

Contemporary Korean Religious Horror: Cults, Conspiracy, and Korean Cinema's "Syncretic Panic"

Thomas Humpal
Dongseo University, South Korea

Abstract

This article examines the contemporary trend in Korean horror cinema in depicting syncretic and cultic religious groups and their involvement in a corporate and political conspiracy. In light of recent real-life scandals involving syncretic new religious movements, and amplified by dramatic social changes, polarizing politics, social media algorithms, and the prevalence of disinformation in the contemporary information age, the Korean syncretic panic and its related tropes are examined in relation to the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and the contemporary iteration of Qanon. While the Korean syncretic panic is analyzed to be influenced by similar social changes as other moral panics, it also conveys a uniquely Korean unease with the collateral impacts of modernization and religion's place within contemporary Korea. The horror films of the Korean syncretic panic articulate this pervasive and growing unease with syncretic and new religious movements by adapting the spatial associations of Korean shamanic horror. In this adaptation the once clear dichotomy of rural (premodern) and urban (modern) is blended, thereby creating a palimpsestic milieu which calls into question modernization's homogeneity of time, space, history, and belief.

본 논문은 혼합적이고 광신적인 종교 집단들과 그들이 연루된 기업 및 정치 음모를 다룬 한국 공포 영화의 경향을 살펴본다. 격변하는 사회와 양극화된 정치, 소셜 미디어 알고리즘 및 만연하는 허위 정보는 최근 실제로 벌어진 신홍 종교 스캔들을 더욱 확장시켰다. 본 논문은 1980년대 사타닉 패닉(Satanic Panic)과 최근 그와 유사한 형태로 등장한 큐어논(QAnon)과의 관계 속에서 혼합주의적 종교 단체에 대한 한국 사회의 공포와 이에 관련된 수사(tropes)들을 연구한다. 한국의 혼합적인 공황(syncretic panic) 상태는 한국 사회 내 근대화의 부작용과 종교의 위치가 갖는 부수적인 영향에 대한 독특한 불안함을 나타내기도 한다. 한국의 공포 영화들은 특히 샤머니즘적 공간을 사용하여 한국 사회에 퍼져있는 신홍 혼합 종교에 대한 불안함을 표현하는데, 이로써 한때 구분이 명확했던 농촌(전근대)과 도시(현대)의 이분법이 불분명해지고, 근대화가 정의한 시간, 공간, 역사 및 신념의 동일성에 의문을 던지는 팔림프세스트릭(palimpsestic) 환경을 생성한다.

Key Word

Syncretism, Korean cinema, New religious movements, Space, Rural, Modernization, The Satanic Panic, *Hellbound*, Religious horror

Introduction

Since 2015, Korea has produced no fewer than a dozen religious horror films and limited series which feature tropes markedly different from the traditional Korean religious horror narrative. In the traditional Korean exorcism film, a masculine figure embodying the progress of modernization arrives in a rural village initiating a clash with the traditional indigenous and female-dominated religion of Museok (Korean Shamanism). This operates as a proxy conflict between progress and regression and is often complex, nuanced, and layered by peripheral clashes like national identity, gender, culture, the cost of progress, and the repression of tradition. The contemporary films that compose Korea's syncretic horror milieu portray a very different religious conflict representing a new kind of perceived threat to social order, progress, and even secular governance. Expanding on and reframing many of the tropes and modes that compose the religious horror and exorcism genres, the new batch of Korean religious horror films have shifted toward depictions of religious syncretism as the driving antagonistic force. In these films, contemporary social and economic order is not threatened by a shaman but rather by a syncretic and cabalistic religious group operating in plain sight, influencing politicians, corporations, and even the hierarchy of the religious orthodoxy itself, thereby threatening to destabilize the established spiritual and political establishment.

The films of this syncretic horror strain include but are not limited to series like *Hellbound* (Yeon Sang-Ho, 2021), *The Guest* (2018), and *Save Me* (2017) and more domestically targeted films like *8th Night* (Kim Tae-Hyoung, 2021) and *Svaha: The Sixth Finger* (Chang Chae-Hyeon, 2019), *Metamorphosis* (Kim Hong-Sun, 2019), *The Divine Fury* (Kim Joo-Hwan, 2019), *The Priests* (Chang Chae-Hyeon, 2015), *The Chosen: Forbidden Cave* (Kim Hwee, 2015), *The Wailing* (Na Hong-Jin, 2015), and *The Closet* (Kim Kwang-Bin, 2020). Individually, these films operate within their own distinct thematic and cultural milieu building from "an established and extensive lineage that goes back as far as the country's own creation myths" (Pierse and Martin 2013, 2). Collectively as a developing subgenre, the terrifying portrayals of doomsday cults and fringe religious beliefs express more contemporary anxieties. These anxieties stem from Korea's long history of tragedy and death surrounding secretive heterodox religious groups and the contemporary public's growing insecurities regarding these increasingly powerful New Religious Movements (NRMs from here forward) that influence Korea's modern economic and political state. While there is no simple and complete answer as to why or how syncretism has assumed the role of villainous strawman within Korea's cinematic and cultural imagination, I suggest that this repositioning of syncretism within Korean cinema, particularly in films released in the wake of the Choi Soon-Sil scandal, which instigated the removal of then-President Park Geun-Hye for crimes involving the funneling of capital and gifts from corporations to a spiritual advisor in return for favorable

policies, is in part a reaction to the real-world role shamanic syncretism has played as the shadow of repeated corporate and governmental failures related to tragedy and malfeasance.

The syncretic horror trend has not gone unnoticed by the NRMs and has stirred ill will among religious sects. While no real-life NRM has been portrayed or named in these films, the verisimilitude of some of the cinematic depictions has some leaders of NRMs and their followers crying slander. A column criticizing *8th Night* was published in the Esoteric Newspaper *Milgyonews* operated by the Buddhist Jin-Gak sect. Also, at the time of its release, *Svaha: The Sixth Finger* was roundly criticized internally and publicly by Shincheonji for a number of scenes from the trailer which depicted worship eerily similar to some of the group's practices. The perceived similarities between their NRM and the fictitious sect depicted in the film raised concerns that the film could damage the group's reputation (Kim Shin-Eui). While both controversies hinge on the perceived verisimilitude of the respective films, they raise larger questions concerning how non-dominant groups and those with unequal access to modernity, namely rural women, and the perceived proliferation of NRMs within that demographic. They represent or reflect something more terrifying beyond the syncretic spirits and gods they worship. The portrayal of these groups in Korean exorcism cinema as subaltern monstrosities that have been othered and "oppressed by the dominant, symbolic order" (Bishop 2008, 146) fundamentally concerns the ways in which a modern society perceives and contains the internal and premodern Other.

This analysis of Korean religious horror cinema's "syncretic panic" delves into this broader shift in representations of syncretism through the lens of history and media representation. It must be said that although these films coincide with and follow the Choi Soon-Sil political scandal, a fair share of the recognizable generic conventions of international religious horror cinema adopted by Korean syncretic horror is no doubt due (in part) to Korean cinema's continued burgeoning international profile and success, which has benefited from the internationalization of once-localized Korean modes and genre manipulation for foreign audiences. However, when examined as a larger body of work, the films also illustrate a broader trend related to the complex nature of Korean religious horror in an age backgrounded by a more religiously diverse and pluralizing body politic and the complication of alternative news sources and conspiracy. In the same vein that the American Satanic Panic was perceived as an institutionalization of Christian heresies of satanism and other heterodoxical practices, but was in actuality a reaction to larger socio-cultural shifts involving shifts in media production and distribution, changes in family and economic structures, and the proliferation of disinformation due to a rapidly polarizing and transforming population. In contemporary Korean syncretic horror, depictions of religious groups both "refract— and in some cases reinforce— off-screen experience, expectation and prejudice," an important

undercurrent to what Douglas Cowan describes as “coven cinema” (Cowan 2008, 208). However, I assert that in addition to a public distaste for the behind-the-scenes influence of occulted and secretive religious organizations on political and social life, the Othering of spiritual groups is a medium that communicates larger socio-cultural shifts.

The Hidden Hand: Cultural Context, and Framework

In their framing of religious horror films, Olson and Reinhard contextualize the traditional religious horror and exorcism narrative as expressing the “prevailing anxieties in any given historical period” (Olson and Reinhard 2016, 60) especially concerning groups like women and minority cultures like non-dominant religions. In my reading of these films, I build from their basic premise that the conflict of these films is an externalized representation of interior anxieties. Although many significant scholars and academics have written extensively about how historical trauma and collective memory coalesce in horror cinema, this paper is mainly indebted to Adam Lowenstein (2005), Linnie Blake (2008), and E. Ann Kaplan (2005), who each argue for the importance of film as a method of revealing national trauma through re-experience, return, and re-examination. These films invite us “to recognize our connection to historical trauma across the axis of text, context, and spectatorship”(9). Horror films do not alleviate historical trauma but recognize that this unspoken and unresolved trauma is still relevant. Lowenstein explains the often occulted and diffuse re-articulation of trauma through horror by engaging with Lyotard’s conceptualization of the difference as the means of finding new idioms for expressing that which cannot be spoken by the victims of trauma (silenced by the conflicting idioms of those who speak of that trauma otherwise). Despite the differing theologies from which the films explore the occulted influence and power of syncretism, they share some important characteristics that represent a burgeoning public anxiety stemming from tragedy and trauma that expresses a crisis of trust in government and social institutions and the influence wielded therein by NRMs.

An NRM is a religious organization or spiritual group that has a modern origin and is peripheral to its society’s dominant religious culture (Clark 2003, 3). In Korea, these NRMs are offshoots of more orthodox faiths often steeped in the remnants of ancient ritual, magic, and shamanism. Although the term ‘cult’ is an awkward and mostly unused word in Korea, NRMs in Korea are often syncretic faiths with cult-like practices and secrecy. Their ceremonies and beliefs are often organized around a self-proclaimed supernatural leader and blend the traditional Korean shamanic theology and Confucian hierarchy with religions more closely aligned with Korea’s modernization like Catholicism and Buddhism

(Kim 2013, 16-17). Of approximately 500 NRMs that have sprung up in Korea over the past century, conservative estimates suggest no fewer than 342 are still active (Kim, Yu and Yang 1997, 1). Often founded during times of upheaval and trauma, their historical roots are elucidated by Busan Presbyterian University professor Tark Ji-il, “most of Korea’s controversial religious groups have in common is that they can be traced back to one of three periods in the country’s modern history... the Japanese occupation, the Korean War, and the period of military dictatorships that reached the peak of its authoritarianism in the 1970s and 1980s” (Power 2014, 13). An undeniable feature of the contemporary religious landscape, NRMs have a long history of influence and mystery in Korean culture, from the Unification Church (colloquially referred to as ‘the Moonies’) in the 1970s, to Odaeyang in the 1980s, to today’s more evangelical messianic sects (France 24 2018).

Unsurprisingly, the proliferation of NRMs in Korea has increased exponentially in the wake of post-IMF crisis neoliberalization. The resulting deregulation has, as exposed by recent scandal and tragedy, created the contemporary theocratic milieu where government, Chaebols (large family-owned conglomerates), and NRMs, incestuously intermingle through investment and policy. It is at this nexus of religious and corporate influence where the perceived threat of NRMs is most potent; a product of the freedom advocated by neoliberalism which “serves the interests only of the biggest companies and its global capitalists” (Rhee 2018, 10). In his analysis of *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-Ho, 2016), Keith B. Wagner similarly magnifies the role of contemporary Korean horror in expressing “the global anxiety about the predatory nature of neoliberal globalization” (Wagner 2019, 520) and particularly its “deleterious” effects on the daily lives of Koreans which have resulted in “failed crisis management, [the] pathogenic spread of disease, and upper-class entitlement” (Wagner 2019, 516); themes that all feature heavily in contemporary criticisms of NRMs and Korean religious horror cinema of the past decade. The NRMs’ real-life involvement with scandal, tragedy, and death echoes their apocalyptic and cataclysmic visions of divine judgment and perspectives on the end of days. Like the films echoing the political instability of the Nixon era that compose the early American Satanic Panic, their shared apocalyptic visions, “need not express a literal end of the world but may entail a sense of the inevitable decay and demise of broad social structure and order” (Phillips 2005, 111). The real-life NRMs’ long history of involvement in organizational conspiracy and tragedy backgrounds much of Korean Syncretic Horror cinema’s too-close-to-home verisimilitude.

Historically, it has been rare for any religious group, no matter how obscure or esoteric their beliefs might be, to be openly criticized in a public forum in Korea. However, recent tragic events involving NRMs have only exacerbated the historically grounded anxieties concerning folk religions and syncretism as an encroaching archaic Other. An investigation

into the sinking of the Sewol Ferry in 2014, which killed over 300 people (most of whom were young students) revealed that the owner of the ferry company, Yoo Byung-Eun, was the founder of an NRM called The Salvation Sect (Power 2014). Just two years later in 2016, the Choi Soon-Sil scandal stoked fears of syncretic cult practices penetrating the Blue House of former president Park Geun-Hye and exposed a nerve running through contemporary sensibilities concerning the influence of ancient practices on the religious landscape of a modernized Korea. Then-president Park Geun-Hye was eventually convicted of abuse of power and coercion for the levying of political favor for bribes paid to longtime friend Choi Soon-Sil, the daughter of a cult leader who held sway over Park since her teen years. While many of Park's political adversaries saw this as the opportune political moment to indict corporations involved in political bribery, the South Korean public "directed outrage at the fact that religious matters were brought into the political sphere" (Park 2018, 644). Choi's access to government information and her influence over Park's policy decisions without clearance signified to many what Choo Mi-Ae, chair of the opposition Minjoo Party, described as "a terrifying theocracy" (Ser 2016). As if gleaned from a horror film, rumors and reports of "shamanic exorcisms" and other "cult-like things" taking place in the Blue House eventually came to public attention despite Park's reassurance that such rumors "[were] absolutely not true." (Choi 2016). The public discourse surrounding the scandal is a case of the dynamic resituating of Korean religious and political boundaries that reflect long-standing urban anxieties of provincial thinking (Hwang 2009; Humpal 2021) and the power of said thought to pervade the most powerful position in the nation.

More recently, in 2020, the NRM ShinCheonJi made headlines as the first super-spreading epicenter of the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak in Korea. The group's secrecy and unwillingness to cooperate with government authorities to stem the spread of the disease garnered negative publicity and potentially cost hundreds or more lives. The media coverage of these historical events only fueled a growing national sentiment of negativity regarding the proliferation of NRMs and their burgeoning influence on the daily life of Koreans. At the heart of the matter is a conflict over the center and periphery of contemporary religion and where ancient shamanic practices and their syncretic influence fit in the modernized and secular state of Korea. Most recently, during the 2022 Korean presidential election rumors circulated regarding then-candidate Yoon Seok-Yul's involvement with a shaman after the talisman-like Chinese character for "King" was spotted written on his hand during one of the debates. Further fueling Yoon's religious controversy was an opposition DPK accusation based on a report from local daily news outlet Segye Ilbo, that stated Yoon had deliberately not made the order because an alleged fortune-teller named Geonjin advised him not to "get your hands dirty with unnecessary blood." (Ko 2022). Yoon's opposition, Lee Jae-Myoung's

campaign was similarly marred by a syncretic scandal when the conservative daily news outlet, Chosun Ilbo, reported that on January 4th of the same year, the DPK had launched a new committee “comprising 17 religious leaders to appeal to the public better. The report said that one of the leaders was a well-known “prophet” who heads the country’s official association of prophets and correctly prophesied all the presidents of Korea from the 13th (late Roh Tae-woo, elected in 1988) to the 18th (Park Geun-Hye, elected in 2013).” (Ko 2022).

The coinciding but not coincidental strains of religious paranoia in Korean politics as expressed in horror cinema can best be likened to the Satanic Panic of 1970s and 1980s American pop culture. The now infamous Satanic Panic was a “moral panic” (de Young 2004) often likened to the blood libel and witch-hunts of Europe and New England in the 18th century (Goode 1994, 57; Frankfurter 2003, 2; Jenkins 2004; Sjöberg 1997), and the communist witch hunts of McCarthyism in the United States during the 1950s (Victor 1993). The mass hysteria known as The Satanic Panic was characterized by wild accusations and over-reporting of occult activity, especially ritualized Satanic abuse, demonic possession, recovered memories, and deals with the devil that are all commonly found horror tropes in all forms of media from and about this time period. With little evidence to corroborate the multitude of accusations, the panic is now understood as resulting from rumors and folk legends that were spread by “media hype, Christian fundamentalism, mental health and law enforcement professionals and child abuse advocates” (Fraser 1997, 105-117). Skeptics and critics of the Satanic moral panic offer multiple possible driving forces behind the allegations which range from attempts by radical feminists to undermine the nuclear family (Underwager and Wakefield 1995) to a backlash against working women (Nathan and Snedeker 1995), and homophobic attacks on gay childcare workers (Hood 2001), to the evergreen threat of religious horror cinema, the fear of alternative spiritualities (LaFontaine 1998). While the very serious nature of the allegations played out in courtrooms and newspapers throughout the United States, cinema reflected the same anxieties through the thematic portrayal of the underground influence of cults operating in plain sight and their insidious way of infiltrating even the most innocent of American institutions.

As a caveat, my argument is not to equate the Satanic Panic with the decades of scandals involving Korean NRMs. The Satanic Panic was a larger and more widespread cultural phenomenon, however, their similar impacts on pop culture, specifically on horror cinema, share the same characteristics that manifest in surprisingly similar ways. The Satanic Panic was a significant part of American conspiracy culture which ostensibly began with disillusionment in the American way of life following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, rising divorce rates, and the rise in alternative spiritualities. The symbiotic relationship between the American Satanic Panic and supernatural horror films expresses the internal

and external insecurities of a rapidly changing nation, the deconstruction of the traditional nuclear family, and the perceived loss of America's Christian identity. According to Drew Beard, the horror films of the Satanic Panic, become loaded with meaning when watched in a period of "increasingly reactionary discourse concerned with, among other things, a sharp increase in the divorce rate after the late 1950s, a rise in dual-income families with both parents working outside the home, [...] an increased awareness of child abuse [...] and the swelling ranks of children in daycare along with 'latchkey kids' who came home to empty houses and apartments after school" (Beard, 212-213). These insecurities were addressed in diverse ways in horror films like *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), *The Devil Rides Out* (Terrence Fisher, 1968), *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976), *Devil's Rain* (Robert Fuest, 1975). These films and the exploitation films of the 1970s planted the seeds for the 1980s Satanic Panic which was a reactive cultural phenomenon to the dramatic changes in how American culture understands itself. In much the same way, Korea's contemporary syncretic panic represents the shifting social, economic, and political attitudes of their time and how a country depicts its conception of itself through media.

In my analysis, I will examine the films based on updated criteria established by Douglas E. Cowan in his book *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen*, in which he examines the religious fanaticism of cults and covens in religious horror cinema. In his analysis, he breaks down the major criteria by which cultic horror films have both reflected and created tropes used to this day in film and conspiracy circles alike. According to Cowan, the formula followed in these films includes the use of sensationalized media, fabrication of recycled motifs, induced paranoia of friends/neighbors/trusted individuals, and the victimization of children. Thereby establishing a set of criteria through which the films of Korean syncretic horror can be situated. Then I will position Korean syncretic horror within the conventions of traditional Korean Religious horror films and exorcism cinema as a means of discussing my assertion that these films are less about religion than they are about a dissolving of a religious and political master narrative.

SNS and Message Board Belief Systems: Online Prophecy and Disinformation

As artifacts of "the prevailing social anxieties of their time," religious horror and exorcism films portray the conventions of horror repackaged for contemporary audiences. Korea's contemporary syncretic horror films are no different. In their varied representations of the complex intersection of religion, social media, mass tragedy, and socio-political scandal, they each make use as their foundation for horror many of the

tropes developed during the classic American Satanic Panic and its more contemporary offshoots; namely, child endangerment and sacrifice, divine judgment, deep state style intrigue, a proclivity of anonymous and not-so-anonymous posts and theories online attempting to make sense of the sudden and scary loss of loved ones without rhyme or reason. *Hellbound*, specifically, offers a broad range of these contemporary anxieties. The twisting of religious dogma and how the respective ideological frameworks portrayed in the series offer a compelling snapshot of belief and tribalism in the social media age and the corporatization of NRMs.

In *Hellbound*, prophesy and quasi-Christian religious syncretism collide in a narrative about three gargoyle-like supernatural monsters (called Executors) that appear at foretold times (called decrees) to decimate and incinerate condemned people's bodies in a fire-and-brimstone show of force referred to in the series as a demonstration. Behind the scenes of these exercises of religious force spring two religious organizations, the cult-like New Truth Society and the gang-like Arrowhead Group, seeking to exploit public fears and religious devotion to gain power. In an odd mix of religious apologetics common to contemporary Korean religious horror films, insidious and exploitative as the organization might be, the powerful spiritual forces at the heart of their theology are as legitimate as any orthodox faith portrayed in the story. The New Truth Society and the Arrowhead Group's machinations of exploitation and religious zeal, while not the clear antagonists of the series, operate as ambiguous agents balancing religious corporatism and vigilante-like extremism of ethical and moral authority.

The more organized of the two groups, The New Truth Society, relies on social media as a platform to spread their religious revelation that the recipients of the decrees are all "sinners" who deserve the bloody punishment they receive at the hands of the monstrous executors, a proclamation that is proven throughout the series to be nothing more than an attempt to control the public through fear. As the characters of *Hellbound* deal with seemingly random acts of God which destroy those so decreed, it is the New Truth Societies' exploitation of human tragedy that is more frightening than any CG monster from Hell. The concept of the decree adopted by the series is an exploration of the concept of a fated or higher explanation for random events. In his attempt to find rhyme, reason, and explanation, Jin-soo inevitably generates a profoundly worse kind of social chaos, attempting to impose order and explanation where there is none. It's ultimately more concerned about how the Korean public deals with the seeming randomness of tragedy. Drew Beard, in his analysis of the phenomenon of moral panics and specifically the Satanic Panic, asserts that the internal "prevalent feeling of loss of personal control and responsibility, and the need to place blame for misfortune elsewhere" and external conditions of "socio-economic stresses, cultural and political crises, religious strife, and moral upheavals"(Beard 2015, 219) created a feedback loop necessary

for such a movement. These feedback loops, amplified by social media algorithms and the prevalence of disinformation in the contemporary information age make it reasonable to argue that the Korean syncretic panic is likely influenced by similar social changes, which convey the uneasy balance between modernization, tradition, and religions' place within a neoliberal society. This is an all too relevant theme in 2020 and 2021, years in which conspiracy-filled beliefs had gained enough of a foothold to fuel insurrections and murder, where those citizens disaffected and disillusioned by the political process and the corruption and lack of compromise have created a world in which, for some, delusion makes more sense than reality. Perhaps the monsters also symbolize the forces unleashed by our self-confined echo chambers of belief and the power manifested by the mob mentality they inspire.

As an interesting meditation and commentary on the nature of tribalism within alternative belief systems and fear at the heart of political rhetoric and conspiracy suffused with religious concepts, *Hellbound* makes a compelling statement about the way people twist religion and politics to suit their own agenda, and how those opinions are spread and echoed through contemporaneous media. Not limited to the United States and other Western nations, the spread of disinformation and alternative religious/political beliefs are on the rise in Korea as well (Tworek and Lee 2021). In 2021 the 'Fake News' legislation passed by Korea's ruling party was intended to quell much of the problem to mixed reviews of its efficacy. Message boards, Twitter accounts, and Naver cafe pages dedicated to "fringe" beliefs continue to be a nationwide concern. In a nation where, cyber-bullying and negative posting have left a track record of high-profile celebrity suicides and one's online presence is subject to constant scrutiny, buying into the ideologies of larger peer groups, no matter the questionable subject matter can prove to be a sanctuary of belonging. The Streamer, dressed like a neon version of the infamous QAnon Shaman, in neon make-up and a fluorescent orange wig to conceal his identity, rants online about "God's will" in a way meant to rile up his viewers who share his same ideologies. He is a caricature of those with radical and extreme views, portraying the absurdity and danger of yielding thoughtful analysis to the click-bait and hot-take culture of social media. While he is a comically exaggerated character, his powerful web presence in the series makes us question his followers; our friends and neighbors, the barista behind the counter, or even possibly the president as a religious extremist in waiting.

While the forms of media have shifted online, allowing for the most outrageous and extreme beliefs to find a home, the phenomenon itself is not new. Cowan summarizes the role media has played in constructing narratives around the Other. he states that "from cinema horror to prime-time television, popular entertainment has contributed to reinforcing the sociophobia of religious fanaticism and the power of the dangerous religious Other" (Cowan 2008, 208). Magnified by the speed

and viral nature of information made possible by SNS platforms, the films of Korean syncretic horror reflect the idea of how different groups coalesce around alternative views of history and alternative spiritualities. In an updated version of nightly network news and daily newspapers, social networking sites and disinformation platforms similarly operate to spread false narratives and unfactual information as a catalyst for stoking public fear. At a time when the real-life mainstream media is as polarized and untruthful as it has ever been, *Hellbound* is just as likely to have you thinking about the viral nature of disinformation in the social media age and those who seek to profit from tragedy.

Hellbound also addresses not just the creation of ‘alternative facts’ and also how social media has de-filtered the news cycle, allowing anyone with a smartphone to editorialize and incorrectly contextualize important new events. The broadcast of demonstrations as spectacles in *Hellbound* similarly rings of social media coverage of tragedy in the age of extreme infotainment. Scenes of unbearable tragedy, like those of the aftermath of the Sewol Ferry tragedy (Bacon 2014) or even as recently as the Itaewon Crush incident of Halloween 2022 (Kim and Song 2022), are now often broadcast on social media before mainstream media and often without context. In *Hellbound*, like the click-driven internet world, individuals can just stand by and watch the “spectacle” to come when they know someone is going to die in front of them. *Hellbound* exposes the pathology of those who create and spread disinformation for their own monetary gain or online clout as a practice more widespread than we may want to believe. As a defining characteristic of Korean NRMs, they “claim a unique knowledge of the path to material and spiritual prosperity – a message that resonates in a highly competitive and status-focused society” (The Straight Times 2018). For alternative belief systems, of which NRMs to varying degrees belong, becoming the Other is a viable option for those disaffected by ‘real world’ interaction and disconnected by lack of participation in economics and government (A partial explanation for the disproportionate number of young women who become involved with NRMs in Korea).

In a true-to-life Qanon-inspired ploy, the ARG-like (Alternative Reality Game) melding of fictional events and information with real life, *Hellbound*’s producers and marketing team created an online presence for both The New Truth Society and The Arrowhead group in which fans of the show began anonymously posting their sins to the messageboard. This blending of reality with entertainment media is nothing if not an embodiment of how the creation of a gray area between fact and fiction is at play in the conspiratorial milieu. In the show’s equally ARG-like finale, the final twist of *Hellbound* resets everything we think we know, as a museum display with the remains of Park Jung-Ja, the second victim in the series, becomes the site of her resurrection. Like a banned Twitter account or canceled celebrity, she reappears from her hellish exile. She

was a mother of two and it was never quite clear what her sin was, but if those who suffered eternal “damnation” are capable of coming back to life, and if a baby can be spared the fate of certain death, perhaps everything’s not so hopeless, after all. At least not in the world where Twitter accounts can be reinstated and political corruption and scandal last only as long as the 24-hour news cycle maintains ratings.

Ritual as Abuse: Child Victims

The proclivity of child victims in Korean syncretic horror is also a recurring motif at the heart of the Satanic Panic. The child, victim to demonic possession (like in *The Wailing*) or hunted by religious zealots (like in *Svaha: The Sixth Finger*), or merely the pawn in a religious game of chance (like in *Hellbound*), is perhaps not a surprising rehash for those familiar with films like *Rosemary’s Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), and the bevy of films warning of the occult dangers to the youth of the nation. Beyond a cinematic plot device, the recurring use of children as victims in religious and conspiracy narratives and syncretic horror cinema appeals to the deepest sense of societal outrage and a feared loss of innocence. In Korean syncretic horror, the child victim is a very tangible and starkly portrayed analog that harkens to some of the more grievous tragedies suffered at the hands of NRMs (particularly the aforementioned Sewol Ferry Tragedy).

Where *Hellbound* portrays the victimization of children, namely the newborn baby whose decree is depicted at the end of the first season, to the heresies of more recognizably Christian theology, the cultic activities of *8th Night* and *Svaha: The Sixth Finger* operate in an identifiably Buddhist framework or dogma, and more cogently portray NRMs as actively engaged in ritual sacrifice which as I have already established is a central motif of religious and moral panics. *8th Night* tells the story of Professor Kim Joon-Cheol (significant that he is an educator) has set out to prove the existence of the Śarīra caskets which house the Black Eye and Red Eye of a monster Buddha defeated some 2,500 years ago. Bhante Seon-Hwa, a Buddhist monk from a fringe sect who hides and defends the Black Eye and performs the rites of exorcism, and CheongSeok, his young apprentice, try to track down the Red Eye, while Detectives Kim Ho-Tae and Dong-jin investigate the string of murders left in the wake of the 8 nights of possession.

In the film, there are two such examples where children become links in the chain of ritual abuse and murder. The first example concerns Professor Kim Joon-Cheol’s success in resurrecting the monster which is revealed later in the film as a product of the sacrifice of his own adopted daughter Ae-ran. Ae-ran makes an appearance later in the film

as a ghost that Cheongseok encounters when he visits the prophesied Virgin Shaman, who is one of the steps the Red Eye Spirit must take in order to reach its goal. Convoluted plot aside, Ae-ran has been groomed from a young age to fill the role of sacrifice for Professor Kim's 'meditation group' (a common nom-de-guerre for alternative religious groups). The big reveal at the end is that each of the possessed eight steps is a member of the meditation group which was formed to usher the Red Eye toward its ultimate goal of reuniting with the Black Eye. The Second is a young female student that SeonHwa and assistant Detective Dong-Jin encounter on the streets outside the residence of the Virgin Shaman. Possessed by the Red Eye, Seonhwa attempts to hunt her down. However, the young female student tricks the assistant detective into protecting her. The Red Eye then takes possession of Dong-Jin's body, and the young female student's body shrivels and dies. While the possessed child trope is common in religious horror cinema, often allegorically addressing the puberty and adolescence of a young woman coming of age (Olson and Reinhard 2016), the young victims of possession in exorcism films do not typically die and are very rarely involved as victims of conspiracy and predatory behavior by alternative religious groups.

Building on the prevalence of child murder and abuse, *Svaha: The Sixth Finger* offers a markedly more syncretic approach, as it involves not only the fringe cultic activities of a vaguely Buddhist NRM but does so while portraying an interestingly syncretic opposition involving the collusion of Christian and Buddhist orthodoxy. The plot of *Svaha: The Sixth Finger* plays equally to folk horror and exorcism cinema. One storyline follows Pastor Park, who moonlights as an extortive publisher of a religious journal and is tasked with investigating a syncretic, Buddhist cult called The Deer Mount which worships a man-god named Kim Je-Seok. In his investigation, Park must travel to and from urban Seoul to Gangwon-Do, a popular year-round tourist destination that happens to be the least populated and largest of the mainland provinces with a reputation for remote mountainous landscapes and traditional/historical sites. There he must piece together the clues of an occult religious history that threatens the fabric of accepted religious history and the power of orthodox Korean religions. The second storyline involves an adolescent girl, Geum-Hwa, who with her grandparents is tasked with hiding her deformed and frightening twin sister from the world. Geum-Hwa and her sister, who they refer to as 'It', are the vessels of a prophesied evil foretold by Kim Je-Seok. Again, an inept police department investigates the ceremonial murders of children, unaware that the cult is hunting them down by illegally procuring their social security numbers and the location of their birth, all in hopes of preventing the prophesied evil from coming to fruition. Like the infant victim of *Hellbound*, the sacrifice of these children are part of a larger religious 'plan' by the secretive, corporatized, and deeply governmentally embedded NRMs. The dozens of child victims

whose missing posters decorate the local police station in *Svaha: The Sixth Finger* are indicative of the same tropes of indoctrination, ritual murder, and abuse.

Additionally, indoctrination and brain-washing of children is a tertiary theme found in *Svaha: The Sixth Finger*, but bears mentioning. Kim Je-Seok's four generals, adopted as young boys from the workhouse, reflect the result of occult indoctrination and represent the broader societal fear of a generation under attack from the religious Other. Brought into the fold at an early age, they are tasked with carrying out the child murders for their adopted father. Kim Je-Seok's donations of food and money to a local orphaned boy's workhouse allowed him access to the young men he would take into his influence. As children from broken homes who became wards of the state, they embody the result of systemic spiritual brainwashing and the kind of dangerous access to children by perverse and spiritually corrupt individuals feared by those of the religious conspiratorial extreme. However, unlike Pizzagate, the value of the young men as victims is not derived from the adrenochrome of their blood, but from the blood they are willing to spill to serve Kim Je-Seok, their messianic heavenly father.

The victimizers of these children are very rarely depicted as simply as an ancient evil or demonic spirit. In each of the films of Korean syncretic horror, the exploiter or facilitator of tragedy against children is an authority figure of some description; represented by religious orthodoxy, the police, or government workers, which only adds to the subgenre's prevailing milieu of paranoid fantasy and distrust of those in power. In *Svaha: The Sixth Finger*, the police never connect the dozens of child murders perpetrated by the Deer Mount Cult and the generals of Kim Je-Seok. At the end of the film, a military detachment is running national defense drills along the road where Kim Je-Seok travels to fulfill his doomsday-like prophecy. As a convoy of uniformed troops passes by, Kim Je-Seok waves to a soldier directing traffic. While The Deer Mount Cult shuffles toward realizing their religious ambitions, in Seoul, monks, and priests live lavish lifestyles concerned only with the possible impact a cult might have on their public image. In the same vein, the final two steps of possession in *8th Night* are police detective Dong-Jin, who was involved with the Professor's meditation group and the final step is the Buddhist monk Seon-Hwa himself, both men who fail to fulfill their sworn public duty. The incompetence of police, as extensions of state authority, is an obvious recurring theme both insinuating, if not explicitly pointing a finger, at the state and judicial authority as culpable in the loss of young life depicted in the films of the syncretic panic.

Behind the child victims of these films are the authority figures of Korean syncretic horror who are either corrupt or inept, and whose investigation into the cinematic crimes of NRMs is representative of broader systemic failures. The police investigations in *8th Night*, *Svaha: The Sixth Finger*, and earlier films like *The Chosen: Forbidden Cave*

are a version of the investigation trope common to contemporary religious horror films and supernatural horror films alike. These investigations are usually initiated by a family member or informed outsider (often priests or monks, and occasionally shamans) who seek to expose the supernatural threat. However, their inquiry is hamstrung when they attempt to get judicial authorities involved who seek logical explanations for seemingly illogical events. At the end of the film, police and governmental skepticism of wrongdoing by NRMs and the supernatural threat they symbolize seldom reverses by the end of the film. Like the aftermath of Korea's real-world mass tragedies, government authority and police, both fly-wheels for the processes that have made avoidable mass tragedy a common event in Korea's 20th century, eschew responsibility and redirect criticism to the neglected regulations and systems themselves. The systemic failure to protect the most innocent means the syncretic threat routinely goes unpunished at the end of the film.

The Syncretic Exchange: Blending Space and Time

The films of Korea's syncretic horror elaborate on the conventional portrayals of the urban-rural divide as an epitome of more subtle cultural conflict like the balance between tradition and progress, shifting gender and economic demographics, and industrial exploitation of natural spaces. In my article "Modernization, Authoritarianism, and Space in Korean Shamanic Exorcism Cinema," I trace the history of shamanic horror cinema as representative of the spatial discourse of Korea's authoritarian developmental policies. I assert that early shamanic horror films fundamentally concern the penetration of the spaces of rural traditional life by modern imported beliefs and the economic systems they inform. This ignites a struggle for the symbolic soul of the rapidly transforming Korean nation as portrayed through the developing countryside. Films like *Ssal* (Shin Sang-Ok, 1963), *A Shaman's Story* (Choi Ha-Won, 1972), and *Oyster Village* (Jeong Jin-Woo, 1972) reflect the political climate of the time intended to eradicate Shamanism from common practice. Depicted as a rural practice out of step with the direction of progress, the typical backdrop of Museok films is an isolated place like a small island or remote fishing village, where the mudang holds a significant influence on local people. The most emblematic example of Korean shamanic horror cinema is *Iodo* (Kim Ki-Yong, 1977) which portrays a remote island dominated by women that has resisted modernization, as the site of conflict between Korea's spiritual past and economic present. In recent years, syncretic horror films build upon the spatial dichotomies of the shamanic exorcism film and offer a more complex take on modernized society and religions' place within it.

By contemporizing the traditional spatial conventions of Korean Shamanic Exorcism away from clear dichotomies of space into a model

involving more liminal overlap, syncretic horror films problematize once clear-cut associations. Rather than the collision of modernization with tradition and superstition, *Svaha: The Sixth Finger*, *8th Night*, and *Hellbound*, along with other contemporary religious horror films like *The Black Priests* and *Divine Fury* portray the intermingling of spaces rather than a one-sided rural threat which sees modernization brought to the countryside in a clash of times and spaces. No longer two completely distinct milieus, the liminality created by the free interchange of rural and urban religions has created a type of syncretic time/space. Syncretism has been seen historically as an attempt to reconcile and analogize disparate religious and cultural practices. In this case, the countryside and city operate along a religious, cultural, and even spatiotemporal exchange while the cultural narrative surrounding Shamanism as a distinctly rural threat to modernization is subverted; in its place are the non-orthodox and syncretic religions operating as the films destabilizing threat to contemporary Korean society. The Syncretic horror film portrays a liminal milieu where past and present, traditional and modern, orthodox and syncretic freely blend, layering the uncertainty of religious faith and history as the background for horror. The competing interests of priests, doctors, and shamans each contribute to this mixing of ideology to create new and compellingly culturally relevant religious horror films that speak to the shifting tides in Korea's religious landscape.

In syncretic horror, the countryside is rife with feckless shamans, useless medical doctors, and most importantly a dominating syncretic milieu; while the modernized city suffers from its own spiritual crises. Religious authority and regulation have been made necessary to weed out heretical and syncretic sects, while Christian and Buddhist orthodoxy intermingle their practices and celebrations. Despite their hypocrisy, religious groups operating outside the aegis of central religious authority are investigated by religious scholars and publications funded by the church and excommunicate those who fall outside the boundaries or favor of religious orthodoxy. As if to add insult to injury, the impotence and irrelevance of shamanism in dealing with contemporary evils in the countryside is made only more clear in the opening scenes of Seoul depicted in *Svaha: The Sixth Finger*. In the lecture conducted by Pastor Park at the beginning of the film, he highlights various "charlatans" and fake prophets who form cults as an economic endeavor. And though his PowerPoint presentation singles out practices like the one which had failed in the barn in the previous scene, and even features images of representatives of real life prophets and would-be messiahs. Ultimately Park's true motivations become evident when at the end of his lecture he shills and requests donations, hinting at the economics of religion under neoliberalism.

The city once understood as a marker or sentinel of homogenous time, now polluted with disparate religious narratives, is an uncanny mix of past and present, science and superstition, that reflects the spatial and

religious liminality of contemporary Korea. *Svaha: The Sixth Finger*, *8th Night*, *Hellbound*, and *The Chosen: Forbidden Cave* depict the intermingling and exchange of belief systems, particularly in cities desperate for belief amid a dissolving master narrative. In their respective cities, the dangers represented by the premodern Other have already reintegrated into contemporary Korea through the free exchange of the traditional and the modern. The blended city of Seoul (*Hellbound/Svaha: The Sixth Finger*), Daegu (*8th Night*), or even Jeju City (*The Chosen: Forbidden Cave*) illustrates that the danger is no longer the conflict between the urban and rural religions, instead, it is their lack of delineation that threatens to undo the religious and spatiotemporal boundaries created by Korea's modernization. Even the urban-associated faiths that share no dogmatic connection or history are working together to delegitimize the mixed faiths, despite that what they too are doing is syncretic in nature. The fictional NRMs are not the only religions dealing in syncretic dogma, we also see the Christian and Buddhist faiths work hand in hand to maintain supremacy. In *Svaha: The Sixth Finger*, for example, the events of the film are backgrounded by a joint Christmas celebration involving Buddhist monks. Korean syncretic horror films further depict the mixing of religions through the references each religion makes to the others' scripture as a means of connecting ideologies or relevant interpretations.

Pastor Park's masculine religious authority is an extension of the modern church to impose orthodoxy; religious, historical, and spatiotemporal. In this way, the blended spaces of contemporary Korean syncretic horror films, like *Svaha: The Sixth Finger* "complicate notions of a singular national culture at any given point in history through the overlapping and influencing of disparate ways of being, like the coeval existence of the traditional and the modern" (Humpal 2021, 14). In effect, they offer "a critique of modernizations' unifying mirage of progress. The inability of shamanism and modernization to coexist in [contemporary] shamanic horror films reflects underlying tension of traditional national character at odds with post-colonial identity" (Humpal 2021, 14). Not only does this disrupt the perceived progress of modernization, but for the purposes of this study, further articulates the significance of spatial roots, tradition, and historical trauma as foundational to the contemporary syncretic horror film. The inadequacy of homogenous time to address a plural religious history is reflected in the way the filmic cults are never debunked as completely without basis nor wielding actual supernatural power. The best example of this is Pastor Park's inability to ultimately debunk Kim Je-Suk and the Deer Mount Cult. However, the same sort of legitimizing outcome can be seen across Korean syncretic horror and lends credibility to the conspiratorial view of the orthodox religious historical narrative.

In connecting once separate environments, both as real places and places of symbolism, many of the films of Korea's syncretic horror cinema (*8th Night* and *Svaha: The Sixth Finger* in particular) feature

the transportation infrastructure that links urban and rural spaces. The highways traversed by Bahnte Seon-Hwa, Park Jin-Soo, and Pastor Park, respectively, visually represent the expansion of modernization and central authority of Korea's highway system as part of a larger modernization project initiated under the Park Chung-Hee regime. However, the circulation of power portrayed in the film functions in both directions, creating a liminal or "in-between" space where the modern and pre-modern intermingle. The "in-between" spaces of *Svaha: The Sixth Finger* and *8th Night*, articulate one of the consistent themes of the fantastical in Asian cinema and Korean cinema in particular, namely, how the sites of interaction between the traditional/rural and the modern/urban expose the cracks in cultural remaining from what Chang Kyung-Sup has described as Korea's "compressed modernity" (Chang 1999, 31). The rapid changes resulting from "compressed modernity" are described as an "accidental pluralism" created by "historical incidents and external dependencies," whose mechanisms have resulted in a hazardous impact on the cultural, ideological, political, economic, and cultural aspects of contemporary life. "Patriarchal political authoritarianism chaebol's despotic and monopolistic business practice, abuse and exclusion of labour, neglect of basic welfare rights, ubiquitous physical dangers, and ideological self-negation are particularly serious examples of such hazards of the uniquely South Korean modernity" (Chang 1999, 34). Under this set of circumstances, "Western-borrowed elements" came to form the "ideological, institutional and even cultural core of state and social organizations", whereas "indigenous or traditional elements were added only electively to some peripheral segments" (Chang 1999, 34). In this case, the countryside as the traditional cradle of premodern religious practices can be understood as a peripheral threat to unmake the perceived linear progress of religious history and modernization (which are related or reliant on "western-borrowed elements").

The roads which connect the incompatible spaces of the syncretic horror films can be understood as a juncture of specific cultural tensions concerning tradition and modernity in much the same way that road films use the road as "a ready space for exploration of the tensions and crises of the historical moment during which it is produced." (Cohan and Hark 1997, 2) In understanding the road as more than just a means of getting from somewhere to somewhere else, we can read the roads, highways, and railroads as physical mapping in space and time of a network of ideologies related to nation, tradition, and development. Not unlike the road film itself which emphasizes modernity's gaze as a fundamental driving force of the narrative in which "our desire for modernity, our desire to be perceived as moving (and quickly at that) against or beyond tradition" (Orgeron 2008, 2), *Svaha: The Sixth Finger* offers the road as both a symbolic and physical connector between the rural and urban spaces. The roads allow him access and interaction

with the past without having to surrender his position of privilege and authority as the agent and legitimizer of religious modernization.

In Korean road films, the road is an allegory narrativizing the failure of both personal development and national modernization, as in Im Kwon Taek's *SeopYeonJe* (1993) and Lee Man-Hui's *The Road to Sampo* (1975), but also uses the journey as a means to re-engage with the past as a separate place and the ruins of trauma left behind. As a country without vast geographical distances to traverse, the road film in Korean cinema often doubles as a re-exploration of time. More contemporary examples of Korean road films more specifically engage with traumatic historical events like Lee Chang-Dong's *Peppermint Candy* (1999), and Jang Hoon's *A Taxi Driver* (2017). Whereas the last two examples I cited engage with the characters' respective personal histories related to historical trauma, In *Svaha: The Sixth Finger* Pastor Park is not re-exploring his personal past, and therefore there exists a gap between the present and past. This gap is articulated by the road; whereby in previous generations of Korean road films which highlighted the natural beauty of the landscape as a victim of exploitation by modernizing economic forces, the landscapes along the roads of *Svaha: The Sixth Finger* are obscured, occulted by the vastness of nothingness.

The blending of urban and rural space and religions also has temporal implications as premodern and modern times exist alongside one another. The resulting heterotemporality, in turn, calls into question the illusion of singular linear time which is asserted by nationalist discourses of development. Bliss Cua Lim suggests that the fiction of a homogeneous national culture is founded on this ascendancy of homogeneous time (Lim 2009, 34-35) In her analysis of how spiritual conflicts like hauntings and exorcisms work to undo the illusion of homogenous time, Bliss Cua Lim cites historian Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum's idea that the clock is an "index of urban modernization" (Lim 2009, 20) or a tool that naturalizes historical modern time as universal. This is oppositional to the world of spirits and ghosts that compose the traditional rural shamanic milieu in which the intermingling of past and present creates a more subjective, less-linear, and more flexible experience of time. By questioning a single linear narrative of religion and history, it becomes necessary to question the singular narrative of modernization, because of the ties shared between Christianity and Buddhism to Korea's economic and industrial development (Kim 2010). Suffused with disparate and alternative historical frameworks, the blending of truth, fact, and ambiguity create sensations as frightening as any horrific, supernatural, or spiritual terrors.

In examining the implications of this type of blending, I return to Bliss Cua Lim's observations of the spatial and temporal palimpsests predicated on the coexistence of realism and the fantastical in horror films. Bliss Cua Lim's assertion that the coexistence between disparate and seemingly incongruous elements in East Asian cinema articulates "symbolic

excess through which the active force of the supernatural provides a mechanism of critiquing capitalist enhancements” (Lim 2009, 135) like those offered by the promise of modernization. The layering of chronology exposes that “homogeneous time translates disparate, non-coinciding temporalities into its secular code because the persistence of supernaturalism often insinuates the limits of disenchanting chronology” (Lim 2009, 13). This sort of generational interaction involves the recurrence of events working to undo homogeneous space and linear time consciousness, departing from “notions of progress and historical chronology” (Lim 2009, 151). As such, Syncretic horror films portray this unraveling of homogenous time and the once-accepted narratives of progress; exposing the blurred delineations between the tradition and the contemporary, the self and the Other, made horrific under compressed modernity. This painful reintegration of a premodern religious Other is expressed temporally and spatially as a syncretic milieu where the economic and religious tools of rapid development have facilitated the horrors of contemporary tragedies.

Conclusion

Although the NRMs portrayed in contemporary Korean syncretic horror cinema are often amalgamated caricatures of secretive religious organizations, the antagonistic guise of The New Truth Society, the Arrowhead Group (*Hellbound*), the Deer Mount (*Svaha: The Sixth Finger*), and Prof. Kim Joon-Cheol’s ‘meditation group’ (*8th Night*), and the respective threats they pose are perhaps less fictional than they are embodiments of growing public distrust and paranoia stemming from real-world NRMs involvement with conspiracy, tragedy, and scandal. One need not examine recent religious horror too deeply before a pattern of the themes and tropes of pervading religious paranoia and fanaticism, both hallmarks shared with the Satanic Panic becomes evident.

In a general sense, the films of Korea’s syncretic horror cinema express a prevailing uncertainty about the times we live in. People are now turning to alternative narratives to try and make sense of the chaotic world around them. This is especially true as distrust in traditional media institutions grows, and TikTok becomes the fastest-growing news source for young people. In such an environment, religious groups with strong, unambiguous ideologies offering comfort and salvation appeal to people struggling with a crisis of national identity during times of deep uncertainty, particularly in a highly competitive and status-focused society. As Korea’s increasingly polarized political parties each look to point the spiritual finger based on superstition and fear of a premodern religious Other, the average Koreans’ quality of life erodes as the gap between the rich and poor grows wider. Eroded too is trust in government, traditional religion, economics, and hegemonic media narratives. Replacing them are exchanges between

divergent conceptions of history and religion that defy authority. These conceptions clash in satellite towns and suburbs or along the roads that connect modern urban centers with the traditional and regressive countryside. The liminality of Korean syncretic horror builds from the foundation and context of a modernized Korea where modernization has resulted in a vast gray area (quite literally) in-between once clearly defined and separate spaces, times, and ways of being. The singular vision of progress has been spatially and temporally polluted by uneven exchange along the infrastructure of development and further problematized by the mixing of tradition, history, and memory. No longer are the once dichotomous urban and rural registers purely oppositional, rather, they are intertwined and seemingly both adrift in a syncretic milieu. In the films of Korea's syncretic panic orthodox religion, shamanism, and even science offer inadequate answers to a society of blended belief and palimpsestic time/space.

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