

*The New Zombie Apocalypse and Social Crisis
in South Korean Cinema*

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Abstract: The popular culture version of the zombie, developed over the latter half of the twentieth century, made only sporadic appearances in South Korean film, which may in part be attributed to the restrictions on the distribution of American and Japanese films before 1988. Thus the first zombie film *Monstrous Corpse* (*Goeshi* 1980, directed by Gang Beom-Gu), was a loose remake of the Spanish-Italian *Non si deve profanare il sonno dei morti* (1974). *Monstrous Corpse* was largely forgotten until given a screening by KBS in 2011. Zombies don't appear again for a quarter of a century. This article examines four zombie films released between 2012 and 2018: "Ambulance", the fourth film in *Horror Stories* (2012), a popular horror portmanteau film; *Train to Busan* (2016) (directed by Yeon Sang-Ho), the first South Korean blockbuster film in the "zombie apocalypse" sub-genre; *Seoul Station* (2016), an animation prequel to *Train to Busan* (also directed by Yeon Sang-Ho); and *Rampant* (2018, directed by Kim Seong-Hun), a costume drama set in Korea's Joseon era. Based on a cognitive studies approach, this article examines two conceptual metaphors which underlie these films: the very common metaphor, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, and the endemically Korean metaphor THE NATION IS A FAMILY.

Keywords: Zombie, social crisis, South Korean cinema

Korea's traumatic history throughout most of the twentieth century — Japanese colonisation, the Korean War, and almost forty years of military dictatorship — has left deep psychological scars on the national psyche, and the recent emergence of zombie narrative genres has furnished another vehicle for expressing the social impact of that

history. The globalised popular culture version of the zombie, which was developed over the latter half of the twentieth century, had made only sporadic appearances in South Korean film before the twenty-first century, which may in part be attributed to the restrictions on the distribution of American and Japanese films before 1988 (the year of the Seoul Olympics). Thus the first Korean zombie film, *Monstrous Corpse* (*Goesi* 1980, directed by Gang Beom-Gu¹), was a loose remake of the Spanish-Italian *Non si deve profanare il sonno dei morti* (1974). Zombies made no further screen appearance over the next quarter of a century, and *Monstrous Corpse* was largely forgotten. Interest in zombies did not emerge until the early twenty-first century with the release of two zombie films: the clichéd *Dark Forest* (2006), directed by Kim Jeong-Min, and the well-received *The Neighbour Zombie* (2009), a low-budget portmanteau film on which four new directors cooperated. Consisting of six stories under the umbrella of the outbreak of a zombie virus in Seoul, *The Neighbour Zombie* explores several themes and motifs which recur in subsequent zombie films, especially issues of human consciousness and the propensity of those in power both to disregard the plight of everyday or marginalised people and to exploit disruption to their own advantage. Thus in segment four (directed by Ryu Hun), a scientist working for the corporation from which the virus escaped develops a vaccine to cure it, but must flee when the corporation seeks to murder him so it can have sole ownership of the vaccine. Segment five (directed by Jang Yun-Jeong) explores the post-traumatic stress caused by the memories of the horrors perpetrated by those zombies who the vaccine had restored to humanity and those citizens who had done terrible things while retaining human form.

Zombies, however, are not just a metaphor for trauma and dehumanisation in the past. Writing of the prominence of zombie movies in American cinema, Daniel W. Drezner argues that the living dead are a metaphor for a variety of anxieties in an American body politic buffeted by asymmetric threats and economic uncertainty (2014: 825–6). Similarly, Linnie Blake, in a formulation that also resonates with recent Korean experience, suggests that “the zombie apocalypse has provided audiences with a means of looking at and working through the contemporary deliquescence of a body politic infected by neoliberalism. The zombie is, in short, the monster of choice for a generation tired of a decade of governmental facilitation of the anti-democratic impulses of neoliberal corporatism” (2015: 28). A comparable tendency in South Korea, impelled by the aftermath of the catastrophic attempt to impose neoliberal economics by the IMF in 1997, by the stranglehold on wealth maintained by a few family companies, and by endemic corruption in legal and political systems, is to use the genre of the zombie apocalypse as a metaphor for global crisis, disorder and fear. The IMF intervention is just another example of the threat of invasion by outsiders which has been a shadow — and reality — under which the Korean peninsula has lived for centuries, and which is overtly evoked in the historical film *Rampant* (2018), in which the zombie virus arrives on a boat captained by a Dutch-speaking Westerner whose business is to sell guns to a faction planning to overthrow the royal family. Societal structures and institutions, including governments and the military, are not only ineffective in stopping the chaos that occurs during a zombie outbreak but are apt to be its cause. The attribution of the source of the virus to a biotech or pharmaceutical company, as in *The Neighbour Zombie* or *Train to Busan* (2016), comments on the moral irresponsibility of such companies in their drive for higher profits and monopolies over expensive products, but also expresses scepticism

about levels of government complicity in favour of these companies and against the interests of the people.

Zombies and Symbolic Representation

This article examines some zombie films produced in South Korea between 2012 and 2018: “Ambulance”, the fourth segment in *Horror Stories* (2012), a popular horror portmanteau film; *Train to Busan* (2016) (directed by Yeon Sang-Ho), the first South Korean blockbuster film in the “zombie apocalypse” sub-genre; *Seoul Station* (2016), an animation prequel to *Train to Busan* (2016, also directed by Yeon Sang-Ho); and *Rampant* (2018, directed by Kim Seong-Hun), a costume drama set in Korea’s pre-modern Joseon era (a genre known as *sageuk* in Korean). Some examples will also be drawn from *Kingdom* (2019), a television drama series still in process at time of writing. Based on a cognitive studies approach, the discussion explores two conceptual metaphors which underlie these works: the very common metaphor, LIFE IS A JOURNEY,ⁱⁱ and the endemically Korean metaphor, THE NATION IS A FAMILY. These metaphors are expressed as simple scripts or schemas (a journey, for example, has a beginning, a purpose, some encounters and an end) but, as David S. Miall argued in his influential article “Beyond the Schema Given”, simple schemas do not explain the unfolding and shifting meanings of complex narratives and must be modified or adapted. The process of comprehension is further guided by *affect*. Miall contends that affect “allows experiential and evaluative aspects of the reader’s self-concept to be applied to the task of comprehension; [it] enables cross-domain categorisation of text elements”; and it pre-structures the audience’s understanding of the meaning of a text (56).

There has been considerable scholarly attention from various critical perspectives to the functions of affect in horror films (e.g., Bartsch et al 2010; Høglund 2013; Winter 2014; Benson-Allott 2015). Underpinning this conversation has been the work of Silvan Tomkins (1963), who argued that affects give depth to human existence through self-awareness and intersubjective relations. Because we build up a memory bank of affective experiences we are able to develop and draw upon complex affect theories in order to negotiate our social world. Zombie films, however, are premised on the possible destruction of that social world and hence, as affect, “horror emerges as a relation between subjects and objects by threatening the perceiver with his or her insignificance and ephemerality as an object” (Benson-Allott: 268). Because zombie films centre on bodies that transform and become monstrous — the once-human that is no longer human — they produce distinct affects of fear and guilt in represented characters who escape, however temporarily, zombification. On the other hand, some characters transform into altruistic subjects, transcending the self-regardingness that had characterised their lives. This transformation is especially evident in *Train to Busan*.

As undead creatures, zombies are symbolic representations of the consequences of the loss of self (Wonser and Boyns: 632) and subsequent exclusion from any actualisation of LIFE IS A JOURNEY because between the moment of transformation and any depicted destruction a zombie lacks consciousness, agency, social life or deliberated action. A zombie has only a drive to run with a zombie pack and to kill. Likewise, the metaphor

THE NATION IS A FAMILY cannot apply to a zombie, which is no longer a member of either nation or family. None of the films which comprise the corpus of this article shows any interest in the specific identity of a zombie or in the life of a character subsequent to zombie transformation. He or she simply disappears into the undifferentiated zombie horde, even those characters in *Train to Busan* or *Rampant* who have engaged audiences in strong affective involvement. A useful argument here is Mitchell Travis's application to zombies of Agamben's concept of "bare life" as applied to a person who is not necessarily recognised as having a socially or morally significant life and is thus outside of the boundaries of the social order and juridical structures (795–6). How such a person is treated is therefore without ethical consequence (Wonser and Boyns: 635). However, in *Seoul Station* and *Rampant*, in particular, the rulers do not make a moral distinction between people and zombies and, identifying a zombie irruption as an insurrection, kill indiscriminately. The erasing of the personhood of characters who become infected thus accords with processes of exception which embrace not only zombies but also underclasses, security threats, terrorists, aliens and frequently women. The infection in *Rampant* originates with a foreign merchant ship, and the "insurrection" in *Seoul Station* is blamed on "communists", that is, North Korea.

Prosocial and Pro-self Behaviour in Zombie Films

As Bishop (2015: 14) argues, new directions in zombie films in the twenty-first century have been enabled by "the world's collective fears and anxieties about terrorist attacks and global pandemic. Because zombies look like our former friends and loved ones, they represent the plain-clothed terrorist or the brainwashed extremist". In South Korea, such anxieties take the form of persisting contemporary and collective fears about North Korean terrorism and international pandemics (SARS, avian flu, mad cow disease [BSE]), and cultural concerns over immigration and identity politics. Finally, and indeed centrally, a core thematic element of South Korean zombie film is a contrast between pro-self and prosocial behaviour and the classic contrast between egoism and altruism-empathy that underpins it. As a recurrent theme, the contrast between prosocial and pro-self behaviour has run through cinema and TV drama since at least the end of the 1980s. More recently, the extreme symbol of pro-self behaviour has crystallised as the zombie, for although zombies are devoid of ego their single drive to attack humans figures the drive to survive which becomes extreme in pro-self people in a time of crisis. Characters in zombie films always include one or two who are so deeply egoistic they cannot grasp that their survival, for which they are ready to sacrifice the entire country, depends on prosocial action. In their survey of motifs and conventions in western zombie films, Robert Wonser and David Boyns (2016) observe that those who survive a zombie apocalypse do so by creating supportive and protective social networks; in contrast, "it is extremely rare to find a lone individual who successfully survives without social support; most survivors of a zombie apocalypse have to collaborate" (642–3). Korean zombie cinema has reproduced this convention and blended it with the contrast between pro-self and prosocial behaviours.

As I have argued, what zombies might signify or symbolise embraces a range of possibilities, but it can nevertheless be left inexplicit, as in “Ambulance,” the first zombie story to appear in film after *The Neighbour Zombie*. Although the journey of the ambulance through one zone to another indicates that the larger setting is based on a war zone created by a partial invasion of Seoul, the focus of this short film is on the failure of a small group to sustain a level of prosocial behaviour which would enable them to survive. “Ambulance” is only twenty-four minutes in duration and the action mostly takes place within the confined space of a moving ambulance, so zombies make only fleeting appearances when they either pursue or attack the vehicle. The practice of depicting zombies as catalyst or enemy secondary to the situation of characters who are still human is the norm in South Korean cinema. The action played out within the ambulance pivots on the metaphors LIFE IS A JOURNEY and THE NATION IS A FAMILY. An ambulance crossing a zone of the city infested with zombies is flagged down by a woman seeking help for her injured daughter, who remains unconscious until the final seconds of the narrative. The crew of the ambulance consists of a driver, a female nurse and a military medical orderly. Tension develops between orderly, nurse and mother because of an ambiguous wound on the child’s arm: if the cause is a traffic accident, as the mother asserts, all will be well, but the orderly believes it is a zombie bite and insists the child should be thrown from the ambulance. The lives of everyone in this microcosm depend on resolution of their conflicting desires: the mother places family above everything and ends up killing the other adults; the orderly is obsessed with self-preservation; and the nurse is stubbornly professional and altruistic. Mother, orderly and nurse represent schemas which appear in all of the zombie texts considered here. For example, in a parallel incident depicted in episodes three and four of the television drama series *Kingdom*, an aristocratic mother refuses to allow the zombified body of her “precious son” to be burned and smuggles it onto the boat in which town officials, aristocrats and military leaders are irresponsibly making their escape. The mother is depicted as unlikable and the officials and aristocrats are contemptible, assuring one another that “Noblemen are the pillars of the country” and must survive (Ep.3, 47:50) as they flee after making no provision for the common people. The affective alignment of viewers with the people thus abandoned pre-structures the outcome of the nobles’ behaviour (a zombie on the boat is to be anticipated, even hoped for) and audience acquiescence to and satisfaction with their destruction. The recurrent self-preservation schema contrasts with the altruism schema within the enclosed space of the ambulance and again of the train in *Train to Busan*. In the latter, one of the most affective moments occurs near the close of a twenty-minute segment (00:54 ff.) in which after an abortive attempt to find security at Daejeon Station the surviving passengers have become separated into three groups. Seok-U, Sang-Hwa and Yeong-Guk team up to fight their way through the zombies in four of the train’s carriages in order to rescue four passengers, including Seok-U’s daughter (Su-An) and Sang-Hwa’s wife (Seong-Gyeong). Having done that, they take them through one more carriage only to find that the other passengers, led by egoistic, pro-self businessman Yong-Seok, have barricaded the connecting door and refuse them entry. In a very moving scene, working-class, foul-mouthed Sang-Hwa entrusts his wife to Seok-U’s care and sacrifices himself to give the

others a chance to survive;¹ in contrast to Sang-Hwa's altruistic act, Yong-Seok demonstrates his preparedness to sacrifice everybody else on the train to save himself. His response when Seok-U's group break into the carriage is to assert that they are infected and in a mob response the other passengers support his demand that the new arrivals must move to the vestibule. On two later occasions Yong-Seok pushes other people into the path of zombies to enable his own escape (01:31:15, a train conductor; 01:33:31, schoolgirl Jin-Hui). The main contrasts between egoism and altruism in these scenes (and there are more) further demonstrate how affect pre-structures both understanding and response: in simple terms, an audience will feel strongly that Seong-Gyeong must survive as a proper outcome of Sang-Hwa's altruism, and that Yong-Seok is contemptible and should not survive.

The three social groups on the fleeing boat in *Kingdom* — aristocrats, government officials and higher military — function as a cross-domain reference to the socio-political structure of modern South Korea. Historical dramas in South Korea are always also about the present and readily suggest cross-domain parallels between, for example, Joseon aristocrats who possess and consume much of the country's resources and the modern *chaebols*, hereditary family companies which make up 1% of the population and control 60% of the country's wealth. In a comparable way, the social schemas represented in the ambulance can be deemed to represent wider social domains, such as the self-regarding family, those who wield political and judicial power, the everyday worker (the driver), and the professional class. As a microcosm of society, the ambulance should be a vehicle (literally and metaphorically) that supports people on life's journey but instead embodies the helplessness and paranoia instilled in characters (and audiences) by the common conflict between self-preservation and moral behaviour which is prompted by a social division figured by the zombie outbreak. The close of "Ambulance" suggests that the story is a dark fable about social cohesion. Having killed the orderly, the nurse and the driver (who transformed after being bitten during a zombie attack on the ambulance), the mother brings the ambulance into the safe zone where it crashes. The daughter wakes, not a zombie, and greets her mother, who promptly zombifies and, her former life obliterated from memory, bites the daughter she relentlessly protected. There are thus no survivors of the journey, the family has collapsed and zombies have entered the safe zone, presaging a full invasion and the collapse of the nation.

Social Disorder as a Cause of a Zombie Apocalypse

"Ambulance" and *Seoul Station*, the harrowing animation prequel to *Train to Busan*, are both zombie apocalypses in which there are no survivors. Only two of the train passengers in *Train to Busan* are human at the end of the journey, a pregnant woman (Seong-Gyeong) and a young female child (Su-An), in an apparent allusion to apocalyptic disaster narratives such as George R. Stewart's seminal *Earth Abides* (1949) and Robert C.

¹ The affective appeal of this character is confirmed by the national and international popularity of the actor, Ma Dong-Seok, subsequent to the screening of the film. "Train to Busan takes Don Lee [Ma Dong-Seok] to Hollywood." http://koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/09/398_214970.html

O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah* (1974), in which a small breeding stock exists to repopulate the destroyed world. *Seoul Station* associates the outbreak with government incompetence and wide-spread social problems. A scientific blunder, enabled by economic adventurism, corrupts the natural world; politicians manipulate the media to cover it up; society is driven by self-interest and a cultural investment in hierarchy and power; and as a result the altruistic minority can preserve very few citizens. The suggestion that a zombie apocalypse in South Korea is a reflection of a debilitated social disorder is made most strongly in the opening eighteen minutes of *Seoul Station*, at which point the first zombie attack is shown. Set in dimly lit streets populated by the city's underclass, the opening depicts a dystopian world inhabited by the unemployed, the homeless, alcoholics and street prostitutes. The first scene depicts an elderly man in a dishevelled state bleeding from a wound on his neck. Two young men he passes, who — in a heavy-handed coincidence — are discussing the need for a universal welfare system, decide they should help him, but change their minds when they realise he is one of the homeless and exudes a horrible smell. Other people the man passes exhibit a general lack of willingness to be involved. Help is attempted by a friend, another of the homeless, but he is incompetent in the face of the apathy of officials and public hostility. This strand is continued across the opening until a pivot point at which the man zombifies (18:46).

A second strand entwined in the opening involves a runaway teenage girl, Hye-Seon, who emerges as the film's focal point. LIFE IS A JOURNEY and THE NATION IS A FAMILY again coincide in Hye-Seon's journey through the night. She lives with her egoistic boyfriend in a sleazy apartment building, has no money, and cannot pay the rent. Having woken to find her boyfriend has gone out, she seeks him in an internet café, where he has just posted an online advertisement to prostitute her. They argue and she then roams the darkened city, arriving at Seoul Station just after 12:30 as the first zombie horde erupts (25:15). For the rest of the film she flees the zombies who infest the city, but is also sought by Seok-Gyu, a man who claims to be her father but is really a brutal pimp she had run away from in the film's backstory. The cross-domain lapping of schemas for father and pimp, of concepts of protection and exploitation, resonates with repeated complaints amongst underclass citizens that society has used and discarded them ("This country doesn't care about us" [01:08:57]) and interrogates THE NATION IS A FAMILY metaphor. The idea is kept visually prominent by a repeated motif of billboards advertising the availability of new luxury apartments, which mock the homeless in Seoul Station who sleep in front of these billboards. A viewer's affective response to this motif pre-structures understanding of the text. Encounters with riot police and the military escalate disregard for the common citizens, since they are conflated with the zombies and accused of staging an insurrection, which in turn becomes an excuse to declare martial law and to attack the citizens with tear gas, water cannon and bullets (01:00). Such scenes further allude to the many representations of police or military brutality in realist films depicting the suppression of the 1980 Gwangju Democratisation Movement. Classic films include *Peppermint Candy* (1999), *The Old Garden* (2006) and *May 18* (2007), but the topic comprises a filmic sub-genre, most recently exemplified by *A Taxi Driver* (2017). The intertextual effect, which is evoked overtly in the film's penultimate scene which depicts zombies being shot by the military, calls into question any assumption that the nation is a family.

Viewers easily distinguish the uninfected from the infected, but *Seoul Station* is an emotionally disengaged film, as only characters in small roles elicit empathy from viewers: a middle-aged homeless man who helps Hye-Seon and is shot when he protests about the mistreatment of ordinary people; and a young man who embodies the altruist schema by saving Hye-Seon at the cost of his own life (01:13:50). Hye-Seon might have attracted some empathy as a weak, female victim lacking any agency, but she is not attributed with any inner life and shows little concern for other people. At the close of the film she is caught by Seok-Gyu after she has taken refuge in one of the advertised luxury apartments, kicked until she is only semi-conscious and is about to be raped in the expensively furnished bedroom that adorns the display apartment. A tear trickles from one eye, perhaps a realisation that she is trapped in a cycle of prostitution and violence. However, she instead dies and transforms into a zombie, but there is little audience satisfaction when she then destroys the pimp who is her persecutor — she has zombie strength, but because a zombie has neither memory nor consciousness she has even less agency than she had when human. Affect is shaped here not by empathy with Hye-Seon nor by satisfaction at the natural justice meted out to Seok-Gyu, but by the significance of the setting in its confirmation of the social injustice that overwhelms the “bare life” population. Viewers are not directly shown the end of Seok-Gyu but see rather the shadow of the former Hye-Seon as she stoops to where she has thrown him to the floor. The shadow plays across an expensive vanity table while the light falls brightly on a wall plaque which details the cost and provenance of the object (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Hye-Seon Zombifies Seok-Gyu

In that zombies are symbolic representations of the consequences of the loss of self, it seems clear that Hye-Seon’s lack of personhood as a zombie is merely an extension of her lack of personhood as a young woman in an androcentric society which treats her as

a possession without rights. It is arguable that a further reason for the lack of audience empathy with Hye-Seon is that it recognises her bare life status.

Affect and Closure in *Train to Busan*

Affect plays a more substantial role in *Train to Busan*, especially in its very powerful close. From the outset of the film, an audience is positioned between apprehension and hope because, as in *Seoul Station*, director Yeon Sang-Ho opens the film with images of a dystopian society: farmers suffer from economic uncertainty and fear of another pandemic; families are dysfunctional, as exemplified by Seok-U's broken marriage and his poor relationship with daughter Su-An; a research facility has caused an environmental crisis which authorities dismiss as an insignificant issue; and financial institutions are greedy and opportunistic and pay no heed to the wider economic damage they cause in their quest for profit. A strong image is established in the scene which concludes the pre-titles segment of the film: a farmer takes his truck through a checkpoint controlled by a man wearing chemical protection clothing, and knows he has been told a lie about the reason for the check; his truck then hits and kills a deer on the road, but as he drives away the dead animal struggles to its feet and a final close-up as it stares at the camera shows a bloody neck and the glassy eyes of a zombie. The image obviously declares that this is a zombie film, but also establishes that the zombie represents a widespread social and ecological crisis. Having established this moment of anxiety, the film then cuts to the title screen.

The opening vignettes about scientific and economic irresponsibility, egoism in family life and ecological crisis also establish the core thematic element of the film as a contrast between pro-self and prosocial behaviour and the classic contrast between egoism and altruism that underpins it. These contrasts are demonstrated at a more specific level by the behaviours of Seok-U and Su-An but are also distributed among other characters. Characters in zombie films may be fixed, like the zombies themselves in their mindless drive to attack humans, but are not defined like the zombies by a single characteristic. Character complexity may emerge as the film unfolds, as with the character of Sang-Hwa: he does not develop during the brief journey but reveals depths of other-regardingness, compassion and courage in his response to the extreme situation in which most of the passengers on the train turn into zombies. In contrast, Seok-U is a character who develops, jolted by events to change from a self-centred individualist into someone who can think altruistically and hence behave prosocially. His early behaviour emphasises his pro-self attitude — for example, when Su-An gives up her seat to Jong-Gil, an elderly woman, Seok-U reprimands her: “You didn't have to do that ... at a time like this, only watch out for yourself” (34:42). Su-An defends her prosocial action by commenting that her grandmother had sore knees — that is, her physical explanation works by analogy and evokes a particular form of altruistic motivation which Batson and Shaw define as behaviour “induced by feeling empathy for the person in need” (110). Su-An's concern for the well-being of another thus accords with Robert Shaffer's (2000) definition of prosocial behaviours as “actions that benefit other people by helping, supporting, and

encouraging their goal accomplishment or well-being". Much of the research into prosocial behaviours since the concept appeared in the 1970s has been focused on the moral development of children (Choi et al. [2011], Leahy [1979], Shaffer [2000]), which resonates with the strategy in *Train to Busan* of presenting many sequences, especially in the first half of the film, from Su-An's perspective. She is represented within a concept of childhood as innocent and open-hearted and more capable of altruistic behaviour than adults, which is still a common conception in South Korea. She overturns Seok-U's pro-self assumptions when, for a brief and dangerous time, passengers disembark at Daejeon Station. Seok-U thinks he has made a special arrangement with a friend there and draws Su-An away from the other passengers. In the following exchange Su-An's criticism of her father's pro-self attitude from her own prosocial perspective shocks him into speechlessness and initiates a process of change. When she learns about his arrangement, she immediately wants to include the acquaintances they have made on the train, especially Seong-Gyeong and Sang-Hwa (43:08):

Su-An: I'll go tell the others.

Seok-U: You don't have to.

Su-An: Of course I do.

Seok-U: Forget them! We're all on our own!

Su-An: You only care about yourself. That's why Mummy left.

Su-An's acts of kindness and altruism are not performed with any expectation of reward, but audience affective alignment with her actions looks forward to a close in which she is rewarded by survival. It is thus affectively satisfying that near the close of the film a now prosocial but infected Seok-U entrusts Su-An to the care of Seong-Gyeong, just as Sang-Hwa had entrusted Seong-Gyeong to Seok-U's care.

Affect is visually reinforced near the close as Seok-U, Su-An and Seong-Gyeong flee the pursuing zombie horde to seek safety on a train engine set in motion by the original train's driver (Figure 2). The *pursuit*-script in which audience alignment is with the fugitives is calculated to generate strong affect driven by hope and anxiety. This scene is a montage of high angle shots from behind the fugitives, low angle frontal shots, and shots of the pursuing zombies from various angles. Camera placement thereby builds anxiety through details such as distance to be traversed and the vast number of pursuers (see Figure 2, top), while the low angle frontal shots accentuate the fugitives' impediments (Seok-U is carrying Su-An and Seong-Gyeong is heavily pregnant – see Figure 2, bottom). In the shots filmed from a high vantage point, everything in the *mise-en-scène* – buildings, trains, railway tracks, the converging zombie horde – is directed toward the focal point at the top centre of the screen, the obscured horizon where safety may lie. Everything in the scene that moves – the engine, the humans and the zombies – are moving toward that exit point, which functions as a symbol of hope. Because a possibility of escape remains, viewers will hope their affective alignment will be rewarded.

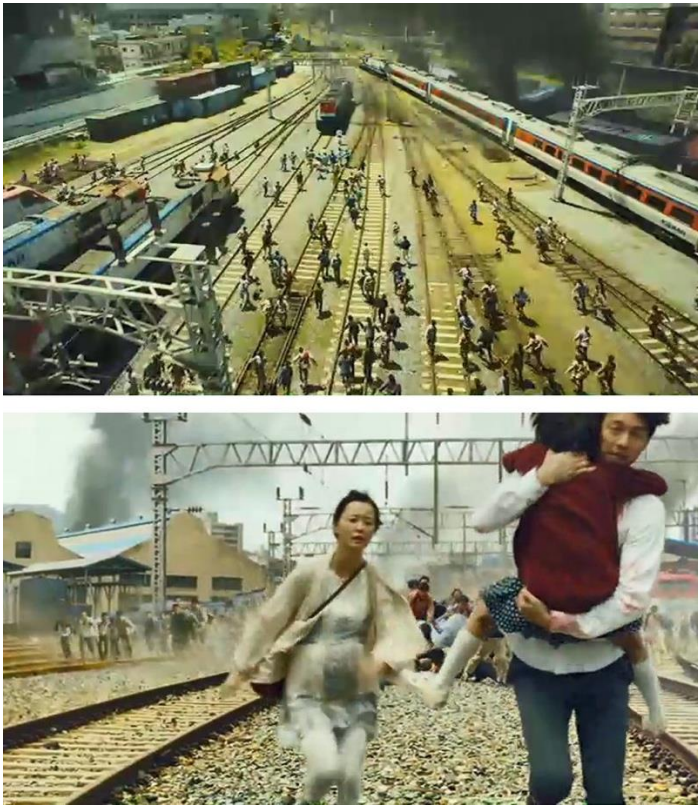


Figure 2. Zombie pursuit in *Train to Busan*. Top: Aerial view; Bottom: low angle reverse shot.

A similar ambivalence is produced in the five low angle frontal segments, which twice interact with the aerial shots in shot-reverse shot sequence (as in Figure 2). The lower camera placement narrows the visual distance between pursued and pursuers, thus increasing viewer anxiety, but these characters are also the three in whom most empathy has been invested by this stage of the film. Affective anxiety is also increased in two other ways. First, by the music on the soundtrack, which alludes melodically and instrumentally to Ennio Morricone's unsettling "Ecstasy of Gold"; second, by the recuperation of the metaphor THE NATION IS A FAMILY, in that the three characters appear visually as a family and an imaged, but unlikely, romantic closure might choose that option.

The image of a blended family changes the idea of what constitutes a nation, since, in contrast to the undifferentiated horde of zombies, such an imagined family would have two children each with a blood relationship with one different parent and no blood relationship with each other. In other words, the nation is multiple not homogenous. Of course this does not happen, as once they safely board the engine they encounter Yong-Seok in the process of zombification, and in the inevitable struggle Seok-U manages to push him from the engine but is bitten in the process. Seok-U's ending is the only exploration of zombification offered in any of these films. Having said his farewells, and entrusted Su-An to Seong-Gyeong, he walks to the back of the engine in order to throw himself off before he transforms. Standing there, he returns to the happiest moment in his human life and remembers Su-An at the time of her birth, and particularly sharp is a memory of holding her tiny foot between his thumb and forefinger (see Figure 3). The

scene defines the elements of cognition and subjectivity a person loses when he or she turns into a zombie: consciousness, self-awareness, memory, perception, intentionality, emotion, empathy and, as exemplified by the vivid memory of Su-An's foot, perceptual qualia, that is, specific individual instances of subjective, conscious experience, or "the ways that things look, seem, and appear to conscious observers" (McLaughlin: 856). Earlier in the film memory loss is foreshadowed when Seok-U realises that zombies do not remember how a sliding door operates, but his final human moments present a subtler and more comprehensive account of what it means to be human. His fall from the engine as zombification strikes is expressed only as a shadow, as reproduced in *Seoul Station*, but here more overtly as a shadow of his former self, symbolising his transition from the humanity he has discovered in this journey to the non-human state of the zombie. Positively, Su-An and Seong-Gyeong have been saved by his efforts. After they have arrived at the perimeter of Busan, the two escape being shot as they approach a military barricade because the soldiers hear Su-An singing the song she had learned to sing for her father, an action which defines her as human, but which also affirms that humanity must be intersubjective.



Figure 3: Memory of qualia in *Train to Busan*

Zombie Apocalypse and the Protagonist's Redemption-script

Character development is apt to occur according to familiar scripts. In the everyday world the train journey from Seoul to Busan, travelling on the KTX, takes less than three hours. In the film the journey is interrupted, first by the unsuccessful attempt to find security at Daejeon Station and later when the line is blocked at East Daegu Station, and while the extended time of the journey is not necessary for Seok-U to gain self-knowledge and moral redemption it does serve that process practically and thematically. Seok-U enacts a form of a *redemption-script*, which is based on a narrative assumption that individuals are both socially constituted and have agency, so that an individual's subjectivity evolves out of a dialogue between social constitution and agency. To surrender one's agency, as Seok-U is shown to have done in his employment as a fund manager, is to become something not very different from a zombie, whereas a *redemption-script* assumes that a character has the agency to exchange the narrative he or she is living for a better life (Colvin: 221, citing Maruna). The *redemption-script* here includes five steps: evidence that the character is living a reprehensible life; the character's expression of pro-self

beliefs; behavioural reactions of others; a confrontation which prompts self-examination; and consequent changes in attitude and behaviour. In developing this *redemption*-script as a core modifier of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor and in particular as the pathway from pro-self to prosocial attitudes, *Train to Busan* extends the tendency in South Korean cinema for zombies to be employed as secondary to a main story about human relationships, as is again evident in the genre mash-up *Rampant*, which mixes a *sageuk* “palace intrigue” story with a zombie blockbuster and throws in elements of humour and contemporary satire along the way. *Rampant* is almost a collage of zombie film motifs — resources hoarded by the wealthy and powerful, who cause the zombie plague; towns where buildings are broken and deserted, and streets strewn with bodies and rubbish; self-sacrificial heroes — but the strongest thematic element is the *redemption*-script which frames the career of the protagonist, Prince Ganglim. Having lived as a political hostage in Qing (China) for ten years, Ganglim returns to Joseon at the behest of his brother, the Crown Prince, who is embroiled in a coup against his incompetent and paranoid father and wants Ganglim to take the Crown Princess out of the country to safety. Ganglim has no interest in politics or power, but wants to return as soon as possible to his hedonistic, womanising life in Beijing. The power struggle for the throne becomes intertwined with a zombie epidemic when sociopathic War Minister Kim Ja-Jun leads a raid on the Dutch merchant ship which is selling guns but also has a crew member who has become a zombie and who bites one of Kim’s soldiers. Kim opportunistically sends the soldier home and plans to take advantage of the ensuing chaos to seize power and declare himself king. As in many zombie films, pro-self behaviour of government institutions proves complicit in the outbreak of the zombie infection, and the uncontrollable hunger of the zombies parallels the hunger for power which corrupts those institutions. This is the context in which Ganglim enacts the same *redemption*-script developed in *Train to Busan* and through overcoming both the machinations of Kim and the zombie scourge matures from an idle hedonist into a leader who actualises the metaphor THE NATION IS A FAMILY in his willingness to hear the cries of the people and to strive to lessen human suffering and improve social well-being.

Conclusion

As Daniel W. Drezner observes, zombie stories end in one of two ways: “the elimination/subjugation of all zombies, or the eradication of humanity from the face of the earth” (2011: 9). These are broadly the options available to South Korean cinema: “Ambulance,” *Seoul Station* and *Train to Busan* indicate the second, tragic option, while *Rampant* is a triumphant heroic narrative. The late appearance of zombie films in South Korea has meant that the zombie has arrived with narrative forms, attributes and contexts that post-date, for example, Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2002): zombies now move fast and their drive to consume commonly reflects neo-liberal manifestations of contemporary capitalism and the potentially destructive effects of the quest by social and economic elites for power and short-term financial gain. Two components which seem to be special characteristics of this cinema, however, are the prominence of prosocial themes

and the *redemption*-script. Contrasts between prosocial and pro-self behaviour have been a feature of South Korean cinema and TV drama since around 1990, where they have been an aspect of social critique directed at the extreme concentrations of wealth in the hands of a few and corruption in the legal and political systems that sustains and profits from inequality and injustice. Elements of *Rampant* make obvious reference to the impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye in 2016 for a variety of acts of malfeasance. The reference is especially evident near the close of the film where a torch-light gathering of citizens to celebrate the defeat of the zombies and a change of regime is a visual quotation of the candle-light protests which were instrumental in the downfall of Park. Prosocial behaviour and the *redemption*-script come together at this point.

The genre-blending of *Rampant* gestures toward a sub-genre of zombie films which is comedic. This genre appeared sporadically in the 1980s and has been established in Western cinema since *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). As Rodger A. Payne explains, comedic zombie stories disrupt the genre “by creating characters, situations, and narratives that are not altogether centered on the apocalyptic nature of the situation” (220). He further argues that satire and black comedy can effectively critique the self-centredness of elite characters and provide subversive perspectives (213). A zombie comedy, *The Odd Family: Zombie on Sale*, was released in 2019, and evoked the familiar satirical themes of a corrupt pharmaceutical company behind the advent of the first zombie and the attempt to exploit the situation financially, but is a genre mishmash rather than a subversion of a tradition as achieved in its main precursors, the American films *Shaun of the Dead*, *Zombieland* (2009) and *Warm Bodies* (2013). A successful zombie comedy needs both a production team and an audience well-versed in a zombie tradition in order to bring about the interplay of familiarity and difference that will have a comic effect and at this time the small number of zombie films made in South Korea does not constitute a sufficient mass.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Names follow the normal Korean order, that is, family name followed by given name. Revised Romanisation has been used throughout.

ⁱⁱ I follow the normal practice of identifying conceptual metaphors by placing them in small capitals.