



Review: Monstrosity as Metaphor: Boon Joon-ho's *The Host*

Author[s]: Christine Lai

Source: *MoveableType*, Vol.3, 'From Memory to Event (2007)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.029

MoveableType is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

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 **UCLPRESS**

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Review of Bong Joon-ho's *The Host*

by Christine Lai

Dir. Bong Joon-ho
Magnolia Pictures, 2006

In *The Host* (*Gwoemul*), directed by Bong Joon-ho, monstrosity takes on multiple meanings. This genre-bending ‘monster’ film, South Korean cinema’s most successful release to date, engages in various forms of capturing: from the gripping scene with the petal-mouthed, Juggernaut-like creature chasing and devouring innocents, to the eventual defeat of the monster. Through a blending of horror and satire, *The Host* pays homage to *Frankenstein* in its construction of a subversive discourse that involves politics, class struggle, ecological catastrophe, and disease. All of these issues come together to create a composite monster that dwells deep inside the tunnels of communal fears and individual neurosis.

The genesis of the creature takes place in a morbid autopsy room, in which an American military pathologist orders his Korean assistant to dispose of formaldehyde by pouring it down the drain. Dismissing the assistant’s warnings, the American, with all his military pride, fails to realize the danger of toxic waste. A few years pass, and we are introduced to the Park family, at once dysfunctional and lovable. Gang-du, father of the remarkable Hyun-seo, is a slow-witted man who runs a snack shed by the Han River with his father Hee-bong.

The scene of the monster's first attack is masterfully shot with Bong's effective orchestration of slow motions and muted sounds invoking chaos and terror. Amidst the panic, Gang-du loses his grip of his daughter's hand and turns around to realise that the monster has gripped Hyun-seo with its prehensile tail. Gang-du later receives a phone call from Hyun-seo, informing him that she is trapped in the sewer that is the creature's lair. Powerless before the unsympathetic authorities, the Park family decides to rescue Hyun-seo by themselves. The remainder of the film narrates their quest.

As remarked upon by numerous critics, *The Host* exposes the weaknesses of government and authority in a mode characteristic of the science-fiction genre of both cinema and literature. Indeed, the creature is the hideous progeny of bureaucratic negligence, and government is thus the parent monster, at once ludicrous and repulsive; both are forces that manifest themselves through the devouring of life. This is politics as horror. Those who are voiceless neglected an attempt to regain a voice by tracing the monster through subterranean sewers and tunnels. This quest is coterminous with the public's protest against the government's decision to release Agent Yellow, an antidote for the supposed virus. Ironically, the dispenser of Agent Yellow bears striking resemblance to the monster in its docile state. The movie thus condenses entire histories of revolution and liberation.

In addition to representing unjust authority as a manifestation of horror, the story also analyses how the people are characterised as 'monstrous'. This exposes the duplicitous and reversible dynamic of the monstrosity metaphor. The monster is that which haunts the margins—like the abject, which exists on the border and in the sewage, the monster is what disturbs system and order. In this sense, the margin on which the abject exists is also the periphery of society occupied by the rejected and the rebellious. Like the monster, the uncontainable persons who escape the grasp of authorities become associated with aberrance and deformity. The bumbling Park family, in their escape from the hospital and their pursuit of the monster, ends up being abjected by the authorities. Monstrosity, as deviance, thus represents an exceedance of preconceived boundaries, in much the same way that the creature is a deviation from nature.

Disease metaphor enters into play when the main characters are accused of contagion, with the monster being the host of a deadly virus. Newspaper headlines depict Gang-du as the dangerous carrier of the virus, as a monster of sorts, to be captured and quarantined. Only later does Gang-du discover that there is in fact no virus; it was invented by the government. Disease is thus relative, and the rules are written by the healthy. Unable to control the panicking crowds, the authorities can do nothing except label them as sick and infectious—abject. The pathologisation of transgression thus casts all deviation as illness, without examining the socio-political processes that precipitated the deviation.

The Host ends with both triumph and tragedy. There is a display of heroism, maternal warmth, and acceptance of someone who was once an outsider. In a world where monstrosity seems ubiquitous, the act of embrace becomes an unacknowledged attempt to conquer the deaths wrought by the monster. The final scene leaves politics behind and focuses on Gang-du's small hut, marooned in a land of snow, ice, and darkness. There is still paranoia and suspicion about the indestructibility of the monster. But a sense of melancholy beauty overwhelms us and suspends our speculation about the resurrection of the monster.