

Do I look good? Dandyism and spiritual figures in *Exhuma*, *the Wailing*, and *the Divine Fury*

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of dandyism through shamanic and spiritual figures in the films *Exhuma*, *The Wailing*, and *The Divine Fury*, using Elisabeth Amann's (2015) framework of the Three Imaginations: paranoid, catastrophic, and anachronic imagination. Employing a qualitative approach, the study analyzes visual and textual data from the films using Spradley's data analysis technique. The findings reveal that dandyism is represented differently across the three films. In *Exhuma*, the shaman's appearance and ritual practices reflect anachronistic and catastrophic imagination. In *The Wailing*, the shaman's ambiguous identity creates tension and reflects paranoid imagination, particularly through the character's self-presentation and relationship with the surrounding community. In *The Divine Fury*, Father Ahn, a Catholic priest and exorcist, embodies all three forms of imagination through his distinctive priestly attire, rejection of materialistic values, and use of traditional religious practices in a contemporary urban setting. These representations demonstrate how dandyism can be expressed through distinctive appearances, personal values, and resistance to conformity. This study contributes to the understanding of dandyism in contemporary South Korean cinema and offers further insights into how spiritual figures are represented through the interplay of tradition, modernity, and individuality.

Keywords: *dandyism, South Korean cinema, shamanic and spiritual figure, Elisabeth Amann*

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INTRODUCTION

For centuries, shamanism has played an important role in human culture. It initially emerged as a religious phenomenon in Siberia and Central Asia, where shamans served as intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds (Jakobsen, 2020). Shamans are generally believed to possess supernatural abilities that enable them to communicate with spiritual entities. Across different regions, shamanic traditions are known by various names and serve different purposes, including providing spiritual guidance and assistance to individuals and communities.

In South Korea, shamans are known as *mudang*, most of whom are women (Kim, 2018). They are commonly called upon to conduct healing rituals and exorcisms, as well as practice divination. Korean shamanism, known as *Mugyo*, is a traditional animistic belief system centered on deities believed to oversee human affairs (Cruz, 2021). Despite the influence of modernization, shamanism continues to be widely practiced in South Korea. Lee (2016) further demonstrates that Korean shamanism has adapted to contemporary media technologies, enabling practitioners to reconstruct their public identities and sustain their cultural presence within a rapidly changing society. However, these traditions have also undergone significant transformations, particularly with the emergence of younger *mudang* who are increasingly influenced by contemporary trends. These practitioners adapt their appearance and methods to contemporary aesthetics and incorporate social media into their activities (Yim, 2024).

Contemporary shamanic practices in South Korea are also represented in various forms of media, particularly film. *Exhuma*, *The Wailing*, and *The Divine Fury* portray aspects of the changing

representation of shamanism in South Korean society. These films feature young shamans whose appearances reflect modern influences. Such portrayals highlight the evolving role of shamans, or *mudang*, as traditional spiritual practices intersect with contemporary cultural trends. Through these representations, the films illustrate how shamanism is portrayed in response to a changing cultural landscape, reflecting the dynamic relationship between traditional beliefs and modern society.



Figure 1. Official film posters of Exhuma (2024), The Wailing (2016), and The Divine Fury (2019), from Left to Right.

In *Exhuma*, *Divine Fury*, and *The Wailing*, shamans are reimagined with a stylish, modern twist. *Exhuma* blends vibrant, contemporary aesthetics with traditional attire, elevating the shaman as both spiritual leader and fashion icon. *Divine Fury* opts for sleek minimalism, offering a refined, modern take on spiritual authority. *The Wailing* embraces an avant-garde approach, portraying the shaman as a flamboyant, enigmatic figure. These films merge the sacred with the avant-garde, transforming traditional depictions into striking, contemporary reinterpretations. Similarly, Pecic (2020) demonstrates that cinematic representations of shamanism can express historical trauma, postcolonial tensions, and cultural identity, suggesting that spiritual figures function not merely as ritual practitioners but also as symbols through which contemporary Korean society negotiates its historical and cultural experiences.

The representation of shamanism in South Korean cinema also reflects the relationship between religious traditions, gender, and cultural identity. Lee (2021) demonstrates that Korean shaman films have historically portrayed female shamans through ritual performances that negotiate spirituality, social marginalization, and individual agency. Such representations highlight the significance of visual appearance and ritual performance in constructing the cinematic identities of spiritual figures. Building on this perspective, the present study examines how contemporary films reinterpret shamanic and spiritual identities through aesthetic self-expression, particularly in relation to dandyism, individuality, and the intersection of traditional and modern cultural values.

There are several studies relevant to our research on the study of dandyism. The first is Michel (2017), which explores dandyism as an aesthetic. The second is Peng (2015), which discusses how dandyism transcends cultural boundaries and serves as a symbol of modernity. The third is Gstottner (2019), which examines how dandyism allowed Quentin Crisp to craft and safeguard his unique identity as a homosexual in a repressive era. The last is Askari (2024), which examines *Mr. Haji the Movie Actor* (1934) as a satirical portrayal of modern dandyism, blending Iran's cultural modernity with global silent cinema influences.

This study examines the concept of dandyism to explore how elegance, aesthetic expression, and attention to detail shape the representation of shamans in modern South Korean films. As previous studies may not have specifically addressed the relationship between dandyism and the appearance of South Korean shamans, this research aims to fill this gap by analyzing the depiction of dandyism in *Exhuma*, *The Wailing*, and *The Divine Fury*. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How is the dandyism of shamans depicted in these films?

Dandyism is a distinctive style and lifestyle characterized by elegance, flamboyance, individuality, and a strong emphasis on physical appearance. Amann (2015) describes dandyism as carefree, flamboyant, idiosyncratic, and without transcendence. Emerging in late eighteenth-century

Europe, dandyism developed beyond fashion into a form of artistic self-expression and social criticism that challenged dominant bourgeois values. The term *dandy* initially carried negative connotations associated with vanity and effeminacy but later became associated with elegance and self-fashioning (Amann, 2015). Grundmann (2021) further explains that dandyism emerged amid social changes, including the decline of aristocratic power and the rise of the middle class. Rather than merely following fashion trends, it functions as a performative expression of individuality and a rejection of conventional social norms.

The characteristics of dandyism are the combination of self-expression and freedom through elegant appearance, where clothing not only reflects personal identity but also shapes how one views oneself and others. According to Amann (2015), a dandy is a person who creates art out of his life. He is the creator and the main character of a story of his own. Dandyism considers clothing as a means of expressing identity and places an immense value on independence and freedom of expression. In spite of expressing character, it also plays a shaping role, as one's physical attributes can affect how they view themselves.

Dandyism in film has often been used to represent a masculine ideal that is heroic and admired, but over time, it evolved into a symbol of eccentricity, marginalization, and perceived weakened masculinity. In the late 1920s and 1930s, American films frequently depicted dandies as charismatic and heroic figures, but by the mid-20th century, this type became exaggerated to the point of being sidelined. Todd stated that in the tough and heterosexual world of film noir, masculinity is defined by sharp wit and toughness rather than refined elegance, and dandy-like figures are often portrayed as sexual deviants or socially alienated villains. For instance, in *Lady from Shanghai* (1948), George Grisby is portrayed as a devious homosexual who contrasts sharply with the film's tough, streetwise hero. In *Laura* (1944), the dandy type appears in two characters: Shelby Carpenter, a manipulative playboy, and Waldo Lydecker, an arrogant aesthete whose obsession with Laura drives him to attempted murder. Similarly, in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), the dandy is embodied by a villainous homosexual obsessed with ancient art and guns, reinforcing the notion of the dandy as the antithesis of the heterosexual, masculine hero. These portrayals illustrate how dandyism in film has evolved into a complex symbol blending aesthetics with social marginalization.

The relationship between dandyism and gender further demonstrates that aesthetic self-presentation cannot be understood exclusively through conventional masculine identities. Gill (2007) challenges the historically masculine interpretation of dandyism by examining the cultural and literary representations of female dandies. This perspective broadens the understanding of dandyism as a form of aesthetic distinction that may transcend traditional gender boundaries. In the context of contemporary South Korean cinema, this perspective provides an additional basis for examining how spiritual figures, particularly female shamans, construct distinctive identities through clothing, appearance, and unconventional self-presentation.

Amann (2015) identifies three key elements of dandyism that shape a character's categorization as a dandy, which he refers to as the "three imaginations." The first is the paranoid imagination, which highlights the tension between surface and depth, appearance and reality. The second, known as the catastrophic imagination, revolves around the distinction between self and other, or "us" versus "them." The third is the anachronistic imagination, which underscores the contrast between past and present, or the old versus the new.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative design with a descriptive approach to examine the representation of dandyism in the appearances of shamans in the films *Exhuma*, *The Wailing*, and *The Divine Fury*. It explored how dandyism, typically linked to fashion and individualism, was reflected in the visual portrayal of shamans and how these depictions shaped societal views of shamans and their roles. The aim was to understand how aesthetics influenced perceptions of the shaman's power, spirituality, and authority.

Data were gathered from the three films, focusing on the shamanic characters whose appearances mixed traditional and dandyism elements. These films were selected for their unique blend of spirituality, fashion, and cultural identity. The data included visual analysis of costume design, grooming, and makeup.

The data were analyzed using Spradley's (2016) four-stage method: domain analysis identifying instances of dandyism in the shamans' appearances, taxonomy analysis to classify different dandyism representations across the films, componential analysis to examine how specific visual elements like color and texture contributed to the character's look, and cultural themes analysis to assess how these portrayals are influenced by the perceptions and concepts of the three imaginations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section explores the depiction of dandyism in shaman characters within the films *Exhuma*, *The Wailing*, and *The Divine Fury*, aligning with its established typology. Dandyism, a widely discussed concept in cinema, is often expressed through the distinctive style and appearance of characters, embodying a lifestyle characterized by irony, sophistication, and aesthetic appeal. Our research examines how dandyism influences these characters' portrayals, shaping their role within various cinematic contexts. Dandyism can be categorized into three primary types: Paranoid imagination, catastrophic imagination, and anachronistic imagination. Through an analysis of *Exhuma*, *The Wailing*, and *The Divine Fury*, we demonstrate how each of these imaginative types is reflected in the shaman characters, revealing the complex layers of dandyism within these films.

Exhuma



Figure 2. Hwa-rim's Shoes _Exhuma

Exhuma explores the intersection of identity, tradition, and historical heritage through the concept of dandyism. The character Hwa-rim challenges conventional perceptions of shamans through her distinctive appearance and interactions with spiritual entities, which contrast with the social stigma associated with shamanism.

As the film's main shaman, Hwa-rim embodies dandyism within the category of anachronistic imagination through her combination of traditional and contemporary elements. Her hanbok, worn during *gut* (굿), a traditional Korean shamanic ritual, is paired with modern sneakers. This juxtaposition of past and present reflects Amann's (2015) concept of dandyism. Furthermore, her unconventional footwear challenges expectations that shamans must adhere strictly to traditional appearances and symbolic objects, such as incense and amulets, which are believed to connect the physical and metaphysical worlds. By wearing sneakers instead of traditional *beoseon* (버선) and low-heeled sandals, Hwa-rim disrupts conventional representations of shamanism and exemplifies the catastrophic imagination category of dandyism.

Beyond her role as a spiritual healer, Hwa-rim represents individuality, cultural transformation, and modernity. Through her character, *Exhuma* (2024) invites audiences to reconsider how historical legacies and entrenched social perceptions can be confronted in contemporary society. The film thus

presents cultural heritage not merely as a fixed tradition but as a foundation for responding to modern social issues. This interpretation is consistent with Lee (2025), who examines *Exhuma* in relation to the complexities of Korean cultural identity and historical memory. From this perspective, Hwa-rim's distinctive self-presentation can be understood as part of the film's broader negotiation between traditional spirituality and contemporary cultural expression.

The Wailing



Figure 3. Il-Gwang_The wailing

In *The Wailing*, Il-gwang's appearance and interactions reflect elements of dandyism. As a shaman, he displays a distinctive style, particularly through his black *hanbok* adorned with colorful, eye-catching patterns. Combined with his dramatic movements during rituals, this attire demonstrates deliberate self-fashioning and reflects the category of *paranoid imagination*. The significance of ritual performance can also be understood through Mills (2012), who examines the role of music in a traditional South Korean death ritual and its relationship to emotional and spiritual expression. This perspective highlights the performative dimensions of shamanic practices, suggesting that Il-gwang's ritual movements and visual presentation contribute to the construction of his spiritual authority within the film. His clothing also conveys ambiguity in identity, as his distinctive appearance may challenge others' perceptions of authenticity. This visual ambiguity can also be considered within the broader development of East Asian horror cinema. Byrne (2014) examines the cross-cultural circulation of horror-film conventions between South Korea and Japan, providing a comparative perspective on how cinematic aesthetics can acquire different cultural meanings. In *The Wailing*, Il-gwang's carefully constructed appearance similarly contributes to the uncertainty surrounding his spiritual identity. This aligns with Amann's concept of dandyism, in which ambiguity becomes a means of constructing individual identity.

From the perspective of *catastrophic imagination*, Il-gwang's appearance varies according to the situation. When meeting clients, he wears a jacket or suit, presenting himself as an elegant and professional shaman. This attire distinguishes him from others dressed casually and reinforces his carefully constructed public image. Through these changes in appearance, Il-gwang demonstrates how clothing can communicate social distinction and shape perceptions of status within the practice of shamanism.

The Divine Fury



Figure 4.. Father Ahn._The Divine Fury

In *The Divine Fury* (2019), Father Ahn, a Catholic priest and exorcist portrayed by Ahn Sung-ki, can be analyzed through Elisabeth Amann's concepts of paranoid, catastrophic, and anachronic imagination. As a mentor to Yong-hu, who develops a stigmata-like wound, Father Ahn guides him in understanding his newfound powers and confronting supernatural evil. His wisdom, compassion, and religious devotion establish him as a spiritual figure whose appearance, values, and actions can be examined through the lens of dandyism.

Father Ahn's *paranoid imagination* is reflected in his commitment to maintaining his spiritual identity amid the conflict between good and evil. His traditional priestly attire distinguishes him from the surrounding modern society and reinforces his religious role. His *catastrophic imagination* is expressed through his rejection of materialism and superficial values. By maintaining a modest lifestyle and relying on essential religious objects, such as holy water and relics, he reflects the dandy's critical stance toward social excess and conformity. Finally, his *anachronistic imagination* emerges through the use of traditional practices, including Latin prayers and ancient rituals, within a contemporary urban setting. This juxtaposition connects historical religious traditions with modern realities. Through these elements, Father Ahn can be interpreted as a figure whose distinctive appearance, values, and practices challenge contemporary social norms and express individuality.

CONCLUSION

This study examines how dandyism is represented through shamanic and spiritual characters in the South Korean films *Exhuma*, *The Wailing*, and *The Divine Fury*. The findings demonstrate that dandyism, expressed through the categories of *paranoid imagination*, *catastrophic imagination*, and *anachronic imagination*, extends beyond fashion to reflect individual identity, social criticism, and the relationship between tradition and modernity.

In *Exhuma*, Hwa-rim's combination of a traditional *hanbok* and modern sneakers challenges conventional expectations of shamanic appearance and illustrates the coexistence of past and present. In *The Wailing*, Il-gwang's flamboyant clothing and dramatic ritual movements emphasize distinctive self-fashioning and ambiguity in identity, reflecting *paranoid imagination*. Meanwhile, in *The Divine Fury*, Father Ahn's reliance on traditional religious practices within a contemporary urban setting illustrates *anachronistic imagination*, while his modest lifestyle reflects resistance to materialism, associated with *catastrophic imagination*.

Overall, these representations challenge conventional perceptions of spiritual figures by presenting them as individuals whose appearance, practices, and values reflect broader cultural transformations. The study concludes that dandyism provides a framework for understanding how visual aesthetics and self-fashioning shape the representation of spiritual identity and authority in contemporary South Korean cinema. Rather than portraying tradition as static, these films demonstrate how spiritual practices and cultural identities are reinterpreted in response to modern social contexts.

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