‘Why don’t you remember? Are you crazy?’
Korean Gothic and psychosis in *A Tale of Two Sisters*

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A Tale of Two Sisters is the product of a notably rich period in Asian horror cinema in which wider distribution of Asian films and the increasing globalisation of popular culture has meant such movies have a better chance than ever before of reaching a worldwide audience. Contemporary high-quality Asian horror films often explore family dynamics and update the paradigms of Gothic horror. Whereas the works of Japanese directors Hideo Nakata (*Ringu*, 1998, and *Dark Water*, 2005) and Takashi Miike (*Audition*, 2005) have been commercially and critically successful, the works of Korean directors such Kim Ji-woon, Park Chan-wook (*Old Boy*, 2004) and Joon-ho Bong (*The Host*, 2006) mark the emergence of Korea as a worthy and original contributor to the Asian horror boom. Kim Ji-woon has recently emerged as a director to be reckoned with, bringing to the screen subtly crafted and thought-provoking works such as *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003) and, most recently, the gangster melodrama, *A Bittersweet Life* (2005).

As Fred Botting has suggested, the shocking opposition between reality and appearances is one of the central mechanisms of Gothic narration: ‘Throughout Gothic fiction terror and horror have depended on things not being what they seem.’(1) South Korean Kim Ji-woon’s intriguing multi-layered film, *A Tale of Two Sisters* (*Janghwa, Hongryeon*, or *Rose and Lotus* in English, 2003) provides a fitting illustration of Botting’s statement. Using a discourse of denial and the subject of family disintegration the film articulates several Gothic themes. Concomitant with these Gothic elements, the film may also be read as a modernisation of the fairy tale; most notably in its thematic focus on the figure of an evil stepmother and the vulnerable children under her “care”. *A Tale of Two Sisters*’ deft transmutation of fairy tale paradigms into a modern setting constitutes the first topic of this article. Specific attention will be paid to the symbolic locations of the film, especially the lakeside family home; in which an elaborate correspondence is made between family secrets and the house. The enclosure of the residence is a space in which transformation and terror are closely intertwined, aligning it with Rosemary Jackson’s seminal definition of the Gothic enclosure as a space of maximum transformation and terror (2), and clearly marking the lakeside home as a Gothic space. Family politics are intimately connected with the fate of the house, and this symbiosis between the house and the disintegrating family unit is the third theme dealt with in this article. Following on from this, will be an analysis of how, through the course of the film, identity and memory are undermined by our central protagonist’s, Su-mi, unreliable perspective. The last point under discussion will be Su-mi’s unsuccessful repression of traumatic memories and how it impacts upon the viewer’s interpretative task.

A Tale of Two Sisters begins in a hospital with the interview of a female patient whose identity remains undisclosed. The narrative then moves to sisters Su-mi and Su-yeon’s return home after a non-specified illness. They are welcomed back to the family’s lakeside house by their distant father and their resentful stepmother, Eun-ju. Over three days, Su-mi and Su-yeon witness and experience unexplained occurrences, such as uncanny duplications, suffocations, and ghosts. The simmering resentment between the two girls and their stepmother escalates into physical violence. At this point, the hitherto self-restrained father angrily confronts Su-mi and reminds her that her sister, Su-yeon, is in fact dead. The viewer then understands that Su-mi’s subconscious has kept her younger sister, Su-yeon, alive. Her

mental anguish and her desire to believe her sister is still alive are the result of her guilt over the untimely demise of her mother and her sister, both of whom died in a tragic accident that she feels she might have prevented, had she not been involved in an argument with her future stepmother, Eun-ju, at that fateful moment.

The details of the accident remain undisclosed throughout most of the film. They are as follows: the accident takes place in Su-yeon's bedroom, while Su-mi and Eun-ju are arguing downstairs in the lakeside house. Their mother, ill and depressed, has hung herself in Su-yeon's closet. Frantically trying to pull her mother out, Su-yeon accidentally causes the closet to collapse and is smothered by her mother's body. Eun-ju has seen the accident and could have helped Su-yeon, but following Su-mi's outburst (in which she accuses Eun-ju of trying to steal her father's affection) Eun-ju changes her mind, leaving Su-yeon to suffocate under the weight of the closest and her mother's corpse. Despite Eun-ju's wilful inaction in the matter, the film focuses more on Su-mi's part in her mother and sister's deaths and the possibility that the double tragedy could have been avoided had Su-mi not lost her temper with Eun-ju at that fatal moment. While the suicide and Su-yeon's accidental death are revealed in this scene, and Su-mi's subsequent psychological instability has been established, all is not satisfyingly accounted for. Indeed, the theory of the "explained supernatural"(3) in the film is undermined by two key scenes in the film. The first of these scenes involves an episode that occurs during a family dinner in which the girls' aunt has an unexplained fit. While writhing on the floor, she sees the figure of the younger girl (Su-yeon) covered in mud, lurking under the sink. This unexpected vision is one of the most terrifying images of the film. The viewer sees Su-yeon from the choking woman's perspective, but only in a frustratingly short glimpse. The impact of this image on the viewer is all the more profound as it is never explained. The second "*un*explainable supernatural" moment in the film is in its second-last scene, when Eun-ju is attacked by a female ghost crawling out of Su-yeon's closet. These two female phantoms are the physical embodiment of the film's resistance to a logically accountable ending. Thus the viewer is denied any attempt to explain away the uncanny episodes of the film.

A Modern Fairytale

Director Kim Ji-woon acknowledges that his 2003 work is based on the Korean fairytale *Janghwa, Hongryeon*. His film is just one of a number of Korean cinematic adaptations of the tale.(4) As a result, the Korean audience would undoubtedly be acquainted with the story of the two sisters, either from hearing it as a folktale and/or from watching earlier film versions of it. Western viewers, however, cannot be assumed to be familiar with the tale. In brief, it tells the story of Rose and Lotus, two dead sisters, whose ghosts visit a town official to explain to him how they met their untimely deaths. Planting a skinned rat in the girls' bedroom, their jealous stepmother had tricked their father into believing that the elder sister had miscarried an illegitimate child. Cast away from home by paternal opprobrium, the accused girl drowns in a lake. Her sister's distress is such that she also drowns on the same spot. After seeing the sisters' ghosts, the city official investigates the case and reveals the stepmother's guilt. The girls' father remarries and his third wife gives birth to twin girls, whom he names Rose and Lotus after his two lost daughters. The Korean ghost story reaches a satisfying end, where retribution is meted out and where the ghosts succeed in expelling the malevolent element from the family unit. The film, on the other hand, offers a modern transposition of the fairy tale that eschews such a well-ordered ending.

A Tale of Two Sisters features strong visual and thematic markers that point to the fairytale origins of the plot, such as an aesthetic obsession with flowers, the presence of ghosts, and the idyllic, yet isolated,

lakeside location of the family home. All of these visual markers have strong symbolic values, echoing Jung's statement that 'in myths and fairytales, the psyche tells its own story.'(5) In a direct reference to the original fairytale of Rose and Lotus, chapter four of the film, entitled 'Dad's Asleep', has Su-mi find a bloody package containing fish and bloody fish entrails in the fridge; a gory package which is clearly an allusion to the skinned dead rat in the original fairytale.

Of course another link between Kim Ji-woon's film and the fairytale upon which it is based is the theme of the avenging ghost. In her article, 'The Ghost Story,'(6) Julia Briggs explains that ghost stories are multilayered but despite their diversity, they all feature a challenge to the rational order and the observed laws of nature. Ghost stories reintroduce 'what is perceived as fearful, alien, excluded or dangerously marginal' (122). In her analysis, she locates the source of terror in the past and the dead or the untamed world of nature. Briggs insists on the creative aspect of dreams and imagination in the ghost story: 'The ghost story reverts to a world in which imagination can produce physical effects, a world that is potentially within our power to change by the energy of our thoughts, yet practically alarming' (124). Keeping with the theme of revenge, which Briggs defines as 'the most primitive, punitive and sadistic of impulses' (128), Kim Ji-woon traces the origin of terror in the familiar. For the viewer part of this familiarly is its modernity. As the director has himself explained, his aim was to try to give a modern meaning to the tale. He took the motif of the stepmother from the fairytale and added an element of horror to a modern setting, claiming he wanted to 'express the distorted mind of people in the modern family.' (7)

The film offers an ideal medium to translate and transform the dark and disturbing fairytale, particularly by emphasizing its modern Gothic elements. Heidi Kaye sees similarities between Gothic films and texts in their common use of images with a strong impact and the necessity of audience response.(8) The continued success of the Gothic genre may be attributed to its adaptability of to modern concerns: 'Gothic tales seem destined to be continually reborn to suit the fears and desires of each new period. The monsters, their creators and their victims are sufficiently malleable in their indefiniteness to allow them to convey ongoing human concerns and tensions' (191). Kim Ji-woon's *A Tale of Two Sisters* is an excellent example of the Gothic's malleability.

The Topography and Colour of Nightmares

Topography plays an essential part in conveying the unsettling atmosphere of *A Tale of Two Sisters*. In the film, the house is under attack. Its very location, by a lakeside, is significant. The two sisters are seen sitting on the pontoon by the lake, dangling their feet in the water. This makes an obvious reference to the lake in which Rose and Lotus drown. The end credits show Su-mi in exactly the same place, wearing the same outfit, but by herself. Both scenes are visually striking and thematically very rich. The murky lake waters of the lake may be interpreted as a metaphor for opacity or, indeed, as a psychoanalytically charged image, symbolically associated with a feminine space. It is also interesting to note that other recent Asian writers and filmmakers have also used the image of water to chilling effect, most notably in the novels of Koji Suzuki, *Ringu* and *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara* and their cinematic adaptations, *Ring* (1998, American remake 2002) and *Dark Water* (2003, American remake 2005).

The film's *mise en scène* has been exactingly structured. For Ji-woon, the film set and its aesthetic impact are of linked to a desire to create a new visual language in the Korean horror cinema. As Ji-woon explains, he wanted 'to create, to show a sense of colour that wasn't there in Korean horror films before'

(*A Tale of Two Sisters* DVD, 2003). One filming technique was to put coloured cloths in front of the lighting to create powerful colours, using different colours for different spaces; purple for the stepmother's room and green for the sisters' rooms. The colour red, of a very dramatic bloody hue, pervades the screen from the opening credits, in which the two sisters wear red clothing and red flowers are seen in the garden.(9) Bloodshed features several times; Su-mi stabs herself in the hand while in a rage and her menstrual blood also alluded to. The dining room scene in the third chapter of the film ('At Dinner') is suffused with a red light that makes the space seem cluttered and gives an oppressive atmosphere to an already tense family gathering. This chromatic constant takes on a deep macabre significance and its prevalence is clearly an omen of the tragic revelations to come.

This colour-coding of the interior acts a strong visual signifier indicating that the locus of anxiety in the film is the house itself and what happens to the family in this setting. The trailer for the movie explicitly proclaims this symbiotic link between the family and the house: 'A hidden secret. A house of lies'. In the film itself, Su-mi also remarks on the house's influence and its connection with their 'new mother': 'That woman is strange and so is this house' (Chapter Four, 'Dad's Asleep'). The house is the physical space where psychological tensions take shape; an illustration of what David Punter aptly calls 'the nightmare topography of the mind.'(10) Even the varying effect of the lighting on the interiors' wallpaper adds a vividly morbid ambiance to the film as the narrative progresses. As the director explains, the aim behind aspect of filming was to invoke a sense of decay and stolen youth: 'I wanted all the interiors and the sets – the flower motifs on the walls, for instance – to look initially beautiful, but then gradually become scary and horrible during the course of the film. It signifies the fact that the two sisters die before blossoming' (DVD leaflet, interview with Jamie Russell). All these visual markers suggest that the house acts as a catalyst for repressed memories to emerge. Haunted by memories, Su-mi suffers from repression. As Kristeva describes it, repression has 'the ability of the speaking being, always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat.'(11) As a consequence of her repression, the visual language the film uses to represent Su-mi's experience contains repetitions and blanks, leaving the viewer with the interpretative task of deciphering which aspects of her experiences are hallucinatory and which are truly uncanny. Yet other characters in the film experience fantastic and inexpiable events too, thereby calling into question the power Su-mi's repression has over the narrative as a whole. The most dramatic and problematic example of this real/hallucinatory confusion, which appears to be outside of Su-mi's own hallucinatory experience, is the episode of the girl under the sink (Chapter Eight, 'Visitors'). In this scene, the girls' aunt collapses and chokes on the red floor of the dining room during a tense meal. The intense colour of the floor is already a sign that the dining room is a space of extreme emotional turmoil. While the woman writhes and gasps, she keeps looking under the sink and at Eun-ju's feet; Su-mi is nowhere to be seen. Afterwards, in the car with her husband, the aunt tells him: 'There was a girl under the kitchen sink.' She has a flashback of seeing Su-yeon all covered in black mud-like earth, crouching under the sink. This stage of the film represents the point of no return; the tension in the house becomes suffocating and has physical effect on its denizens. The house is an oppressive and asphyxiating place, and it also contains smaller, metonymic versions of itself, such as Su-yeon's closet, which turns into a literal coffin.

Family Disintegration in The House of Lies

When Eun-ju snappily exclaims: 'This damn house won't leave me the hell alone' (Chapter Ten, 'Locked Doors'), her statement points to the uncanny atmosphere that pervades the house. Freud's seminal work on the *unheimlich* explains that 'an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary

appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises.'(12) The lakeside house is the locus of uncanny events, the space where the frontiers between the dead and the living, past and present, metaphorical and actual significations are repeatedly crossed and thereby put into question. As the director explains, 'I wanted to express the irony that the family is threatened in its very home' (DVD leaflet, interview with Jamie Russell) by making the home the terrifying place of the plot, as opposed to the hospital, for instance.

As a result of Kim Ji-woon's decision to firmly locate the uncanny events in the family home, family politics becomes one of the central issues of the film. When asked in an interview why children are so prominent in Asian horror movies, Ji-woon explains how the lack of independence for children in the East means that a child relies on his parents a great deal. Therefore, the intensity of the moment of horror increases in this cultural context, when parents become threatening. The film combines the traditional Gothic motif of the danger within the house with a more culture-specific allusion to the child's heavy dependence on his parents in Korean culture. Su-mi perceives her family as besieged by Eun-ju's intrusion. Su-mi's perusal of old family pictures is an ordeal for her because she sees Eun-ju posing in all of them as her father's assistant. For Su-mi, the family is jeopardised in its structure because Eun-ju has supplanted their mother. In the dining-room, Eun-ju upbraids Su-mi for resenting the change: 'Listen carefully. I'm your mother, got it? As much as you hate it, I'm the only one in this world you can call mother, get it?' (Chapter Seven, 'Family photographs'). In his 1909 study, 'Family Romances,' Freud has suggested that for a small child his parents are at first the only authority and the source of all belief. (13) Deprived of her mother and confronted by this hostile replacement, Su-mi's vulnerability is thus double-fold.

Su-mi's distress at her mother's death is such that she cannot come to terms with it and unconsciously blames her father for what she interprets as a betrayal of her late mother. Su-mi's dead mother is a ghostly presence haunting the living; appearing in the film with long flowing hair. Long hair, according to Kim Ji-woon, functions as a metonymy for death in Asian horror film. The belief that hair keeps growing after death, conveys to the audience an understanding that the vision of a dead loved one with long hair is the result of incomplete bereavement. This is certainly the case for Su-mi. As one study on the nature of childhood bereavement and trauma has argued, psychologically bereaved children can regress to an earlier stage of emotional development and behaviour.(14) Under the terms of this definition, normal grief stretches over five stages: denial; anger or guilt; depression; reconciliation; and eventually re-attachment. The symptoms of the denial stage include restlessness, disbelief, looking for the lost person, seeing the lost person, a loss of the sense of one's identity and disorientation in time and place. The second stage is characterised by anger and guilt, and the symptoms include recrimination, fantasies of violence and retaliation against others, self-doubt, blaming self and others.(15) Taking such psychological theories into consideration, it can therefore be argued that Ji-woon's film offers a psychologically accurate depiction of a young girl stuck between the first two stages of grief, but unwilling to progress further. In this sense, Su-mi behaves in an emotionally predictable manner after the demise of her sister and mother. What differs is the depth and power of her grief, not its methodology or symptoms.

Unreliable Perspectives and Unsuccessful Repressions

Su-mi's obsession with Eun-ju provides the viewer with a gateway into the many contradictions of her perspective. The frontiers of individual identity collapse in Su-mi's visions. Her dreams reveal her confusion about her identity, echoing Freud's claims that 'dreams have at their command memories which

are inaccessible in waking life.'(16) The stepmother is the embodiment of Su-mi's unacknowledged darkness. Jungian analyst and folklorist Marie-Louise von Franz has suggested that the stepmother in fairy tales is 'a symbol of the unconscious in its destructive role - of its disturbing and devouring character.'(17) As such, Eun-ju may be interpreted as Su-mi's own unconscious, her double. Duplications feature heavily in the film. Objects are faithfully duplicated, creating many uncanny occurrences and signalling that split personality is a theme of the film. Su-mi's diary and clothes in the wardrobe are the first duplicated items. These are exact duplications. Eun-ju also finds duplicated clothing, by doing so she duplicates Su-mi's action. And while female characters in the film are not accurately duplicated, Eun-ju and Su-mi imitate each other so much that confusion about identity is nonetheless generated. Su-mi and Eun-ju replicate each other's gestures (Eun-ju is at one stage seen perfectly imitating Su-mi's gesture of looking over her shoulder when she was in the forest), suggesting that, for most of the film, Eun-ju is in fact generated by Su-mi's distorted vision. Elisabeth Bronfen explains how repetitions destabilise the concept of self and other: 'a repetition that succeeds perfectly may be fatal because the space of difference between model and copy has been eliminated, collapsing both terms into one entity and abolishing the singularity of each separate term.'(18) Eun-ju therefore is an inexact replica of Su-mi, she embodies the emotions that Su-mi cannot accept as hers, such as resentment towards her father, and anger at herself for not being there when her sister suffocated to her death under the weight of the collapsed closet.

Projecting these unaccepted emotions onto Eun-ju, Su-mi's sense of her own identity becomes problematic; her ambivalence about herself is exteriorised by transferring her negative feelings on Eun-ju, whose face Su-mi's has angrily blacked-out from the family photographs. (Chapter Ten, 'Locked Doors').(19) Eun-ju is Su-mi's dark double in the latter's hallucinations. Of course, the use of the figure of the double is a typically Gothic device in a context of fragmented identity, as Fred Botting explains: 'The loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured are presented in the threatening shapes of increasingly deshumanised environments, machinic doubles and violent, psychotic fragmentation.'(20) Julia Briggs, in *Night Visitors*, asserts that the double, being neither the self nor another, constitutes 'a powerful symbol of unresolved inner conflict.' (21) While venting hostility at her stepmother, Su-mi's unresolved anger seems, in truth, directed at herself and at her father; a character whose discreet presence fails to soothe Su-mi's deteriorating psychological condition.

Su-mi's father is a doctor.(22) His profession introduces an opposition between two discourses: the psychosomatic manifestations of Su-mi's ailment versus the rational scientific discourse of medicine. The first scene of the film shows a male psychologist trying to coax the unidentified female patient into a talking cure therapy: 'Well, then, shall we talk? Who do you think you are?' In the house, Su-mi's verbal exchanges with her father are unsuccessful. With literal skeletons in the family closet, Su-mi's father berates her for bringing up the accident: 'Su-mi, we agreed not to talk about that closet' (Chapter Six, 'Out in the Cold'). The word 'closet' becomes a taboo in this household; other words are also implicitly prohibited. Su-mi's father avoids saying the word 'insane' for most of the film, instead relying on euphemistic expressions such as 'sick:' 'You are not even accepting all this. You'll get sick again.' (Chapter Seven, 'Family Photographs'). During this dialogue, the dramatic use of lighting shrouds the left half of Su-mi's face in shadow; signifying her obscured memory and her resulting fragmented sense of self. Pitting the discourse of Su-mi's overpowering daydreaming against her father's clinical statements, it is clear that he does not understand and/or cannot accept the rationale behind Su-mi's phantasies. In his study of day-dreaming, Freud states that 'the motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every

single phantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality.'(23) He also highlights the highly pathogenic quality of excessive phantasies, when left unchecked: 'If phantasies become over-luxuriant and over-powerful, the conditions are laid for an onset of neurosis or psychosis' (148). Su-mi's father appears to have no understanding of his daughter's emotional turmoil. He never asks her why she wants to believe that her sister is still alive, he keeps telling her not to do it: 'Please, stop it. I'm sick of this now' (Chapter Thirteen, 'Identity Crisis'). Her father's definite statement: 'Please stop! Su-yeon is dead' (Chapter Eleven, 'Digging a Grave') temporarily dispels the narrative confusion of the film, but Su-mi refuses to give up her psychotic visions of Su-yeon. In *Madness and Cinema*, Patrick Fuery highlights the frequent dichotomy between emotion and science in films: 'More often than not, what is essential for the solving of the riddles and enigmas is not the rational efforts of science, but the emotive.' (24) Su-mi's father is ineffective on a number of fronts; as a doctor, as a father, and implicitly as a husband. Su-mi's mother hangs herself, literally strangling herself into speechlessness. Her choice of suicide method points to her lack of voice in the household. Su-mi's father is unable to deal with his daughter's psychosis or keep it under control, just as he had been unable to recognise, let alone prevent, his wife's emotional descent and suicide.

Simultaneously, Su-mi is unable to deal with the reality of her mother and sister's death and sinks into a state of permanent daydreaming in which she reconstructs history and keeps them alive. Her attempt is weakened by the unwelcome resurgence of traumatic images. The most shocking vision is that of the creeping woman in the black clothing with her hair down about her shoulders, hiding her face. The woman's neck has been snapped, judging from the way she moves. She steps on Su-mi's bed and Su-mi sees blood tricking down the woman's legs. This scene is shot in such a way that Su-mi appears framed by the woman's legs. Her vision imprisons her, and the birth symbolism of the blood running down the apparition's legs is quite striking. In his seminal *Semiotics of Cinema* Jurij Lotman suggests that in films an image can be made particularly meaningful by playing with and destroying usual expectations about this image and that 'objects in close-ups are seen in cinema as metaphors.'(25) Su-mi's bedroom contains many unexpected elements, such as the stopped clock, which she rewinds. The insistent close-up on the clock forces the viewer to ponder on the meaning of her action. The stopped clock may be a sign that a death has taken place in this house, while Su-mi's rewinding of it suggests her unwillingness to accept this. The film articulates signs of ambivalence and confusion. The unexplained presence in the dining room of a collapsed girl with her long hair down on her face wearing the green silk dress (the same dress hanging in the closet where Su-yeon died) is another sign that Su-mi's world, as she has recreated it, is becoming incoherent., Su-mi's identity crises reaches a violent climax when, in another instance of inexact doubling, she stabs Eun-ju in the hand (Chapter Twelve, 'Trail of Blood'), and is afterwards found by her father, unconscious with a wounded hand. It is only when faced with the real Eun-ju that Su-mi's world of illusion collapses (Chapter Thirteen, 'Identity Crisis'). Her memories and the inconsistencies in them are the key to her psychosis.

Su-mi's anger at her disintegrating family features strongly in the narrative, but this theme also serves as a palimpsest for the issues of repressed mourning. Repression and denial are pitted against the unwelcome resurgence of buried traumas that Su-mi endeavours to negate out of her guilt for surviving when her sister, Su-yeon, has not. Su-mi's survivor's guilt is palpable when, in her visions of her sister, she insists that Su-yeon informs her of any danger: 'If she ever gets on your case, then tell me and don't ignore it like before, OK?' (Chapter Three, 'At Dinner'). Her expression of devotion to Su-yeon ('I'll always be with you' Chapter Four, 'Dad's Asleep'), viewed retrospectively, takes on an incantatory dimension. When she

swears to Su-yeon that she will never abandon her again ('I'm sorry, Su-yeon, I'm sorry. This will never happen again. Never' (Chapter Ten, 'Locked Doors'), the repetitions in her sentences betray her anguish. Moreover, the adverb 'again' implies that something has happened to Su-yeon before. Crucially, it can be interpreted as an admission on Su-mi's part that she knows that something bad has already happened to her sister, despite her hallucinatory attempts to keep her alive. Without a clear demarcation between Su-mi's visions and reality, the film highlights Su-mi keeps a weak control over her memories; the incoherence of numerous episodes pointing to her wilful, yet partially ineffective, forgetfulness. Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer's influential study of hysteria highlights that forgetting is an act of volition: 'before hysteria can be acquired for the first time one essential condition must be fulfilled: an idea must be intentionally repressed from consciousness […]. The repressed idea takes its revenge, however, by becoming pathogenic.'(26) In particular, Freud and Breuer have stressed that the forgotten content is layered depending on the gravity of the blocked memories. The contents of each particular stratum are therefore characterised by a certain equal degree of resistance and that degree increases in proportion as the strata are nearer to the core of the repressed memories. More recently, Alice Miller has argued that 'repressed pain blocks emotional life and leads to physical symptoms.' (27) *A Tale of Two Sisters* presents the viewer with a grotesquely amplified case of repressed memories, where the symptoms expand beyond the mere psychosomatic level and include parasitic visions and hallucinations, which in turn lead to physical injury.

In *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Vicky Lebeau commends Freud's quest to discover the meaning behind his patients' symptoms as a means of reconnecting the hysterical symptoms with the thoughts that generated them. Linking this quest with the interpretative task of the film viewer, she describes how the aim of this process is 'to listen for the story – wishful, anxious, traumatic – embedded in the image.' (28) What story is embedded in the images surrounding Su-mi? Two images, in particular, yield crucial clues; one involves a statue in the house, the other, a bloody bag, which Su-mi fails to open. The statue is a life-size of a child shielding his eyes in his hands. This white statue can be seen as another double of Su-mi, who is horrified by the events that have taken place in the family home. The posture of the child is one of fear and a rejection of the visions that surround him. The statue is in the corridor on the ground floor of the house, which is exactly where Eun-ju and Su-mi had their argument on the day of the double tragedy. The statue is thus a marker of a fatal moment in time; it also acts as a mirror of Su-mi's psychological status. Both are frozen in time, refusing to accept the painful past and to live in the present, unwilling to acknowledge reality. The film's image of a bloody bag is another clue to Su-mi's psychological state. When Su-mi struggles with resurgent images and when her aggressive behaviour becomes increasingly alarming, she is seen trying to drag and hide a bulky and bloody cloth bag which looks like it contains a person struggling to break free. The trail of blood and the blood-stained bag stand for the interrupted path in Su-mi's memory, the bag being the content she has wiped out; its trail is the path she has blocked off is her memory. In this instance, Su-mi's delusions reveal how she resents herself for failing her younger sister. Although Eun-ju is guilty of not assisting Su-yeon when she still could have been saved, Su-mi feels indirectly responsible for having failed her sister. Eun-ju, who is guilty by voluntary omission, thus becomes the consuming object of Su-mi's redirected self-hatred.

In their compelling analysis of the mechanisms of false memories, psychologists Sven-Ake and Engelberg convincingly argue that a memory is totally inhibited 'when the individual is unable to integrate the experience with existing schemata pertaining to self-image and life in general.' (29) From this perspective, Su-mi's identity confusion exposes her attempts to eject certain memories from her mind. On

two occasions, Eun-ju is actually Su-mi's mouthpiece. In Chapter Eight, 'The Visitors,' Eun-ju behaves and talks like an overexcited teenager at the dinner table. The table is set for four, whereas it should be for five, suggesting that Eun-ju and Su-mi at that moment only constitute a single presence. This scene is the first example of the use of the device by which Eun-ju speaks for Su-mi. An hysterical and giggly Eun-ju swings from elated excitement to cold hatred when she verbally attacks Su-mi's uncle and aunt: 'Do you remember? My memory's a bit blurry, but I think it did happen.' 'Su-mi as Eun-ju' (30) says what Su-mi cannot bring herself to say. In 'Trail of Blood' chapter, Su-mi's reliance on a phantasy version of Eun-ju grows more insistent. In this scene, Su-mi as Eun-ju berates Su-mi for her inability to create a coherent phantasy: 'Remember when I said you'll regret it some day? […] Know what's really scary? You want to forget something, totally wipe it from your mind. But you never can. It doesn't go away, you see, and it follows you around like a ghost.' This poignant monologue actually mirrors Su-mi's own self-deprecating thoughts and reveals that she is aware that her illusions are floundering in the struggle between repression and memory.

In choosing a repression-prone individual as the central character of his film, Kim Ji-woon adopts a patently Gothic device which evokes a strong, yet ambivalent, audience response. Numerous seminal Gothic texts, from Edgar Allan Poe's unnamed narrators in many of his short stories, such as 'Ligeia,' 'Berenicë,' 'The Tell-Tale Heart' and 'The Black Cat' to Henry James' unnamed governess in *The Turn of the Screw*; rely on the device of the unreliable narrator to destabilise meaning and make a division between reality and the imaginary difficult to achieve. Just as the reader of these texts must put into question what is presented to him/her, so must the viewer of *A Tale of Two Sisters*. Its viewers are faced with the task separating fact from fiction and deciphering Su-mi's hallucinations and dreams as a palimpsest of her trauma. If the film is a dream, then it shows the manifest content of the dream and merely points to the latent content, to use Freud's essential dichotomy. In her study of the psychoanalytical dimension of cinema, Vicky Lebeau states that 'even in the dream, it seems, the child's wish cannot speak its name.' (31) Su-mi's vivid images therefore mask her pain and yet they are the only signs of what they refuse to express clearly. If indeed the goal of a repressive procedure is 'to allow the person to remain unaware of what is being processed,'(32) Su-mi's repression can be interpreted as fulfilling the function of a shield that protects her from painful memories. Paradoxically, this coping device also prevents her from making the necessary progress towards completing her mourning. And if, as specialists such as Kihlstrom and Hoyt argue, 'repression, in order effectively to defend the individual against threatening ideas and impulses, must be unconscious' (202), then Su-mi efforts to block her traumas are doomed to fail, because she does so knowingly. The film narrates an imperfect repression accompanied by the deliberate fabrication of memories. This may in turn be interpreted with recourse to Martin Conway's discussion of false memories, which underlines the crucial point that if an event is not properly understood at the time of experience, then later memories formed from it will contain erroneous as well as accurate details: 'Errors in the knowledge base from which memories will later be constructed, established at or close in time to actual experiences, can give rise to memories which are basically accurate but contain minor errors or to memories that are grossly incorrect but which, none the less, contain some accurate details.' (33) This accurately summarises the profound epistemological confusion behind an interpretation of Su-mi's memories as well as her visions, both of which are partially accurate and convincing, up to a certain point. The interpretative difficulty arises in attempting to define that point.

The coherence of her visions falters when imagistic memory invades her phantasy. Kihlstrom defines imagistic memory as a memory that breaks through the conscious mind in the form of imagery, (34)

arguing that unconscious memories do not go away and instead express themselves as symptoms, affecting conscious experience in the form of intrusive images, somatic feelings, and dreams. The very last chapter of the film, entitled 'Closets,' presents to the viewer the point of origin of Su-mi's trauma, which has up until this point only been vaguely suggested. It is, of course, her mother's suicide in the closet and her sister's fatal attempt to pull her mother down. While trapped under the upturned closet and her mother's body, Su-yeon slowly suffocates and weakly cries for help. Eun-ju sees and hears Su-yeon crying for help but, when she reaches the ground floor, Su-mi angrily confronts her about her involvement with their father: 'Now you are trying to act like mum. Do me a favour. Stay out of our lives.' Irked by the girl's hostility, Eun-ju decides not to tell about the tragedy infolding upstairs and warns Su-mi that their argument will have dire consequences: 'You might regret this moment. Keep that in mind.' Su-mi's reply seals her sister's fate: 'What can be worse than standing here with you?' She storms out of the house while Su-yeon suffocates. From the balcony of the first floor, Eun-ju silently watches Su-mi walk away, knowing that Su-mi is not aware of the tragic accident that might have been averted. The last chapter of the film is its genesis. Instead of reassuring the viewer, the end destabilises the audience further with its implication that Su-mi will to cling to her psychotic daydreams. In her discussion of the psychoanalytical dimension of the Gothic, Michelle Massé claims that daydreams and neurotic symptoms are mechanisms of defence used to construct systems that satisfy basic desires while still letting us function adequately in the real world.(35) It ensues that daydreams are a creative expression of desire, 'stories written by ourselves for ourselves' (p. 229). The Gothic dimension of Kim Ji-woon's film is all the more prevalent because Su-mi's desire and denial are so excessive. She is utterly immersed in her phantasies to the point of psychosis. No one is able to convince her to abandon her illusions, especially not her father, whose discourse of rationality utterly fails to comprehend, let alone deal with, his surviving daughter's psychotic desire.

Conclusion

In terms of audience response, we may ask what type of spectator the film constructs. In *The Analysis of Film*, Raymond Bellour evokes 'rhetorical obscurity' (36) and, using Alfred Hitchcock's work as a foundation of his analysis, argues that Hitchcock's films are designed as experiences of semiotic ambivalence. Kim Ji-woon's work functions along the same lines and requires a high level interpretative effort from its audience. Tzvetan Todorov states that the Gothic relies on ambivalence and resistance to interpretation, claiming that 'perception constitutes a screen rather than removes one.' (37) The second-last scene of the film, in which Eun-ju is swallowed up by a creature in the closet, completely undermines the hypothesis that all that the viewer has been witness to is part of Su-mi's hallucinatory delirium. Eun-ju drives back to the house after visiting Su-mi in the hospital. Walking towards Su-yeon's bedroom, she steps on the wooden floor and the spectator sees blood oozing from under the floorboards. Eun-ju opens the fatal closet and a female form crawls out and engulfs her in darkness. The inclusion of this second-last scene makes it impossible for the audience to come up with a reasoned explanation for the events narrated in the course of the film. For Rosemary Jackson, resistance to endings is the defining feature of Gothic plots: 'Uncertainty and impossibility are inscribed on a structural level through hesitation and equivocation' (49). Kim Ji-woon's film embraces interpretative resistance as its raison d'être. In *Madness and Cinema*, Fuery compellingly analyses the 'enigmatisation' process of Gothic cinema and the impossibility of analysing certain aspects of a film conclusively as part of cinema knowledge: 'What is meant may not be clear, may indeed be unresolvable, but it continues to assert its status as meaningful.'(38) What makes the film so engrossing is exactly this resistance of the plot to any definite interpretation. Kim Ji-woon defends this open-endedness: 'Asian horror leaves you with

something that is unresolved in your mind' (DVD, interview with Jamie Russell). In psychological terms, Jung maintains that such an enigma should be respected: 'A great work of art is like a dream; for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself and is always ambiguous.' Kim Ji-woon's *A Tale of Two Sisters* taps into rich emotional territory by touching upon universal fears and longings. In addition, the film is an amazing feat in terms of the sheer aesthetic quality of the visuals. Its masterful execution fulfils the viewers' desire for arresting and stimulating art while the intricate workings of the plot remain an enigma.

1. Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 170.

2. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), 47.

3. The 'explained supernatural' is a term used to describe tales which appear to have a supernatural element but can ultimately be explained as entirely natural. Walter Scott is the first writer to have critiqued this mention of story-telling in his comments on the work of Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe. See E.J. Clery, 'The Supernatural Explained' in *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction 1762-1800* (Cambridge; Cambridge UP, 1995), 106-171.

4. At least five film versions of the tale have been made by Korean filmmakers.

5. Carl Gustav Jung, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1933), 217.

6. Julia Briggs, 'The Ghost Story' in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 122-131; 122).

7. Tartan Films, 2003. Director Kim Ji-woon's interview in *A Tale of Two Sisters*. [DVD]. London: Tartan Video.

8. Heidi Kaye, 'Gothic Film' in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 180-192); 181.

9. David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: the Text, the Body and the Law* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 152.

10. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

11. Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in Freud's *Collected Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1933), 244.

12. Sigmund Freud, 'Family Romances' in Freud's *Collected Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 237.

13. Paul Barnard et al., *Children, Bereavement and Trauma: Nurturing Resilience* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1999), 28.

14. Paul Barnard et al., *Children, Bereavement and Trauma: Nurturing Resilience* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1999), 86-87.

15. Sigmund Freud, 'On Dreams' in Freud's *Collected Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 12.

16. Marie-Louise von Franz, *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Dallas: Spring, 1970), p. 88.

17. Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Risky Resemblances: On Repetition, Mourning, and Representation' in *Death and Representation*, eds. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. 103-129), 104.

18. Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 157.

19. Julia Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber, 1977), 19.

20. Ineffective male doctors feature in several seminal Gothic texts depicting female insanity. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1899), the narrator's husband is also a doctor who fails to understand feminine emotions and distress.

21. Sigmund Freud, 'Creative writers and day-dreaming' in Freud's *Collected Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953),146.

22. Patrick Fuery, *Madness and Cinema: Psychoanalysis, Spectatorship and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 29.

23. Jurij Lotman, *Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. Mark E. Suino (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1976), 44.

24. Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, 'Studies on Hysteria' in Freud's *Collected Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 116.

25. Alice Miller, *The Drama of Being a Child* (London: Virago, 1979), 162.

26. Vicky Lebeau, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Play of Shadows* (London: Wallflower, 2001), 21.

27. Carl Gustav Jung, The Development of Personality, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), 183.

28. Sven-Ake Christianson and Elisabeth Engelberg, 'Remembering and forgetting traumatic experiences: a matter of survival' in *Recovered Memories and False Memories*, ed. Martin A. Conway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 230-250), 232.

29. For the sake of clarity, the author of this essay prefers to refer to 'Su-mi as Eun-ju' in order to differentiate better between the two versions of Eun-ju present in the film.

30. Vicky Lebeau, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Play of Shadows* (London: Wallflower, 2001), 39.

31. John F. Kihlstrom and Irene P. Hoyt, 'Repression, Dissociation and Hypnosis' in *Repression and Dissociation: Implications for Personality, Psychopathology, and Health*, ed. Jerome L. Singer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 100-117), 101-102.

32. Martin A. Conway, *Recovered Memories and False Memories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 178.

33. John F. Kihlstrom, 'Suffering from reminiscences: exhumed memory, implicit memory, and the return of the repressed.' In *Recovered Memories and False Memories*, ed. Martin A. Conway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.100-117), 102.

34. Michelle A. Massé, 'Psychoanalysis and the Gothic' in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Blacwell, 2000, p. 229-241), 229.

35. Raymond Bellour, *The Analysis of Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 238.

36. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), 105.

37. Patrick Fuery, *Madness and Cinema: Psychoanalysis, Spectatorship and Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 72.

38. Carl Gustav Jung, *The Spirit of Man in Art and Literature*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 104.