THE VAMPIRE NEXT DOOR

'Thirst' is just the latest in a recent flurry of vampire films and TV shows from around the world that shun the old gothic trappings. Kevin Jackson asks what else this new breed have in common, while overleaf James Bell talks to 'Thirst' director Park Chan-wook

Unless you have been locked up in a spider-ridden crypt with a mouth full of wild garlic, it can hardly have escaped your attention that vampires are, suddenly, everywhere. In box office smashes on the large screen and cult hits on the small one, in bestselling books, in comics and electronic games and on the internet. This triumphant return of the fanged kind would have been hard, if not impossible to predict as recently as four or five years ago when the vampire genre seemed to have been worn threadbare. Steam had most definitely run out of the Anne Rice movie franchises (anyone here rate Queen of the Damned? I rest my case), Joss Whedon's splendid Buffy the Vampire Slayer had come to a keenly lamented end after 144 episodes, and the only vampire films with commercial clout were essentially action movies, sometimes amusing enough, often merely noisy and thick-eared: the Blade trilogy, the Underworld trilogy and the still-in-progress Night Watch trilogy, adapted from the novels by Sergei Lukyanenko. Oh yes, and then there was Van Helsing...

Today, the state of vampirism could hardly be more different. Above all, we are in the Twilight zone: Stephenie Meyer's four plump novels about teenage undead romance made her the bestselling author of 2008, with some 40 million copies of books from the series already sold across the world. The film version of the first Twilight novel took a healthy $49 million at the US box office in its first weekend in November last year, and by the spring of this year had become the most profitable vampire film ever, with US takings in excess of $150 million. (The runner-up, sorry to say, is Van Helsing at $120 million.)

Meanwhile on the small screen, HBO's biggest hit of the year has been True Blood adapted by Alan Ball from the popular 'Southern Vampire' books written by Charlaine Harris. More modestly, BBC3 has drummed up a substantial and loyal audience for its drama-comedy Being Human, about a flat share between a werewolf, a ghost and a wickedly handsome vampire. On a somewhat higher plane, even critics who usually sneer at the horror genre

BLOOD ON THE PARQUET
'Thirst' relocates Zola's 'Thérèse Raquin' to a flat in South Korea where Sang-hyun (Song Kang-ho, top) infects his lover Tae-ju (Kim Ok-bin, below)
were rightly moved and impressed by Sweden's Let the Right One In, derived from the harrowingly violent novel by John Ajvide Lindqvist. And now - in some ways the most striking of the whole pack - from South Korea comes Thirst, joint winner of this year's Jury Prize at Cannes for its already distinguished director, Park Chan-wook. The truly remarkable thing about these films, though, is less their blantly violent nature than their quality. They're all surprisingly good. Even Twilight, which would probably have packed in the young fans no matter how shoddily or cynically it was staged, proved to be an unusually atmospheric and sensitive production, fluently directed by Catherine Hardwicke.

What is going on here? A cogent question, though anyone capable of offering an adequate reply would probably be too busy rolling in piles of banknotes to speak up. The Twilight phenomenon has been as much of an affront to conventional trend-spotting as was, say, the Harry Potter craze (to which we may in some way be a sequel: children growing out of Hogwartsiana may have moved on to the romance of Bella and Edward). This has not inhibited assorted commentators from trotting out catchphrase explanations, mostly social in nature. Several critics have pointed out that the success of Tod Browning's 1931 Dracula with Bela Lugosi happened when America and Europe were plunged deep in an economic depression; we are now grinding through the worst economic crisis in 70 years, and so are following suit, escaping from financial fright into supernatural fright. Well, maybe.

Rather than seek out exterior forces at work in the zeitgeist, it might be more rewarding to consider a few key examples of the recent crop and try to determine whether - for all their considerable differences of style, tone, national origin and what have you - they have elements in common that may account for the genre's renewed appeal. And the answer to that question is a 'yes' - cautious and qualified, but a 'yes' for all that. There appear to be three main points of affinity.

The first is that they (mostly) shun the conventional trappings of the gothic and the exotic. Nothing new in this, it might be objected, since vampire films have often traded in a dramatic contrast between the safe world of sunlight and the dangerous, fantastical world of night stalkers. Dracula AD 1972 did this in a thoroughly blush-inducing way, and Buffy far more creatively, with an amusing even-handedness in matters of fantasy and reality. Part of the show's appeal was that it gave comparable dramatic weight to dating, going steady and general high-school angst as it did to clawed invaders from the pits of hell.

And yet there is a genuine shift of nuance here. Of late, vampire fictions have been opting not merely for quotidian settings, but for aggressively bland, tedious versions of the quotidian. Each is set in or near a mundane, workaday location which even some of its inhabitants find less than stimulating. In Twilight, the setting is a permanently overcast coastal town in the American Northwest (Bella, narrator of the novel and a former resident of sunny Phoenix, Arizona, draws how horrid and provincial it is all going to be). In Let the Right One In, it's a housing estate in a working-class suburb of Stockholm; in True Blood, a small Louisiana bar. In Thirst, after an untypically adventurous prologue somewhere in Africa, much of the main action takes place in a small clothing store and its upstairs apartment, somewhere in a big city. No Transylvanian mountain passes, no cloaks and bats and castle towers to speak up. The吸血鬼, his nonchalant cleverness when it comes toיבים and his nonchalant cleverness when it comes toיבים, is a trait of homo sapiens. Even in the eyes of the besotted Bella, every-thing about Edward seems magical, the fact that he can run up trees is a marvel comparable to his check-bones, just one dazzling charm among many. The doomed protagonist of Thirst, meanwhile, becomes a vampire by scientific rather than legendary means, and only his ability to leap high buildings is unambiguously supernatural.

Lastly, most of the vampires in these otherwise varied tales - and certainly the leading vampires - are deeply sympathetic characters. As with the choice of banal locations, there's nothing particularly novel about this calculated sympathy for the villains: in various depictions you can see the one in all of Anne Rice's books; in the 1960s supernatural soap opera Dark Shadows, with its brooding vamp hero Barnabas Collins (far better known in the US than in Britain, this show has cast a very long shadow over American popular culture); in the 1992 Coppola version of Dracula (indeed, in a lot of other Dracula movies, including Tod Browning's in Blade, and in assorted good/bad characters from the Buffyverse, notably Angel and Spike).

But, again, there is genuine innovation as well, perhaps at its clearest in Let the Right One In. Who are the real monsters of this grim tale? Mainly, the vile school bullies who make life a protracted nightmare of humiliation for poor Oskar; Eli, who ultimately rescues him and deals out brutal punishment, is a deadly bloodsucker, but she is merely asserting her Darwinian will to survive. Motiveless malignancy, cruelty as an end in itself, is a trait of вовки. Perhaps the most impressively chilling aspect of the narrative is that the human race comes out so poorly. "Pity the monsters," runs a well-known phrase in one of Robert Lowell's poems. Well, we learned to do that years ago. These new films add a rider: "And fear the humans." Only in Twilight are the bad guys supernatural beings; in all the others, evil is warm, and breathes.

From east to west

An equally complex set of variations on pity and terror is played through Park Chan-wook's Thirst. Despite its vein of grotesque humour, Thirst can be read as a tragedy in the classical sense. It's shot in a flamboyant style which will be familiar to anyone who has seen the director's earlier films - Sympathy for Mr Vengeance, say - and will be a minor revelation to newcomers. Park Chan-wook has been justly applauded for, among other qualities, his nonchalant cleverness when it comes to framing: there's hardly a shot in Thirst that doesn't seem new and thoughtful, and though the ostentatious brilliance of this style may teeter on the brink of upstaging the narrative, most of the action...
**Vampires**

is so compelling that the bravura flourishes seldom seem excessive. (One possible exception: a gorgeously mad, visionary shot of a blood-red ocean, its waves broken by the backs of two bloodred whales. It could be the cover of a prog-rock concept album.)

*Thirst* falls into two main sections. The first shows how a devout, almost saintly young Catholic priest, Sang-hyun (movingly played by the Korean star Song Kang-ho, who somehow marries boyish charm with intimations of unbearable spiritual pain), is so distressed by the sufferings of the patients to whom he ministers that he decides to take part in a medical experiment that will mean almost certain death. He travels to Africa, is duly infected, develops hideous bubbles on his skin, vomits blood, and dies. Seconds after he flatlines, however, he comes back to life, and gradually recovers from all his symptoms. Catholics are persuaded that a miracle has taken place, and seek out Sang-hyun in the conviction that he can cure their own afflictions. Alas, the curative agency here is not divine but demonic: the disease has been licked by a transfusion of blood tainted with vampire cells. Sang-hyun can stay healthy, lively and handsome... provided he drinks human blood.

The second part of the film, in which Sang-hyun struggles to find 'ethical' ways of taking blood (compare the self-styled "vegetarian" vampires of *Twilight*) is based on Park Chan-wook's declared source, Zola's _Thérèse Raquin_. If you don't know what happens in that book, want the movie to surprise you, skip the following paragraph.

Soon after his return to active duty, Sang-hyun meets some people he knew many years ago - a widow, Madame Ra, and her mentally damaged son Kang-woo, who live in a horrible, claustrophobic house (played in Park Chan-wook's declared source, Zola's _Thérèse Raquin_). If you don't know what happens in that book, want the movie to surprise you, skip the following paragraph. 

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Christianity also plays a part in *True Blood*, which many viewers - as with the Twilight movie - will find good deal more entertaining than its source material, a series of moderately forgettable novels about telepathic waitress Sookie Stackhouse (played on TV by Anna Paquin). Sookie's uneventful life in a "podunk town" is disrupted when she becomes involved with a gentlemanly vampire with the homely name of Bill. *True Blood* takes place in a world in which vampires, having been freed from the necessity of preying on humanity by the synthesis of an acceptable blood substitute, have formally declared their presence (they have, folks say, "come out of the coffin") and are demanding equal rights with the breathing.

What will be obvious from this summary is that under its sexy, sassy, knowing surface, *True Blood* is at heart a good old-fashioned allegory about the virtues of tolerance - the parallels with other struggles for civil rights are underlined by the show's African-American characters, including Sookie's best friend, who reads books by Naomi Klein. The vampires in the show come in all moral hues, but none of them are as out-and-out rotten as the redneck thugs or fundamentalist Christians who despise them. Sookie is a Christian too, but a nice one. As she tells her grandma, she bets that "Jesus wouldn't have minded if people were vampires." And dear old Granny agrees. Van Helsing would have been appalled - so much for abominations in the sight of the Lord, and the scouring power of the cross.

Such, roughly, is the state of the new vampire craze at present. Is it likely to continue? Publishers in America are saying no: convinced the market has now reached saturation point, they are increasingly reluctant to commission vampire titles. But things look rather different when you round up the number of vampiric movies that are planned, or rumoured to be planned. Apart from more titles in *The Twilight Saga* (number two, *New Moon*, rolls out worldwide in November), these include at least two Dracula films (including Alex Proyas' long-delayed *Dracula Year Zero*), *Fangland*, adapted from the novel about vampires in network television; and *The Moth Diaries*, about a vampire in a girls' school, from director Mary Harron.

Then there is another long-delayed project - *Tim Burton's Dark Shadows*, with Johnny Depp in the Barnabas Collins role - not to mention repeated murmurs that the Anne Rice franchise may be brought back to life with Robert Downey Jr in the title role of *The Vampire Lestat*. Sheer herd instinct has something to do with all this activity: obviously, as long as punters keep buying tickets and DVDs for vampire fodder, the studios will keep churning it out. But the recent crop of vampire films has shown, once again, that the vampire genre need not be monotonous, and that the vampire theme remains multi-faceted and capacious enough to carry all sorts of additional possibilities, from satire to tragedy to farce - who knows, maybe even a musical? So, to perdition with the American publishers and their lily-livered abilities, from satire to tragedy to farce - who knows, maybe even a musical? So, to perdition with the American publishers and their lily-livered

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"*Thirst* is released on 16 October, and is reviewed on page 79. *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* is released on 20 November"