

EuiJin Hur

DIASPORA AS HORROR IN *PENINSULA*: A PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

This article examines horror in Peninsula (2020) through the Lacanian concept of extimacy. Rather than treating zombies as external monsters, it argues that horror arises through the transformation of familiar spaces, names, and social relations. Using a theory-led close reading with visual and narrative analysis, the article focuses on displacement, symbolic naming, and the uncanny reconfiguration of Korean urban space. "Diaspora" is employed in a limited analytical sense to describe the film's representation of displacement, failed return, and symbolic exclusion. It argues that horror emerges from the extimate relation between home and exile, while zombies and displaced figures function as symptomatic images of exclusion, survival, and the persistence of capitalist logics after social collapse.

KEYWORDS: horror cinema, extimacy, diaspora, zombie, Lacanian film theory

Diaspora kot grozljivka v filmu *Peninsula*: psihoanalitična perspektiva

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek obravnava grozo v filmu Peninsula (2020) skozi Lacanov pojem ekstimnosti. Namesto da bi zombije obravnaval zgolj kot zunanje pošasti, pokaže, da groza nastaja s preoblikovanjem znanih prostorov, imen in družbenih razmerij. Raziskava temelji na teoretsko usmerjenem natančnem branju ter vizualni in narativni analizi izbranih prizorov. Osredotoča se na premestitev, simbolno poimenovanje in nelagodno preoblikovanje korejskega urbanega prostora. Pojem diaspore je uporabljen v omejenem analitičnem smislu za opis filmske reprezentacije premestitve, neuspele vrnitve in simbolne izključenosti. Prispevek trdi, da groza izhaja iz ekstimnega razmerja med domom in izgnanstvom, medtem ko zombiji in razseljeni subjekti delujejo kot

simptomatične podobe izključenosti, preživetja in vztrajanja kapitalističnih logik po družbenem razpadu.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: kinematografija groz, ekstimnost, diasporičnost, zombi, lacanovska filmska teorija

1 Introduction

Horror is often understood as a genre that operates through the intrusion of an outsider. More precisely, a familiar space, one's territory, or an everyday environment is abruptly transformed into something unfamiliar by the arrival of an external presence. All the spatial coordinates and the location are still the same. However, the appearance of an unfamiliar figure radically alters the way the space is experienced, turning the familiar into the strange. In this perspective, horror should not be understood only as an emotion that originates within the individual. Namely, it can also function as a structural affect produced by a reorganisation of coordinates triggered by an external intrusion. Expressed more concretely, periods of social transformation also entail transformations of the subject itself. Approaching horror as an affect operating on the social or structural level is thus in harmony with the way horror can be conceptualised within Lacanian psychoanalysis.

At the same time, this article regards the experience of displacement and failed return in *Peninsula* (2020) as closely connected to the film's production of horror. Here, "diaspora" is not used as a comprehensive sociological category to explain any form of migration, exile, or transnational identity. The term is instead used in a limited analytical sense to describe the film's representation of subjects expelled from a symbolic home, deprived of stable belonging, and forced to return to a space no longer recognisable as home. In this sense, the article is concerned less with diaspora as a stable collective identity than with the experience of displacement, exclusion and failed return conveyed in the film. Diasporic images in the film are hence not observed as empirical portrayals of diaspora in general, but as cinematic figures via which these conditions are visualised and narratively articulated. The displacement in focus also operates on what may be called a parallax level. What changes in *Peninsula* is not just the physical location of the characters, but the position from which Korea is perceived and named. The same geographical space appears differently when viewed from within the peninsula, from the position of exile, or in the gaze of foreign media. In this context, the film's horror depends on a parallax shift: a change in the observer's position that transforms the meaning of what is seen. Žižek's account of parallax is useful here since he argues a parallax shift is not

merely a subjective change of viewpoint, and is instead a shift that affects the way reality itself is structured for the subject (Žižek 2006: 258).

The psychoanalytic concept of extimacy can help make parallax displacement easier to comprehend. Extimacy describes the paradoxical relation in which what appears external is already located at the intimate centre of the subject or symbolic order (Lacan 2013: 76). In *Peninsula*, horror arises not simply because a foreign or unknown object intrudes into a familiar space. On the contrary, horror emerges when what was assumed to be familiar, such as Korea, home, family, urban space, and national belonging, returns in an estranged form. The film therefore produces horror through the collapse of the stable distinctions between inside and outside, home and exile, familiarity and threat.

Peninsula is a stand-alone sequel to *Train to Busan* (2016). A stand-alone sequel refers to a film that shares the same fictional universe as its predecessor yet is narratively independent of it. *Peninsula* is set 4 years after the zombie outbreak depicted in *Train to Busan*. The film was directed by Yeon Sang-ho, who also directed *Train to Busan* as well as the Netflix series *Hellbound* (2021), and attracted approximately 3.8 million viewers in South Korea. The narrative takes place on the Korean Peninsula after the zombie virus has spread to Busan – the last safe zone left in the earlier film – turning the entire region into ruins. What the film accentuates is the transformation of once familiar Korean urban landscapes into devastated spaces, creating an uncanny visual experience. In conventional apocalyptic narratives, the end of the world often implies the possibility of renewal or a new beginning. *Peninsula*, however, departs from this narrative logic. Instead of simply suggesting hope after catastrophe, it presents the post-zombie Korean Peninsula as a space in which the familiar has become fundamentally strange.

From this view, the presented study examines the way visual horror is articulated in *Peninsula* through a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. More specifically, it analyses how the film transforms Korea from a familiar national and urban space into an uncanny site of displacement, exclusion, and failed return. The article proceeds as follows. First, the method, scope and terminology of the study are outlined. Second, the argument presented in the article is situated within Lacanian film theory and debates on spectatorship, ideology, and the cinematic apparatus. Third, analysis is provided of three visual and narrative mechanisms via which *Peninsula* produces horror: expulsion and displacement, the loss or transformation of names, and the uncanny reconfiguration of familiar spaces. Rather than offering a comprehensive analysis of the film's entire narrative, in focus in the article is how *Peninsula* constructs Korea itself as the spatial ground of horror.

2 Method and Scope

The research employs a close, theory-led reading of *Peninsula*. The film is selected as a case study because it combines zombie horror, post-apocalyptic spectacle, and the motif of return to a devastated homeland. It is also significant as a stand-alone sequel to *Train to Busan* since it shifts the focus from immediate survival during the outbreak of zombies to the aftermath of national collapse, refugee status, and the return to a ruined Korean Peninsula. Accordingly, *Peninsula* provides a useful case for examining how horror cinema can stage the transformation of a familiar national space into a strange and politically charged landscape.

The analysis concentrates on selected scenes and still images in which displacement, symbolic naming and spatial estrangement are made most apparent because these are the three central mechanisms *Peninsula* uses to produce horror. The selected images are not treated as isolated illustrations, but as visual evidence connected to the narrative structure, mise-en-scène, and the spectator's recognition of familiar Korean spaces. The article therefore subjects the film to a combination of close textual analysis and visual analysis. In that manner, the way the film organises relations between image and discourse, spatial familiarity and estrangement, and narrative events and symbolic transformation is examined.

The study does not claim to provide a general theory of diaspora, zombie cinema, or capitalism. Its scope is more limited. The way *Peninsula* represents displacement, failed return, and symbolic exclusion through a Lacanian framework is the centre of attention, with the primary concept used being extimacy. The latter describes the structural relation between inside and outside, home and exile, familiarity and threat. The uncanny is treated as a secondary concept that names the affective experience produced by this structure: the moment when what is familiar appears as strange. Concepts such as interpellation, symbolic naming, and capitalist survival logic are used only where they clarify particular scenes in the film.

To avoid terminological ambiguity, in this article "film" refers to the specific textual object of analysis – *Peninsula* – and "cinema" to the broader medium, apparatus, and institutional form by which images, spectatorship and ideology are organised. "Horror cinema" refers to the genre and its broader conventions, whereas "horror film" relates to a particular work. "Representation" designates the way the film constructs social and symbolic relations through images, narrative, naming, and spatial organisation. Finally, "psychoanalysis" does not refer to the psychological diagnosis of characters, and instead to a Lacanian theoretical framework for analysing desire, the Real, the symbolic order, extimacy, and the gaze.

3 Lacanian Film Theory, Extimacy, and the Uncanny

The Lacanian framework of this article operates in relation to film theory more than a general psychological interpretation of characters. Lacanian film theory is associated with earlier debates on the cinematic apparatus, spectatorship, identification, ideology, and the gaze. In the 1960s and 1970s, film theory drew on psychoanalysis and structuralism to determine how cinema positions the spectator and the manner by which images produce effects of identification and meaning. Metz's work on film semiotics and identification, Baudry's account of the ideological effects of the cinematic apparatus, and Mulvey's analysis of visual pleasure and the gaze are central to this history (Metz 1974; Baudry 1974–1975; Mulvey 1999). These works show how cinema organises meaning, identification and spectatorship using visual and ideological structures. Later, Joan Copjec's intervention was important for rethinking Lacanian film theory vis-à-vis approaches that reduced psychoanalysis to a simple theory of ideological misrecognition (Copjec 1994). In this context, Althusser's theory of ideological interpellation also became important for film theory, especially in discussions of the way cinema positions the spectator as a subject (Althusser 1971; Baudry 1974–1975).

This article draws on the tradition described above in a narrow way. While no attempt is made to reconstruct the entire history of Lacanian film theory, this tradition helps to clarify how *Peninsula* positions the spectator before images of a familiar space that has turned strange. The point is not that the film reveals the hidden psychological truth of the characters, but that the images organise a relation between spectatorship, symbolic identity, and the Real. In this sense, the concepts of extimacy and the uncanny are used to analyse the film's production of horror at the level of visual and symbolic organisation.

In psychoanalysis, notably the work of Jacques Lacan, the unconscious is not primarily related to the inner core or essence of the individual. On the contrary, Lacan famously defined the unconscious as "structured like a language" (Lacan 2006: 223). This formulation shifts the unconscious away from the domain of the personal or private and locates it within a socially structured order. For Lacan, the unconscious is not the nucleus of individual singularity and is instead articulated and organised through external conditions. Lacan argues the unconscious must therefore be understood via a topological model such as the Möbius strip whose inside and outside are found on the same surface (Kim 2010: 200). He namely does not treat the unconscious as a fundamental substance, but approaches it with a formal and topological logic that unsettles the simple opposition between interior and exterior.

This point is crucial for understanding extimacy. As a combination of exteriority and intimacy, the word denotes the idea that what appears most intimate within the subject is, on a fundamental level, externalised. That is, extimacy indicates that what the subject experiences as most familiar is structured and determined by external conditions. The interior is not self-contained; it is constituted through an outside that is already internal to it. Individual inner reality is hence shaped by social and symbolic structures. Ideology operates precisely by making this process appear natural, as if the subject's most intimate experiences belonged purely to the individual rather than the symbolic order in which the subject has been formed.

It is important to distinguish extimacy from the uncanny. In this article, extimacy refers to a structural relation: what appears to be outside the subject or symbolic order is already located at its most intimate point. The uncanny, in comparison, refers to the affective experience produced when this structure becomes perceptible. Following Freud, the uncanny names the return of what is familiar in an estranged form. Extimacy thus describes the structure of inside and outside, while the uncanny describes the spectator's affective experience of that structure. In *Peninsula*, Korea becomes uncanny not due to it being entirely unknown, but because it is still recognisable as Korea while no longer functioning as home, nation or a symbolic ground.

In this dimension, horror can be understood as an affect that emerges when the stability of symbolic coordinates is disrupted. What once appeared to be self-evident knowledge is transformed into an unfamiliar and unstable field. Horror does not necessarily arise from absolute otherness. It may develop when the familiar returns as something strange, when what should have remained stable becomes unstable, or when the subject encounters the dependence of its inner world on an external symbolic order. This explains why horror can have a political dimension: it exposes the fragility of the structures which organise identity, belonging, and social meaning.

The relationship between defamiliarisation and cinema should be clarified. Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* was mainly developed in relation to theatre, not as a general theory of cinema. Benjamin later discussed Brechtian techniques in the context of modern media, political art, and the transformation of perception. Therefore, in this article Brechtian defamiliarisation is not treated as a universal principle of cinema and is instead used in a limited sense to describe how certain moments in *Peninsula* interrupt familiar images of Korea and make them strange.

Seen in this way, the horror in *Peninsula* does not simply depend on immersion or shock. Horror also depends on moments in which the spectator recognises a familiar space and simultaneously perceives that this space no longer belongs to the symbolic order that once made it familiar. The mentioned process is connected to montage, framing and the placement of images in the sequences in the

film. It is argued that while cinema as such is not Brechtian, *Peninsula* employs certain techniques of estrangement to create an uncanny relation between the spectator and the image.

In this condition, horror can be understood as the spectator's encounter with the instability of the image, as in the recognition that what appeared to be a coherent and familiar world is sustained by symbolic frames that can collapse. What the spectator confronts is not a hidden substance behind the screen, but the absence of such substance and the dependence of meaning on fragile symbolic and visual structures. The Lacanian significance of this encounter lies in the fact that the Real does not appear as a positive object so much as a rupture within the symbolic field. The horror in *Peninsula* stems from this rupture: the familiar space of Korea remains visible, yet the symbolic order that made it recognisable as home has collapsed.

4 Displacement, Naming, and the Uncanny Image of Korea in *Peninsula*

Even though the film shares the zombie-apocalypse setting and fictional universe of *Train to Busan*, it does not continue the earlier film's narrative and instead functions as a stand-alone sequel. Set 4 years after the outbreak of zombies depicted in *Train to Busan*, *Peninsula* portrays a devastated Korea abandoned by most of its population. Having fled to neighbouring countries as refugees, Korean survivors leave behind a peninsula transformed into a lawless wasteland inhabited by zombies and human violence. Against this bleak backdrop, the narrative centres on Jung-seok, a former soldier, Min-jung, a survivor who in the danger zone is raising two children, Joon, Yu-jin, and an elderly man, Kim, who protects Min-jung and her family. Through these figures, the film presents a story of survival within a ruined Korean landscape.

The film's narrative may be summarised as follows. After the collapse of the South Korean government due to the zombie outbreak, most Koreans must flee to neighbouring countries as refugees. Suddenly stripped of national belonging, these displaced Koreans suffer poverty and systemic discrimination, with Jung-seok being no exception. One day, he is summoned by a Triad organisation together with his brother-in-law, Chul-min, and two other Koreans. The group is offered a mission to retrieve trucks loaded with cash and valuables left behind in Korea. Since the country's collapse, all maritime and aerial routes into/out of the peninsula have been strictly controlled by the international community. There have nevertheless been occasions when people successfully entered the restricted zone and recovered ownerless assets, before again escaping. Labelled as people "from the zombie country" and exhausted by ongoing poverty and

discrimination, Jung-seok agrees to return to the ruined peninsula. The group plans to locate the lost truck and escape via the port of Incheon. The film concerns the events they encounter while on this mission.

On a structural level, *Peninsula* produces horror with three interrelated operations: first, displacement and failed return; second, the loss or transformation of names and symbolic identity; and third, the uncanny reconfiguration of familiar spaces. These three operations should not be understood as separate theoretical systems. Instead, they describe different levels of the same cinematic process: displacement names the narrative condition, symbolic naming describes the discursive mechanism, and the uncanny names the affective experience images in the film produce.

The first operation concerns displacement and failed return. In the film, the same geographical space appears differently subject to whether it is viewed from within the peninsula, from a position of exile, or via the gaze of foreign media. This shift can be understood in terms of parallax: not as an additional theoretical system, but as a way of naming the visual and positional change that makes the same object appears otherwise. As Žižek argues, parallax involves the shifting of perspective according to which an object appears differently, even though there is no direct change in the object itself (Žižek 2006: 4). Applied to *Peninsula*, this means that what was previously perceived to be familiar or self-evident is reconfigured through displacement and comes to appear fundamentally different. The transformation is observed in the following images.

Figure 1: Spatial transformation according to shifts in the observer's internal and external position (a–d) (Yeon Sang-ho 2020).





- (a) A city engulfed in flames amid a zombie outbreak.
 (b) An urban landscape perceived to be in ruins.
 (c) Korea as reported by media in the United States.
 (d) Unfamiliar through the gaze of an external observer.

Figure 1(a–d) shows how *Peninsula* reconfigures the familiar image of South Korea according to the position of the observer. Figure 1(a), which appears at the start of the film, depicts a distant view of a city as the zombie outbreak intensifies and spreads nationwide. When isolated as a single image, the scene is ambiguous. Apart from the smoke rising from the city, it is difficult to recognise immediately that the urban space is under attack by zombies. What destabilises the familiar image of the Korean city is not the city itself so much as the framing in which it is viewed. This shot is captured from the back seat of a fast-moving car as Jung-seok and his sister's family flee in an emergency. The perspective is thus defined by retreat rather than approach. The film's use of sound, distant explosions, indistinct impacts, and hurried breathing further signals that this is no longer the city as previously known. Yet the decisive factor that renders the city precarious lies in the movement away from it: the contrast between the city and the surrounding green forest, combined with unstable frames caused by the car's speed, transforms what otherwise might be an ordinary cityscape into an image of loss.

While Figure 1(a) demonstrates how a shift in viewpoint produced by motion can transform the same space into something different, Figure 1(b) shows how sequential placement can alter an image's meaning despite its visual content remaining similar. Compared to Figure 1(a), Figure 1(b) presents the city from a closer distance and, on the surface, appears to depict a familiar South Korean metropolitan landscape. However, by the time this image appears, the audience no longer regards the city as ordinary. This effect is produced less by the image

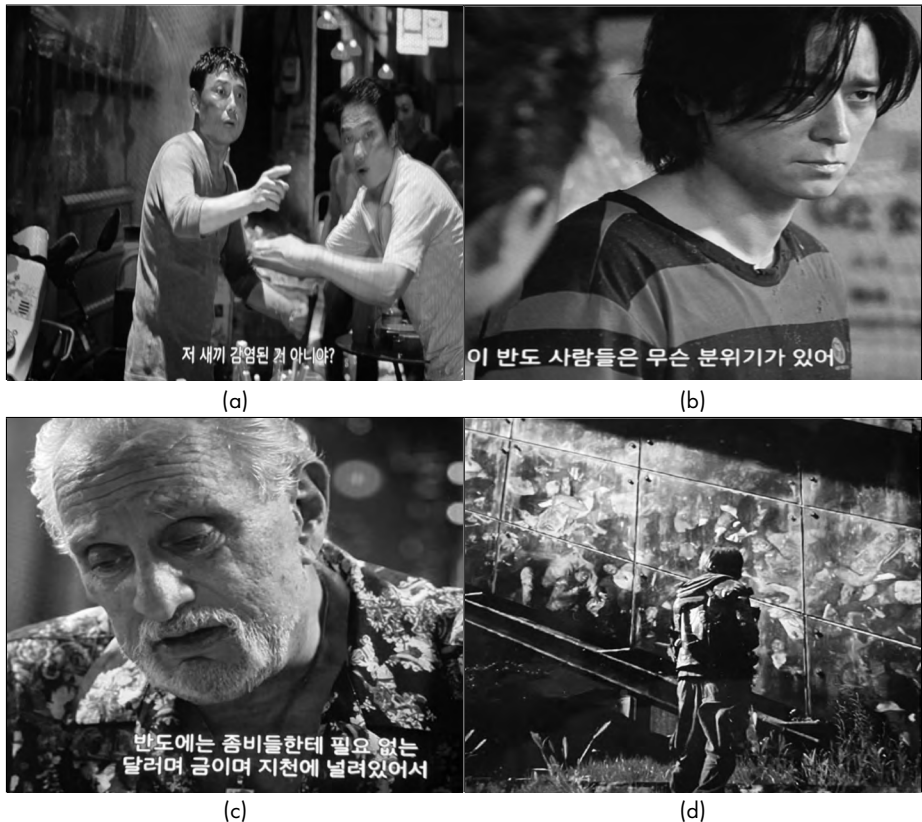
itself than by its position in the film's sequence. Earlier scenes of zombie attacks have already established the interpretive frame by which the subsequent city image is viewed, such that what might otherwise register as conventional is signified as ruined and dangerous.

A further shift comes with Figure 1(c–d), which depicts the outbreak as reported by American news media. Here, Korea is framed through an external gaze within the film, borrowing the authority of the diegetic world itself to declare that Korea is no longer Korea. The Korean landscape is mediated through foreign observers who speak English and appear with English subtitles, rendering the familiar space strange using linguistic and institutional distance. The reports state that South Korea collapsed on a single day after the outbreak, mention claims that the virus originated from a pharmaceutical company, and assert that North Korea is the safest place on the peninsula. In this sense, Figure 1(c–d) functions symptomatically. Rather than simply introducing new information, these scenes reinforce the collapse already established in Figure 1(a–b) by re-staging it as an external and quasi-official declaration. The film namely supplements the disappearance of Korea by placing it in the mouth of American media, publicly announcing that the nation state has vanished from the peninsula.

The early production of horror in the film, as well as the establishment of its narrative background, relies on this transformation of what existed before. Through shifts in character viewpoint as well as diegetic devices that function as an apparently objective world, familiar spaces and events are reconstituted as no longer fundamentally the same. This operation exposes a key aspect of the film's visual logic: a phenomenon is not replaced by a wholly different object; instead, it appears as other while remaining recognisably what it was previously. The horror of the image emerges from this simultaneous continuity and estrangement.

Figure 1 demonstrates how the familiar is made strange by changes in gaze and symbolic framing, whereas Figure 2 illustrates a different process: the loss of a name or the deprivation of symbolic articulation. Here, the issue is not simple erasure but transformation. The main concept at stake is interpellation. In Althusser's sense, interpellation is the process by which ideology addresses individuals and constitutes them as subjects. In *Peninsula*, naming functions as such an ideological and symbolic operation: the displaced Koreans are no longer called "Koreans", but "Peninsula people" or people from the "zombie country". The change in name thus signals a change in symbolic position. In Lacanian terms, this imposed naming also indicates the subject's dependence on the Other because the subject is positioned by a signifier it does not choose.

Figure 2: The loss of naming and the imposition of appellation (a-d) (Yeon Sang-ho 2020).



- (a) The loss of a name.
- (b) The common noun "peninsula".
- (c) The substructure of the symbolic system.
- (d) Imposed names.

Figure 2 shows how the collapse of a symbolic structure leads the subject to find what once was familiar to be radically strange, as if it were discovered in a place that had not been anticipated. Stated differently, a change in naming produces a transformation that is not merely a semantic shift (Žižek 37–36 :2025). Figure 2(a) depicts Korean refugees living in poverty and humiliation in a foreign land. Having escaped Korea, they are no longer recognised as "Koreans" and are instead treated as refugees from a failed state. Previously identified and interpellated as nationals, they are now reduced to embodiments of the nation's contradictions and viewed as

sources of disorder or infection. This process symbolically transforms them into surplus, a transformation linked imaginatively and symbolically to the zombie virus itself. As Figure 2(a) suggests, even minimal expressions of anger/agitation become grounds for suspicion since refugees are accused of being infected and turned into objects of ridicule, fear and contempt.

The described mechanism is condensed in the name "Peninsula people". Figure 2(b) depicts a scene when a member of the Triad approaches Jung-seok and calls him using this term. The collapsed state is no longer "Korea" but reduced to "the Peninsula". The symbolic proper name is erased and replaced with a common noun. Although the referent remains unchanged, this substitution produces estrangement via a shift in symbolic positioning. The transition from "Korea" or "Koreans" to "the Peninsula" and "Peninsula people" generates a gap, despite only the act of symbolic naming having been altered. What becomes evident here is that horror does not necessarily arise from what is entirely unknown, but from the transformation of what previously was assumed to be known through a change in naming.

Such symbolic estrangement recalls the logic in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, in which Gregor Samsa remains the same being on one level while his symbolic and social position changes radically following his transformation. The comparison is not meant to make Kafka a central framework of the article, and instead to clarify the logic of symbolic displacement: what changes is not only the body or the place, but the position from which the subject is recognised and named.

In other words, symbolic transformation does not stem solely from a change in substance itself. Rearrangement on the symbolic level instead produces a transformation in reality (Žižek 2014: 303). What is revealed when interpellation renders the subject unfamiliar is not a hidden essence, but the absence located at the place of the supposed cause (Lacan 2013: 55). This logic becomes clearer in the sequence shown in Figure 2(c–d), which begins with the Triad ordering Jung-seok and his companions to enter the peninsula to retrieve the trucks and continues until they arrive at Incheon. Figure 2(c) reveals that once Korea has disappeared as a stable symbolic name, a remainder surfaces: abandoned gold and US dollars. In psychoanalytic terms, this remainder can be seen as a point at which the subject is forced to confront the truth of the symbolic order, not as a positive substance, but as a gap or rupture (Lacan 2013: 68). Linked to the subject's split, this confrontation also recalls the logic by which the object of desire is found to be absent at the place of its cause (Lacan 1998a: 103). Within this framework, the Triad's demand exposes what appears after the symbolic veil has been lifted: behind the symbolic order of Korea is not an intact national substance, and instead the material underside of exchange, survival, and capitalist value.

The Triad has no interest in Korean currency. It desires valuables and dollars that circulate globally. The scene thus exposes Korea's implication within a dollar-centred market system. With the same logic, "Peninsula people" are commodified by functional necessity. They are named as such because they are familiar with the peninsula's physical terrain and are required for the truck retrieval. The recruitment itself is not symbolic in any dignified sense but practical. The team is assembled to maximise efficiency with minimal personnel: Jung-seok, a former soldier experienced in combat; Chul-min, a communications technician capable of maintaining satellite contact within the disconnected peninsula; a former taxi driver able to navigate routes; and a mechanic capable of recovering and re-starting vehicles. Whether they wish it or not, they are interpellated under names they did not choose, according to the Other's practical calculus.

Figure 2(d) stages the moment when subjects forcibly constituted by the naming confront the rupture between symbolic identity and the Real. Having crossed into the peninsula and entered Seoul via Incheon, Jung-seok and his companions encounter a glass-enclosed pedestrian overpass near Guro Digital Complex Station. As moonlight illuminates the corridor, it is revealed to be densely packed with zombies. What they confront is the gap between the symbolic system and the Real, concretised by bodies pushed into the place of what the social order cannot assimilate. Together, Figure 2(a–b) and Figure 2(c–d) visualise the Real following the collapse of the symbolic order: the abstract substitution of a proper name by a common noun is first presented, then made concrete in economic surplus, and finally rendered as a recognisable image of dissonance in a Seoul subway site filled with zombies.

In summary, the fear experienced by both the retrieval team and the spectators in Figure 2(d) may be understood as an image of Seoul projected as its possible future and recalled as its ruined past (Kim 2000: 48–49). Zombies materialise the gap between Korea as it once functioned within a symbolic and economic order and the surplus that is left after Korea has 'disappeared' as a stable symbolic name. What confronts those who return to the peninsula is not a homeland to be restored, but an allegorical image that reveals the underside of the social relations that previously sustained it (Benjamin 2002: 40). This also marks a vital difference from *Train to Busan*. In the earlier film, zombies function primarily as direct threats and obstacles. In *Peninsula*, by contrast, zombies increasingly operate as allegorical images embedded in the landscape, while antagonism shifts toward human violence and the social relations that emerge after the symbolic collapse.

The third mode of operation extends the loss of names through the uncanny familiarity of the space. The film's mechanism of horror lies in images that spectators

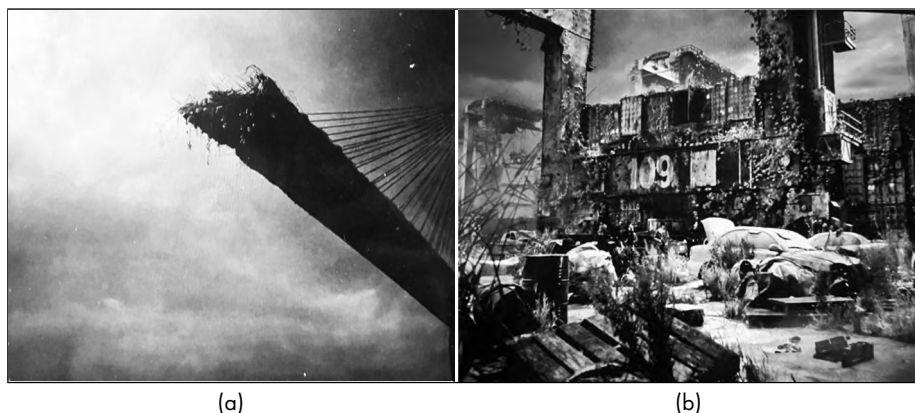
believe they already know, presented as something else. To accomplish this effect, *Peninsula* relies heavily on the audience's memory. Rather than depicting pre-outbreak Korea with archival footage or flashbacks, the film offers indirect cues through passing dialogue and remnants of everyday signage, prompting viewers to imagine Korea as it existed prior to it becoming "the Peninsula".

Figure 3: The slogan "A healthy nation without worries about the future" on display at Yeongdeungpo Station in the film (Yeon Sang-ho 2020).



Figure 3 shows insurance slogans that are glimpsed while passing through Yeongdeungpo Station, such as "A healthy nation without worries about the future" and "A great support for those who prepare for the future", while a character remarks that "everything has turned into ruins in just four years". Horror thus emerges not just from what is shown, but from the distortion of an image of Korea already lodged in the audience's knowledge. In itself, the slogan is not frightening. It becomes uncanny because it persists in a ruined space, detached from the social order that earlier had given it meaning.

Figure 4: Aspects of the peninsula's landscape rendered unfamiliar and threatening (a–b) (Yeon Sang-ho 2020).



(a)

(b)

- (a) The broken Incheon Bridge.
- (b) An unfamiliar landscape of the peninsula.

This strategy appears in both panoramic landscapes and condensed form via the large shopping mall occupied by Unit 631.

Figure 5: A large shopping mall as the peninsula's principal stage (a–d) (Yeon Sang-ho 2020).



- (a) The fortified shopping mall.
- (b) Gladiatorial combat and gambling.
- (c) A gladiatorial tournament.
- (d) Domesticated zombies.

As Figure 4(a–b) indicates, the film reconstructs familiar infrastructures as radically strange: the severed Incheon Bridge and the post-apocalyptic routes between Incheon and Seoul persist throughout the film. These landscapes establish atmosphere by unsettling perception, albeit the decisive space emerges in the shopping mall fortified by Unit 631.

Unit 631 was originally tasked with rescuing civilians in early stages of the outbreak. After the government collapses, the unit fortifies a large shopping mall, where supplies remain relatively abundant, and waits to be rescued. Yet, when no signal arrives, the unit descends into despair and self-abandonment. The soldiers refer to civilians as “wild dogs” and force them to play “hide-and-seek”, a survival game set in the mall lobby in which captured zombies and human survivors are released together. The soldiers and remaining survivors gamble on the outcomes using necessities and survival goods.

Figure 5(a–d) shows how the chain shopping mall, an important symbol of South Korean consumer capitalism, is transformed into a militarised fortress and a gladiatorial arena. The film does not present what the shopping mall used to be. Instead, it offers indirect cues, such as the triangular roof typical of Korean chain malls or franchises like “Dunkin’ Donuts”, to indicate that the space was at one time ordinary and familiar. This matters because, while zombies remain objects of fear, the film’s more fundamental horror lies in the modes of survival adopted by those who remain, and in the descent from “Korean” to “Peninsula person”. The gap that is revealed is not simply a fall from civilisation into barbarism; it suggests that the boundary between civilisation and barbarism is less stable than first appears (Lee 2002: 121).

This logic is elaborated through Figure 5(b–c). In Figure 5(b), the survival game proceeds as spectators gamble with allotted necessities. Participants include civilians originally rescued by Unit 631 and those who barely survived on their own. If they fail to prove their usefulness, for instance by searching for supplies outside, they become targets for the game. Those who cannot demonstrate their utility are reduced to what Agamben calls “bare life” in a figurative sense: they are included in the survival economy of the mall solely through their exposure to violence. The gambling game organises and discharges discontent within a militarised order, while the captured civilians are turned into expendable bodies. Figure 5(c) offers a more direct representation of this condition: As one of the “wild dogs”, Chul-min is captured and forced into the game. If the “wild dogs” survive for a limited time, Unit 631 throws them expired food, prompting a desperate struggle, after which they are confined until the next round begins. With these scenes, the film visualises an enclosed economy in which human life is valued exclusively according to utility, exposure and survival.

As the sequence culminates in Figure 5(d), the scene becomes highly symptomatic. Here, the film exploits the zombies’ sensitivity to sound and movement, manipulating them like instruments within the game. The distinction between zombies produced by the initial outbreak and those created during the hide-and-seek collapses. At this point, Žižek’s discussion of zombies becomes relevant. Approaching zombies

through the figure of the proletarian subject, Žižek conceptualises the capitalist subject as biologically alive yet already dead, a form of living death (Žižek 2014: 355). Drawing on Marx's account of capital as dead labour feeding on living labour and Lacan's concept of *jouissance* as a drive that circulates without fulfilment, Žižek characterises the capitalist subject as a "pure labour subject".

From this perspective, zombies are not only remnants of collapse. They can also be seen as symptomatic and allegorical figures via which the film visualises the reduction of life to mechanical reaction, survival, and circulation. Still, this does not mean that zombies directly represent capitalism as such. Instead, in the context of the shopping mall and the retrieval mission, they help make visible a survival logic whereby bodies are valued only insofar as they can be used, exchanged, manipulated or discarded.

The shopping mall's transformation to become a militarised fortress and gladiatorial arena therefore does not simply denote a fall from civilisation into barbarism. More precisely, it stages the persistence of certain logics associated with consumption, competition, spectacle and survival following social collapse. The mall remains organised around exchange, gambling, hierarchy, and the management of expendable bodies. In this dimension, *Peninsula* suggests the collapse of the state does not automatically produce a space outside capitalist social relations. Namely, when Korea collapses as a symbolic system, the film does not present a liberated world outside the social order. In fact, it stages what Lee describes as "artificial nature": a second nature produced by social and economic systems, but experienced as unavoidable or natural (Lee 2018: 110–112). In *Peninsula*, this artificial nature appears through the shopping mall's survival economy where exchange, utility, spectacle and violence organise social relations after the state's collapse. The film hence imagines a world in which fragments of those relations persist in brutalised and distorted forms.

Seen in this way, the shopping mall acquires paradoxical significance best understood through extimacy. The hide-and-seek reveals that the mall, although precarious, functions as the centre sustaining its internal economy. Without the game, the hierarchy would collapse. Zombies, functioning mechanically within this system, make this world possible. This extimate structure organises not only the mall but the film as a whole. Unit 631's exploitation of the "wild dogs" mirrors the transaction that initiates the narrative: the Hong Kong Triad's deal with the retrieval team replicates the relation between distant observers and expendable subjects. For the Triad, it does not matter who retrieves the truck, so long as the truck returns. Positioned at a distance, they observe the struggle. Jung-seok's group thus also occupies the position of "wild dogs" compelled into violence by an external calculus.

The mentioned repetition becomes explicit when Captain Seo, the commander of Unit 631, seizes the truck and boards the Triad's ship. Dreaming of a new beginning, Captain Seo believes that he alone has succeeded in escaping the peninsula. However, once his function has been fulfilled, he is immediately discarded by the Triad, revealing that he, too, was nothing more than an expendable body within the same logic. Facing imminent death, Seo smashes the ship's rear gate and allows zombies to flood the vessel, thereby repeating the collapse of the shopping mall and completing the film's allegorical circuit.

Figure 6: Hwang Jun in the closing sequence delivering her final line of dialogue (Yeon Sang-ho 2020).



The film concludes with Jung-seok and Min-jung's family boarding a UN helicopter. Although the ending initially appears to promise rescue, this idea is upturned in the final line delivered by Hwang Jun (Figure 6). When a UN soldier reassures her that a "new world" lies ahead, she replies, "The world I lived in wasn't so bad". Instead of offering a simple resolution, this line condenses the film's irony by suggesting that the outside may not be fundamentally different from the inside. Altogether, the analysis shows that *Peninsula* advances in a dual structure: the shopping mall stages extimacy on the level of space, while the retrieval mission functions as the mechanism which compels entry into the peninsula and sustains the narrative tension.

In sum, the term "the Peninsula", used to replace "Korea", designates the same geographical location while signalling a shift in symbolic and ideological positioning. While the film generates horror through post-outbreak devastation, its central operation lies in the uncanny effect produced by displacement, visual re-framing, and symbolic substitution. Horror emerges not simply because the familiar becomes strange, but since the strange appears via what is already known and re-situated. In this perspective, *Peninsula* distinguishes itself from *Train*

to *Busan*. Whereas the earlier film features zombies as direct objects of fear, *Peninsula* increasingly treats them as figures embedded in a broader structure of displacement, exclusion and survival. The film ultimately suggests that systemic collapse does not automatically inaugurate a positive new beginning. Instead, it stages horror as the persistence of familiar structures after their apparent downfall, producing subjects who are simultaneously recognisable and estranged. Zombies can accordingly be viewed not as direct models of capitalist subjectivity, but as symptomatic figures through which the film visualises the reduction of life to survival, utility and exclusion. Diaspora, likewise, appears less as an external theme than as a cinematic form of failed return by which the familiar becomes threatening and exclusion is made visible.

5 Conclusion

The article has considered how *Peninsula* produces horror through displacement, symbolic naming and the uncanny transformation of familiar Korean spaces. By using Lacan's concept of extimacy, it was argued that the film's horror does not simply arise from zombies as external monsters. Horror instead emerges when what appears external or threatening is revealed to be intimately connected to the familiar structures of home, nation, urban space, and social order.

The analysis has focused on three mechanisms. First, the film stages displacement and failed return by transforming Korea from a familiar homeland into a space that can only be approached from the position of exile. Second, it shows how symbolic naming changes the status of subjects and places: "Korea" becomes "the Peninsula", and Koreans become displaced figures associated with infection, danger and uselessness. Third, the film produces an uncanny effect by making familiar infrastructures like bridges, stations, roads and shopping malls appear as ruined and threatening spaces.

The article also clarifies the relationship between extimacy and the uncanny. Extimacy describes the structural relation in which the outside is already located at the intimate centre of the inside. The uncanny describes the affective experience produced when this relation becomes visible. In *Peninsula*, Korea becomes uncanny since it remains recognisable while no longer functioning as a stable symbolic home. The horror of the film therefore lies not in absolute otherness, but in the return of the familiar in an estranged form.

Finally, it was suggested in the article that *Peninsula* can be interpreted as a reflection on the persistence of survival logics following social collapse. This does not mean the film offers a complete theory of capitalism, or that zombies or displaced figures should be treated as direct models of capitalist subjectivity.

Rather, the film allows us to see how exchange, utility, spectacle and exclusion continue to organise social relations even after the apparent breakdown of the state. Depending on this dimension, *Peninsula* stages horror as the recognition that what survives a catastrophe is not just life, but the distorted persistence of familiar symbolic and social structures.

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Figures

All figures are screenshots from *Peninsula* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2020) and are used solely for scholarly analysis.

Figure 1. Spatial transformation according to shifts in the observer's internal and external position

- (a) A city engulfed in flames amid a zombie outbreak
- (b) An urban landscape perceived to be in ruins
- (c) Korea as reported by media in the United States
- (d) Unfamiliar through the gaze of an external observer

Figure 2. The loss of naming and the imposition of appellation

- (a) The loss of a name
- (b) The common noun "peninsula"
- (c) The substructure of the symbolic system
- (d) Imposed names

Figure 3. The slogan "A healthy nation without worries about the future" on display at Yeongdeungpo Station in the film.

Figure 4. Aspects of the peninsula's landscape rendered unfamiliar and threatening

- (a) The broken Incheon Bridge
- (b) An unfamiliar landscape of the peninsula

Figure 5. A large shopping mall as the peninsula's principal stage

- (a) The fortified shopping mall
- (b) Gladiatorial combat and gambling
- (c) A gladiatorial tournament
- (d) Domesticated zombies

Figure 6. Hwang Jun's in the closing sequence delivering her final final line of dialogue.

Author's info**EuiJin Hur**, PhD Candidate

University of Ljubljana, Department of Asian and African Studies

Aškerčeva cesta 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

E-mail: eh78748@student.uni-lj.si