics. Moreover it is precisely in these discursive zones where decisive ethical and moral questions are generated. As a vampire and a priest,

how is Sang-hyun responsible to others and to what extent is he justified in taking their lives so that he may continue his? The moral occult typically associated with the melodramatic mode, and integral to all genre filmmaking, seems to be at issue here. To what extent can we as spectators sympathize with Sang-hyun, particularly when he is compelled, or forced, to make morally questionable decisions? If, according to film scholar Linda Williams, one of the most important features of melodrama is the sense in which a victim-hero comes to be recognized for their inner virtue, then Sang-hyun seems to problematize this recognition, delineating a zone whereby the viewer is compelled to both feel with and think critically about the vampire-priest's morality. For Williams, the excessive emotionality and Manichean moral polarities that have been understood to stand at the center of melodrama actually aim toward something more essential: "the achievement of a felt good, the merger—perhaps even the compromise—of morality and feeling" (55). If this is the case, the viewer's attitude toward Sang-hyun vacillates throughout Park's melodramatic *Thirst*, from feel-good to feel-bad. As such, the film spectator shifts between identification and alienation, and their capacity for sympathy becomes problematic and undecidable. As I explained earlier, this undecidability is an intrinsic potentiality of the ontology, or the body, of the film image itself.

The ethical aporia at the center of *Thirst* cannot be separated from the ambivalent relationship Sang-hyun ultimately has to his Catholic faith. While his very being embodies the indistinction between vampire and priest, when he realizes that in the eyes of the church he is destined to live a life of sin, the holy man renounces his faith. After promising Tae-ju to murder her contemptible husband, Sang-hyun speaks to the diocese bishop, apparently to request absolution. Old and blind, the bishop requests some of his vampire blood, so that he may see the sun rise over the sea once more before dying. "Be the miracle worker," he pleads, "make the blind see." The request imparts to Sang-hyun the responsibility of a divine power, and reinscribes once more the right of the sovereign over life and death. The priest is immediately repelled and he walks, with anguish, out of the bishop's bedroom. He then turns and says: "I'm no longer a priest nor a friar. Forget the rules! Forget the Vatican!" Sang-hyun's renunciation takes place at the exact midway point of the film. Throughout the second half, he will not be seen wearing his robes, and will continue to partake in the pleasures of the flesh, as well as willingly carry out Kang-woo's murder (Figure 5).



Figure 5.

At the end of the film, the good priest will commit a final cardinal sin, one that he asserted at the film's beginning is "worse than first degree murder" and "worth a life sentence in hell": suicide. Earlier, we saw a woman commit this irreversible act, and though we were not informed as to why, Sang-hyun the vampire-priest nevertheless said nothing to chastise or prevent her from going through with this immoral act. In the final scene he drives himself, Tae-ju, and Mrs. Ra to a cliff overlooking the ocean at dawn and forces all of them to wait and watch the rising sun. Tae-ju initially resists his attempts to subject their bodies to the annihilating force of the sunlight, but she finally gives in. "I wanted to live with you forever and ever. Together again in hell then," Sang-hyun solemnly remarks, aware that this act goes against all his Catholic principles. The non-believer Tae-ju responds by saying, "When you're dead, you're dead. It's been fun, Father." As the sunlight quickly emerges, their faces disintegrate and melt. Their death is not simply an act of martyrdom, but a reminder that their existences remain earthly and mortal. And through this act of self-annihilation, Sang-hyun transvalues the priestly and vampiric terms of the moral contradiction that he has been destined to live. Through their conclusive death, his and Tae-ju's bodies are returned to the world, recalling the Catholic sacrament: "Remember that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return." Despite their being vampires, despite their power to quickly heal their own bodies, and despite their potential to live forever, Sang-hyun refuses to accept the conditions of his own life and refuses to murder others in order to perpetuate his.

Sang-hyun's gesture of renunciation is not a denial of the sacredness of the Catholic Church, not a falling toward the secular, but an act of profanation. In a key essay published in 2005 called "In Praise of Profanation," Agamben makes a crucial distinction that will be useful for my concluding points on Park's *Thirst*:

In this sense, we must distinguish between secularization and profanation. Secularization is a form of repression. It leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another. Thus the political secularization of theological concepts (the transcendence of God as a paradigm of sovereign power) does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact.

Profanation, however, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use. Both are political operations: the first guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized. (*Profanations* 77)

What Agamben here calls "secularization" is a clear nod to his previous work on Carl Schmitt and the insight that all modern political concepts are secularized theological concepts. In his *State of Exception*, Agamben shows us how the formation of the modern sovereign finds its metaphysical grounding through the withdrawal of law's binding force, such that "*auctoritas* can assert itself only in the validation or suspension of *potestas*" (86). Clearly what is at stake here is the danger of *auctoritas*, seemingly legitimized through law and its metaphysical legacy in the Roman constitution, as it is embodied in a living sovereign or a *Führer*. And yet, it is precisely when the binding force of law is suspended, constituted through a zone of undecidability between life and law, between *zoe* and *bios*, that the profane realizes its apparatus-deactivating, law-deposing power. If secularization coincides with the politics of sovereign power, profanation intersects with a politics of pure means, whose conditions were linked to divine violence in Benjamin's "Critique of Violence." That which has been profaned undermines its appropriation toward a predetermined end, and thus shows itself as pure potentiality.

Later in the essay, Agamben speaks of this delicate balance between the difference and repetition of the same in conjunction with the forces of modernity.

He puts particular emphasis on the mass media and the church that work to extinguish the redemption of the profane:

The apparatuses of the media aim precisely at neutralizing this profanatory power of language as pure means, at preventing language from disclosing the possibility of a new use, a new experience of the word. Already the church, after the first two centuries of hoping and waiting, conceived of its function as essentially one of neutralizing the new experience of the word that Paul, placing it at the center of the messianic announcement, had called *pistis*, faith. The same thing occurs in the system of the spectacular religion, where the pure means, suspended and exhibited in the sphere of the media, shows its own emptiness, speaks only its own nothingness, as if no new use were possible, as if no experience of the word were possible. (*Profanations* 88)

It is thus significant that Sang-hyun refuses to take up the generic role of the miracle doer, who wields sovereign power over life and death, and refuses to infect the blind bishop so that he can see. For this is not a power that belongs to him as a finite, mortal being. Through his refusal, Sang-hyun stops short of indulging the bishop's desire to treat his subordinate as a means toward a predetermined end, and of secularizing the power of the Catholic institution. Instead, the good priest sets off on a path toward the profane, a "pure means" that makes visible the potentiality of the messianic event described by Paul in his correspondence (and interpreted by Agamben in *The Time That Remains*), while affirmatively foregrounding the capacity of the media to reveal its power of revealing, thereby releasing its use toward a new politics.

Again, the body of the vampire underscores this undecidable aporia intrinsic to the power of the cinema. Like overexposed images, the vampires at the end of *Thirst* disintegrate and become "washed-out," overcome by an annihilating, bright light. When their undead lives conclude, so does Park's film. Their deaths deactivate the law of genre cinema and its persistently commercial aims. And yet, in this moment the transient nature of the film medium is revealed, a medium that unfolds and "lives" in time, in synchrony with the ocean, the whales, and the rising and setting of the sun.

If, according to Agamben, in modernity the state of exception has already become the rule, ubiquitous in our episteme of governmentality, then this messianic

potential for making visible, what Martin Heidegger calls a “saving power” (28) in his essay on technology, is also grounded in our current historical situation. Ten years after the financial crisis, in a decade when the accelerated forces of global capital infected contemporary South Korean culture and life, Park’s *Thirst* provides a way to think this ubiquitous state of things, what anthropologist Aihwa Ong calls “the dynamic tension between neoliberalism as exception and exceptions to neoliberalism” (25) that characterizes the particular configuration of capitalism and governmentality in East and Southeast Asia. What remains at stake are the forms of subjectivity and its concomitant ethics that arise from the reterritorialization of Korean cinema by the deterritorializing forces of Hollywood and its narrative structures. In the midst of its ontological precariousness, Park’s film holds out for an urgent politics of the cinema.

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