

Ghost Movies in Southeast Asia and Beyond

Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde

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Ghost Movies in Southeast Asia and Beyond

Narratives, Cultural Contexts, Audiences

Edited by

Peter J. Bräunlein
Andrea Lauser



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Preface

Spirits remain ubiquitous in the religious and social life of Southeast Asia. Recent processes of modernization have indeed consolidated rather than weakened these developments. Mass media, especially cinema and television, play a major role in shaping conceptions of ghosts and spirits in popular culture. Since the overwhelming success of the Japanese horror-blockbuster *Ringu* (1998), the once poorly regarded ghost movie genre has reinvented itself, and become even more popular in East and Southeast Asia. Set in contemporary urban environments, films and television shows featuring communication with the unredeemed (un)dead and vengeful (female) ghosts, with their terrifying grip on the living, have become commonplace. Ghost movies almost invariably comment on moral issues and the relationship between tradition and change. These films also incorporate occult forces which determine the fate of individuals, as well as modern life itself. As such, they offer valuable clues to the condition of modernity and the anxieties of their main audience, the aspiring middle class.

Observing these trends, we started to explore popular media as an appropriate lens to measure their impact on the recent spirit belief. Why do people like to be scared (and why are they prepared to pay for this experience)? How is entertainment related to the worldviews and religious convictions of their audiences? Are such products of the film industry sources of re-enchantment, or do they simply produce forms of 'banal religion'? Or do we, in fact, need to develop different analytical categories beyond the enchantment-disenchantment metaphor?

This volume grew out of contributions presented at two different conferences and workshops focusing on ghost films in contemporary Southeast Asia. The research network *Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia* (DORISEA) hosted an international workshop in Göttingen in October 2012, and held a follow-up panel at the EUROSEAS conference in Lisbon in July 2013. Early versions of the chapters in this book were originally presented at these events. Without the invaluable support of so many people—many more than we can mention here—this volume would not have been possible. First of all, we would like to express our special thanks to all the conference and panel participants, and in particular to the contributors to this volume, for their willingness to join our exploration, and for their insightful contributions. We are especially grateful to Karin Klenke for accompanying our workshop and its outcomes with her organizational skills as a DORISEA network coordinator. The German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) provided funding for the

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Andrea Lauser, Göttingen, Germany

Peter J. Bräunlein, Göttingen, Germany

March 2016

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She co-edited among others the recent volumes “Religion, Place and Modernity in Southeast and East Asia: Reflections on the Spatial Articulation of Religion” (2016), “Haunted Thresholds. Spirituality in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Geister in der Moderne Südostasiens” (2014), “Engaging the Spirit World: Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia” (2011).

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'Cinema-Spiritualism' in Southeast Asia and Beyond

Encounters with Ghosts in the 21st Century

Peter J. Bräunlein

Introduction

Within the diverse and colorful cultural landscape of Southeast Asia, ghosts and spirits have not been relegated to the pre-modern past; rather, they continue to play an important role in the post-colonial present. In rapidly transforming societies such as Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore, Cambodia, Indonesia and Myanmar, spirits of the departed remain ubiquitous. Indeed, they are both visible and audible in shrines and temples—through trance mediums and by the means of ritual performance—and in television series, blockbuster cinema, cartoons, tabloids, and other forms of mass media.

Ghosts were, of course, always protagonists in literature and film in East and Southeast Asia. However, in the middle of the Asian crisis in the late 1990s, ghost movies became major box-office hits. The emergence of the phenomenally popular 'J-Horror' (Japanese horror) genre inspired ghost movie productions in Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Singapore in unprecedented ways. Most often located in contemporary urban settings, these films feature frenzy, ghastly homicides, terror attacks, communication with the unredeemed (un)dead, and vengeful (female) ghosts with a terrifying grip on the living: features that have since become part of the mainstream television and film entertainment narrative pool.

The various manifestations of spirits and ghosts in ancestor veneration, possession cults, popular rituals, and the mass media in different parts of East and Southeast Asia have revealed that they are thoroughly modern manifestations of the uncertainties, moral disquiet, unequal rewards and aspirations of the contemporary moment (e.g. Fieldstad and Thi Hien, 2006; Kwon Heonik, 2006, 2008, 2010; Endres, 2011; Endres and Lauser, 2011; McDaniel, 2011; Johnson, 2014). It is precisely the increasing (re)emergence of ghosts and spirits in the public sphere as a means of engaging with the complexities and ambiguities of the contemporary world that has led scholars to call for a (re)

conceptualization of beliefs in spirits and accompanying practices as something eminently modern (Bräunlein, 2014).

Ghosts and the Biases of a Master Narrative

The effort to take ghosts and spirits seriously in the academic world is a provocative one. This is particularly true in the Western academia, where a strategy of ironic distancing is relatively common whenever ghosts and spirits are mentioned as subjects of scholarly investigation (with the honorable exception of anthropologists, I hasten to add). However, my conversations with scholars in Southeast Asia have conveyed a different impression. There, it seems that, the study of ghosts and spirits, either in the cinema or during trance rituals, has never been questioned or commented on with tongue in cheek. Ghosts and spirits are treated as serious subjects in every respect. Conversations about ghosts and spirits, so I learnt, reveal a sort of West–East contrast which is reflected in the (still) dominant master narrative on modernity.

The topic of ghosts and spirits serves as a versatile gauge that distinguishes not only between reason and superstition, authentic religion and folk-religion, but also between the educated elite and the poorly-educated masses, high-brow and lowbrow culture, good and bad taste. Publicly expressed disdain for ghostly matters is common not only in academia but also in the *feuilleton* of the bourgeois media. Everyone knows that ghosts and spirits are not a suitable topic for a careerist. There are, of course, anthropologists, folklorists, film and cultural studies scholars striving for recognition of the subject matter. However, such scholars are concerned, it is commonly assumed, with the ‘primitive mind’, with pre-industrial societies or the lower depths of society. In this way the mainstream consensus is reaffirmed.

The prevalent discourse on ghosts and spirits is part of a wider discourse of modernity. Modernity is considered rational and secular, and this basic assumption carries with it a fundamental divide between the ‘us’ of reason and progress and the ‘them’ of irrational beliefs and ‘not-yetness’ (Chakrabarty, 2000: 8, 249f.).

In other words, modernity as a master narrative not only transmits interpretive patterns and a value system, but also works as an ideological force. Modernization theory, especially in its classical variants which regard the Western path to modernity as unilineal and exemplary, is affected by this ideological subtext. Discontent with and critique of such convergent theoretical assumptions has prompted scholars to look for alternative concepts which accentuate the inherent diversity of developmental paths (Wagner,

2001; Knöbl, 2007, 2015). The debate over 'multiple modernities', suggested by Shmuel Eisenstadt (2000), is one prominent example. Another noteworthy approach emphasizes 'multiple secularities' (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, 2012).

Historically seen, however, the fascination with the uncanny is a characteristic of Western modernity, which began in the 18th century through literature. Horace Walpole, Gottfried August Bürger or Mary Shelley, to mention but a few authors, initiated the enduring and distinctly modern genre of gothic and horror, which would remain popular throughout the 19th century (Wolfreys, 2001). Pleasure in anxiety and enjoyment of fear were and are part of the emotional makeup of the modern individual. The literary aestheticization of the uncanny was thus a reaction to the demand of the reading public, especially the educated middle classes. Around the 1850s, this class was fascinated by the spiritualist movement in the US and Europe, which has been re-evaluated in the recent past (e.g. Barrow, 1986; Garoutte, 1992; Treitel, 2004; Tromp, 2006; McGarry, 2008; Monroe, 2008). These historians no longer regard ritual communication with the spirits of the deceased to be a relic of pre-modernity or a superstitious folly, but as a genuine component of modernity. In those days spiritualism had become, in fact, "the religion of the modern man" (Hochgeschwender, 2011). Another aspect was the discovery of an inner relationship between spirit media and technological media (Sconce, 2000): spiritual telegraphy was one telling example of that connection (Noakes, 1999), spirit photography was another (e.g. Chéroux, 2005; Harvey, 2007).

Aside from the (re)discovery of the fantastic and spectral imaginary in the history of Western modernity, awareness is growing that modernity itself is somehow 'uncanny'. In his "Specters of Marx" (1994), Jacques Derrida lists the ten plagues of the global capital system, thereby introducing the term 'hauntology'. Fascinated by the essential feature of the specter, the simultaneity of presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, Derrida argues that the logic of haunting is more powerful than ontology and a thinking of Being. Hauntology harbors eschatology and teleology within itself (Derrida, 1994: 10). After the frequently invoked 'end of history', the past is an essential constituent of the present. It is the ghosts of the past, especially the specters of communism that haunt us. From that perspective, ghosts are not terrifying revenants, but manifest "as welcome, if disquieting spurs to consciousness and calls for political action" (Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015: 191). Through Derrida the reference to haunting, ghosts and spectrality became an accepted, even fashionable trope in the academia. He initiated, probably unintentionally, a 'spectral turn' which gained ground in the 'uncanny nineties' (Jay, 1998). While the 'spectral turn' has undoubtedly inspired contemporary cultural theory and the arts, it has

also been heavily criticized (Luckhurst, 2002; Blanco and Peeren, 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015; Leeder, 2015b).

Ghosts and Movies in Southeast Asia *and Beyond*

Despite such a 'spectral turn', in the Western academia the topic of ghosts and spirits invariably invokes debates about modernity, reason and unreason, belief and knowledge, religion and science, 'we' and 'other'. In accordance with these conceptions, a world populated by ghosts and/or animated by spirits belongs to a worldview that some evolutionists labeled 'animism' in the 19th century. Animism in this sense

operated as *mirror* and a *negative horizon*: it established a limit and created an outside, a negative, from which modernity derived its own positivity. In this negative image, modernity affirms itself *as* modern, by constructing its constitutive alterity. To be modern meant to leave the confused magic world of animism behind and to separate the world along the rationale of the great Cartesian divides. Unlike animists, moderns have replaced mere subjective belief with objective knowledge, and they have established the distinction proper between imagination and reality, mind and matter, self and world. Becoming modern meant to extirpate oneself from the world of animism, in which all those fundamental divides appear as inextricably fused.

FRANKE, 2011: 169

This 19th century mirror and negative horizon is still in operation. To argue as a film studies scholar, a sociologist or a media anthropologist is to proceed from a different perspective than that of a horror-movie fan or a client of a trance-medium. In academia, conventions, tacit agreements, and even taboos are observed. The ontological status of ghosts is a sensitive issue in that regard. Even if the scholar subscribes to a methodological agnosticism, ghosts and spirits are commonly discussed against the background of 'belief' and 'knowledge': *they* still believe in ghosts—*we* do not. 'Belief' and 'believing', however, are contested terms in the study of religion (Bell, 2002: 2008), and are carefully scrutinized concepts in philosophy and sociology of knowledge (Mannheim, 1936; Macintosh, 1994). In short, analytical instruments entail biases and cultural partialities, and explications of these are indispensable to making known the position from which we investigate ghosts and movies in Southeast Asia.

Precisely because spirits are a provocative antithesis to enlightened reason and the promises of modernity, they make a highly interesting leitmotif in studies seeking to gain insight into social transformation processes in Southeast Asia. Indeed, this leitmotif also provides insights into cultural peculiarities of Western modernity: looking from the 'periphery' to the West is revealing. Consequently, the 'beyond' in the volume's title refers to a specific reflective perspective that contrasts the East and Southeast Asian ghost movie genre with its appearance and popularity in the West. The global success of the genre can only be understood by reflecting on the importance and various meanings of ghost discourses and the uncanny in Western and Eastern societies. This comparative perspective has been chosen as an antidote to the stereotypical juxtaposition of Asian audiences as 'ghost-believers' and Western audiences as apparently 'rational' and 'skeptical'.

Film and the black box called cinema are inseparable concomitants of modernity. The medium adds a new dimension to what the modern man considers the realm of the 'real'. Cinema generates and distributes influential narratives and imaginations that constitute, at least to some extent, the social imaginary of the global mediascape. Amongst the different "technologies of the imagination" (Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen, 2009), the moving image of film has to be considered a powerful, if not the most powerful, technology in this regard. Hereby, the importance of imagination and the imaginary have to be re-evaluated, as proposed by Arjun Appadurai:

The image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice*. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is somewhere else), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. This unleashing of the imagination links the play of pastiche (in some settings) to the terror and coercion of states and their competitors. The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order.

Appadurai teaches us that imagination can be understood “as the mechanism by which ‘modernity’ is made ‘multiple’ in different social and cultural contexts” (Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen, 2009: 6). Most likely, Appadurai did not have spectral images in mind when he wrote these lines. For our purpose, however, his ideas are highly stimulating. To link ghost narratives to the social world of the audience, to its desires and subjectivities, and to its work of imagination is one aim of this volume. Choosing and being entertained by the genre of ghost movies is part of social practice, as the spectator is neither a passive recipient nor a mere object of ideological subjugation by the cinematic ‘apparatus’. Ghost movies are embedded and reflected in national as well as transnational cultures and politics, in narrative traditions, in the social worlds of the audience, and in the perceptual experience of each individual. Ghost movies are entertainment, narratives, cultural events, and they have a life beyond the screen. Therefore, the value of studying film as social practice is self-evident, as Graeme Turner suggests (2006).

Thus, the contributors to this volume share the conviction that imagination and the imaginary are powerful forces in the human lifeworld. Blockbuster movies are imagination machines which work as ‘models *of*’ the state of things as well as ‘models *for*’ the way things ought to be, to borrow Clifford Geertz’ famous phrase (Geertz, 1973: 93). Moving stories, regardless of whether they are told by the bonfire, or through literature or film, reflect *and* reshape the world. Both aspects are of equal importance. To analyze ghost movies in so far as they are a form of textual representation or discourse container is a widely accepted but, in itself, insufficient as an approach.

These assumptions underlie the analytical perspectives of all contributors. Nevertheless, as this volume is the result of a multi-disciplinary endeavor, the contributors’ methods and theoretical perspectives vary. We consider this fact to be the strength of our efforts: underscoring the multifacetedness of the ghost movie genre by constituting a kaleidoscopic approach. A kaleidoscope is based on the principle of multiple reflection, allowing the user to view numerous different, surprising and colorful patterns by a slight turn of the mirrors. This analogy is helpful to elucidate our intention of scrutinizing ghost movies from different viewing angles. The heuristic ambition of multifaceted awareness can be summarized in the words of Friedrich Nietzsche:

There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our ‘concept’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity’, be.

NIETZSCHE, 1989: 119

In the following, I outline some perspectives that illustrate the promising potential of dealing with ghosts in movies.

Cinema Spiritualism

The term spiritualism refers to a period of rapid transformation in the West when spirits of the dead were evoked through trance-mediums and new media such as photography, telegraphy and radio. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, spirit séances were a complex event that straddled ritual, stage magic, entertaining spectacle, and scientific experiment. Such staged trance performances polarized the audience, provoking in equal measure accusations of fraudulent behavior, and fascination with the possibility of communication with the departed. Likewise, photographic images of spirits were “believed to be real manifestations of the existence of spirits and ghosts, at times debunked as a photographic trick, at times used for their entertaining and spectacular effect”, as Simone Natale states (2012: 126; see also Natale, 2011).

Media practices of evoking ghosts obviously responded to a certain cognitive and emotional fascination amidst the growing middle class. The concurrent emergence of trance media and new media stirred public debates on deception, superstition, and occultism on the one hand, and reason, progress and a new science of the otherworld on the other. At the time, it was the latent suspicion of a close relationship between magic and modernity, or better, the notion of a magical quality of modern communication technology that simultaneously irritated and stimulated. The grand narrative of progress and reason considered magic to be the quintessential ‘other’ of modernity. Whereas some thinkers, such as Sigmund Freud, Ruth Benedict and Bronislaw Malinowski acknowledged the existence of magic *in* modernity, they did not elaborate their arguments in theory (Pels, 2003: 3). The spiritualism/anti-spiritualism controversy took place against this background, a debate in which diverse kinds of media played an important role (e.g. Noakes, 1999; Sconce, 2000; Thurschwell, 2001; Chéroux, 2005). “All media have their spectral dimensions”, film historian Murray Leeder (2015b: 3) maintains. Likewise, media historian John Durham Peters states that “[e]very new medium is a machine for the production of ghosts” (Peters, 2000: 139). Apart from recalling spirit appearances as media effects of the first modernity, we might also recall the fact that cinema, the art of projecting shadows, has from its beginning been the epitome of magic in and of modernity (Gunning, 1995; Douglas and Eamon, 2009; North, 2001; Leeder, 2015c).

The mediation of ghosts has been constantly renewed in the course of over 150 years of media history. At this point we might wonder, together with Rosalind Morris,

whether the fantastical and increasingly elaborate forms in which these figures are realized cinematically are related as much to the fact that the form is constantly threatened by exhaustion as to the technological invention of new representational possibilities.

MORRIS, 2008: 237

In fact, 100 years after the heyday of spiritualism, and particularly since the turn of the 21st century, ghosts have once again become prevalent across a diverse range of media, including films, television series, and video games.

This sort of ghostly presence polarizes anew. The public debate on the effects of the seemingly inferior products of the culture industry is also a debate on media and modernity, on the human mind and its manipulation. One faction implicates mass media, especially the new media, as instruments of controlling and dulling the mind, whereas the opposing faction cherishes advanced media technologies as instruments of brightening the mind and opening up new realms of hitherto unknown experiences.

Early on, film theorists discussed the mind-altering capacities of the cinema, which was seen as an intrinsic characteristic of the technology. The film scholars Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener speak of a 'trance-like state' in which the spectators are transposed in front of the screen.

In the cinema, the specific set-up of projection, screen and audience, together with the 'centering' effect of optical perspective and the focalizing strategies of filmic narration, all ensure or conspire to transfix but also to transpose the spectator into a trance-like state in which it becomes difficult to distinguish between the 'out-there' and the 'in-here'.

ELSAESSER AND HAGENER, 2010: 68

Trance-cults and trance-techniques, we might note, had been a disputed topic 100 years ago. In this dispute, conflicting ideas about the modernity or backwardness of trance-techniques and its media were subject to fierce debate (Hahn and Schüttpelz, 2009: 9). Assessments of the 'trance-like states' of cinema audiences continue to differ. Jean-Louis Baudry, for example, by referring to Plato's cave parable, sees the ominous and fatal effects of cinematic apparatus upon spectators:

It is therefore their motor paralysis, the impossibility to go away from where they find themselves, that makes a reality check impossible in their case, thereby beautifying their misapprehension and causing them to confuse the representational for the real [...].

BAUDRY, 1986: 303

Baudry describes the audience's state of mind as diminished vigilance, dream-like, as paralysis or regression, always at risk of confusing the fictitious with the factual. Critics of Baudry object that, unlike the prisoners in Plato's cave, audience members are cognizant that they are in a cinema house and voluntarily enter into the experience.

With these remarks on spiritualism and trance, I do not want to maintain that today's ghost movie fans can be simply equated with the spiritualists of 100 years ago. In no way do I suggest that a naive audience is so mesmerized by mediatized ghosts that they mistake screen reality for that outside the cinema.

Nevertheless, the reference to historic spiritualism calls attention to some common aspects. From early on, Murray Leeder asserts, "the cinema has been described as haunted or ghostly medium. [...] Deliberately or accidentally, it has become a storehouse for our dead" (Leeder, 2015b: 3). Indeed, in recent years, the idea of cinema as ghostly has been reinvigorated under the influence of Derrida's hauntology.

Media, cinematic technology in this case, create an experiential realm which facilitates the encounter with otherwise invisible beings. The creation of this inner realm is, to a certain extent, based on altered states of consciousness and the willingness of the individual to immerse herself in this imaginary space. In his theory of fiction as a game of make-believe, augmented by his concept of 'mental simulation', the philosopher Kendall Walton argues that make-believe has to be regarded as the fundamental world-making activity (Walton, 1990). The human capacity of world-making through fiction is based on the poetics of immersion, as Marie-Laure Ryan coined it. Temporal and emotional immersion always requires "an active engagement [...] and a demanding act of imagining" (Ryan, 2001: 15).

The spiritualist's stage performances as well as the cinematic performances of ghost movies offer a space for such acts of imagining, in which 'what if's, or skeptical popular subjunctivity, can be tested (Koch and Voss, 2009). The main hypothesis being tested is the question of whether ghosts exist or not, whether there is 'existence' after life or not.

Are Movie Ghosts Gothic, Religious or Banal?

Unavoidably, the human quest for existential meaning queries the unknown: death and what comes after death. What form of existence can be expected after death? This question belongs to the spectrum of existential questions for which religions traditionally provide ultimate answers (Cowan, 2011: 405, 2008: 126–133). Religious experts, theologians, priests, and ascetics claim interpretive authority about the afterlife, and dare to explicate redemption and damnation,

heaven and hell, purgatory and rebirth. In the course of modernity, Eastern and Western alike, religions as meaning-giving systems compete with other authorities: political ideologies, philosophy, science, art, and literature. In the quest for meaning, the individual is overloaded with a great variety of alternatives, and is thereby compelled to choose and refuse, to examine, to reassess, to decide, to search anew. Although in disguise, although playful, popular culture serves as a valuable resource in this quest for meaning.

Without a doubt, most ghost movie fans would flatly deny that, for example, *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998) or *The Grudge/Ju-On* (dir. Takashi Shimizu, 2002) are movies about religion or religious movies. Likewise, most film historians and scholars of cultural studies do not detect any religion in ghost movies at all. Instead they use the label 'gothic'; a term invented in literary studies which functions as an aesthetic, pop-cultural category (e.g. Wheatley, 2006).

In contrast, media scholar Stig Hjarvard helpfully applies the analytical category 'banal religion' in his "theory of the media as agents of religious change". By 'banal religion', Hjarvard considers

the fact that both individual faith and collective religious imagination are created and maintained by a series of experiences and representations that may have no, or only a limited, relationship with the institutionalized religions.

HJARVARD, 2008: 15

Such experiences and representations are not only to be found in urban legends, folk traditions, and fairy tales, but are also in soap operas, tabloids, comic books and, of course, blockbuster movies.

Hjarvard emphasizes that the label 'banal' does not imply that banal religious representations are less important or irrelevant.

On the contrary, they are primary and fundamental in the production of religious thoughts and feelings, and they are also banal in the sense that their religious meanings may travel unnoticed and can be evoked independently of larger religious texts or institutions.

HJARVARD, 2008: 15

Methodologically, and in accordance with Thomas Csordas, we should consider "religion, popular culture, politics, and economics as necessarily coeval and intertwined, as they are in the lives of actors" (Csordas, 2009: 3).

No matter how useful the category 'banal religion' is, we have to recognize that pop-cultural ghosts refer to multiple relationships between religion, media, and the public sphere (Meyer and Moors, 2006: 3). The boundaries

between entertainment and religion are blurred, as was already illustrated by the example of the Western spiritualism around 1900. Or, in the words of Stewart M. Hoover: "An effect of the mediated public sphere [...] is the destabilization of the category of 'the religious' in media audience terms" (Hoover, 2008: 43).

"What if you were already dead?" Post-mortem Cinema and Identity Crisis

As products of popular culture, ghost movies unfold affection and attraction in the border zone between amusement and thrill, secular and religious world-views, trivial and existential questions, angst and existential dread. This makes the genre interesting not only for sociologists, anthropologists, media and film scholars, but also for scholars of religion. The appearances of ghosts on television and in cinema provide some sort of information about afterlife. The common fear of death, of dying badly and of not remaining dead is linked to concepts of condemnation and redemption, which fall in the fields of traditional religious competence, but are reflected in the products of entertainment industries.

Against this background, I want to refer to the prominent, invented genre label 'post-mortem cinema'. In their introduction to film theory, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener identify this new genre, which has flourished since the 1990s, as a recent development of Hollywood film. The authors do not exclusively deal with ghost movies. Rather, the term 'post-mortem cinema' has a broader scope. The authors point to movies such as *Forrest Gump* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1994), *Lost Highway* (dir. David Lynch, 1997), *The Sixth Sense* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), *American Beauty* (dir. Sam Mendes, 1999), *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher, 1999), *Memento* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2000), *Mulholland Drive* (dir. David Lynch, 2001), *Donnie Darko* (dir. Richard Kelly, 2001), *Vanilla Sky* (dir. Cameron Crowe, 2001), *The Others* (dir. Alejandro Amenábar, 2001), and *Volver* (dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 2006).

One of the key questions of this genre is: "What if you were already dead?" The narrations, including *how* the story is narrated, have their own characteristics. Elsaesser argues that many mainstream Hollywood films deal with after-life, survival, parallel lives, and simultaneously with memory, memorization, and trauma. Coming to terms with the past and the preservation/reconstruction of history, either collective or personal, is central to this genre.

[W]hile the body is (un)dead, the brain goes on living and leads an after-life of sorts or finds different—ghostly, but also banal, mundane—forms of embodiment.

The linking motif of these films refers to the limits of classical identity formation:

where we assure ourselves of who we are through memory, perception and bodily self-presence. When these indices of identity fail, or are temporarily disabled, as in conditions of trauma, amnesia or sensory overload, it challenges the idea of a unified, self-identical and rationally motivated individual, assumed and presupposed by humanist philosophy. Not only posthumanist philosophies, such as those of Deleuze and Foucault, but popular films and mainstream cinema, too, register this crisis in our ideas of identity.

ELSAESSER AND HAGENER, 2010: 155–156

Southeast Asian ghost movies fit in a very literal sense to the label 'post-mortem cinema', because these movies explore and depict forms of post-mortem existence in various ways. But they also fit the label as specifically elaborated by Elsaesser and Hagener. Southeast Asian ghost movies reflect upon the identity crises and trauma of the living as well as of the dead. The impositions of modernity, individualization, growing violence, new gender-relations, and the need to re-invent and adapt the self to the demands of modern life, take their toll. Ghost movies mirror a changing understanding of the self, haunted by new anxieties and new kinds of spirits. In many such movies both the living as well as the dead are portrayed as confused and in need of psychological and religious guidance. Precariousness, insecurity, and even chaos are parameters of the present. Naming chaos and taming unpredictability by spirit rituals and narratives of ghostly intrusions are strategies to cope with the effects of urban modernization (Johnson, 2012).

Ghost movies of the early 21st century are located in an urban and middle class ambience. Ghosts most often utilize information and communication technologies to intrude and threaten. The ghosts in such films never transform into protective forces. They stage a melodramatic tribunal by their own rules. Ridden by insatiable anger, they cannot be appeased. There are no heroes and no happy endings—the invasion of ghosts is enduring. Ghost movies of this kind belong to the horror genre and they are about fear. The study of ghost movies provides insights into the cultural construction of fear, but also into the shortcomings of modernity and their frightening effects. Pattana Kitiarsa says in relation to Thai horror films:

modernity intensifies violation, violence, and the haunting of the dead. These films have undressed modernity and revealed its naked truth. They

mirror(ed) modernity's ironies. [...] Thailand is haunted by the shortcomings of modernity: it seems to promise many things, but cannot always deliver on what it promises; the process of modernization has created as much as it has destroyed. In the Thai context, horror films reveal the dark side of urban modernization.

PATTANA KITIARSA, 2011: 216

In fact, it is the trope of trauma and identity crisis that unites Western and Asian ghost movies. There are links between spirits and changing conceptions of self in a global world, as Nils Bubandt argues, comparing Indonesian spirit cults with popular US-American television series such as *Ghost Whisperers* (dir. John Gray, 2005–2010), *Medium* (dir. Glenn Gordon Caron, 2005–2011), *Supernatural* (dir. Eric Kripke, 2005–present) and Hollywood movies such as *The Sixth Sense* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 1999):

In Indonesia, ghosts are becoming traumatised, while in the West spirits increasingly struggle with emotional problems. In different ways, [...] spirits are becoming implicated in the globalisation of an interiorised and psychological understanding of what it means to be human. As humans are encouraged to think of themselves as psychological beings, human spirits and ghosts are reinvented in a variety of ways—East and West.

BUBANDT, 2012: 1

Encountering Cinematic Ghosts: beneath the Skin

The way in which Pattana Kitiarsa and Nils Bubandt decode ghost films works on a meta-level of observation and analysis. The scholarly perspective operates with abstract concepts and tools such as discourse, representation, modernization, society, trauma, the self, or even spectrality. Scholars learn and teach something about culture and society by watching ghost films.

The audience's perspective in front of the screen is necessarily different. The average spectator's decoding is anything but abstract and analytical. Since the ghost movie genre deals with the otherwise invisible, the viewers have to be convinced of the otherworldly reality depicted on screen. Ghost movies always play with and dislodge the audience's reality concepts and expectations. In the end, however, the plot and clues of the story, as well as its enactment, must be comprehensible and persuasive. Filmic post-mortem scenarios and encounters with ghosts implicate a sort of plausibility test.

This test, however, does not work exclusively through cognitive considerations of argumentative pros and cons. This plausibility check works in a playful mode. It is not the analytical mind that is addressed in the first place but rather bodily sensations: thrill, shiver, shock, terror, creeping horror, attacks of sweating, goose bumps, elevated blood pressure, hairs standing on end, and so on. It is this kind of body language and knowledge which make ghosts real and plausible, for an intense moment at least. Shiver and thrill are also intrinsic emotions in the spiritualist's séances, and demonstrate equal results in testing the plausibility of the spirits' presence.

Ghost movies operate most effectively by arousing "somatic modes of attention", or more precisely, "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Csordas, 1993: 138). Those 'others' include, in our case, ghosts and spirits. Recent attempts by film scholars to investigate the ways in which the cinema unfolds its persuasive power therefore scrutinize the various dimensions of the bodily sensorium. Vivian Sobchack argues that the

cinema [...] transposes what would otherwise be the invisible, individual and intrasubjective privacy of direct experience as it is embodied into the visible, public and intersubjective sociality of a language of direct embodied experience.

SOBCHACK, 1992: 42

Jennifer M. Barker (2009) points in a similar direction, arguing that

the experience of cinema can be understood as deeply tactile—a sensuous exchange between film and viewer that goes beyond the visual and aural, gets beneath the skin, and reverberates in the body.

BARKER, 2009, blurb

Similarly, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener conceptualized their book on film theory throughout as an "Introduction through the Senses" (2010).

This growing analytical awareness of the spectator's body is clearly a reaction to theoretical positions that reduce film watching to a disembodied, mainly cognitive activity (e.g. de Saussure, Lacan, Althusser, Barthes). Without discussing film theory in further detail, one factor is worth noting. The ghost movie audience is seeking a peculiar (and paradoxical) *experience*, the rendering palpable of the invisible and immaterial. That is, the audience demands an encounter with the scary and invisible, namely ghosts and spirits. At issue here is the paradoxical desire of 'fearing fictions' (Carroll, 1990:

60–63). The quality of a good ghost movie is measured against the intensity of its corporeal effects.

Film theories that deliberately oppose the body/mind split are helpful in this regard. As long as a “theory’s task is less to discourse about films, but to speak with (and through) films” (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 49), one may become productively inspired. Anna Powell, in her book “Deleuze and Horror Film”, points out:

[w]e cannot maintain the distanced gaze of subjective spectator at objective spectacle, but respond corporeally to sensory stimuli and dynamics of motion. Fantasy is an embodied event.

POWELL, 2005: 205

It is exactly the embodied event of ghost movie watching that effects the perception of reality or, better, stimulates play with multiple realities, or possible worlds. Thus, the cinema of ghosts creates a space for “the sense of possibilities”. Every film, but especially the ghost film, offers an “experimental form of attention in which possibilities are explored in correspondence with ever new and surprising ways in which they are set free” (Largier, 2008: 749).

The palpability of ghosts in movies is generated through cinematic techniques of verisimilitude. This, however, is not achieved by the maneuver of simply overwhelming a defenseless and somewhat naïve viewer. Moreover, the actual verisimilitude of ghosts has nothing to do with a presupposed *belief* in ghosts, because, as Noël Carroll rightly remarks, “if one really believed that the theater were beset by lethal shape changers, demons, intergalactic cannibals, or toxic zombies, one would hardly sit by for long” (Carroll, 1990: 63).

Instead, we have to reckon with what Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined “the willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge, 1951: 264, after Carroll, 1990: 64). At the beginning of the 19th century, poet and philosopher Coleridge developed this idea in the context of supernatural fiction. Importantly, Coleridge’s concept unquestionably ascribes agency to the recipient. Likewise, horror fans are anything but victims of illusion: they are willing and well prepared to enjoy ghost movies intellectually as “mind game films” (Elsaesser, 2009), and emotionally as a ritual of learning how to fear.

Learning to Fear: Catharsis by Dark Play

Film historian Georg Seeßlen, commenting on the attraction of the horror genre, states that classical horror narratives show how the normal becomes

uncanny, whereas contemporary horror narratives tell us about the challenge of fear through the hero's quest for horror and fear. The hero has to cross the underworld and face terror without hesitation. After this cathartic moment, life is less frightening. The Grimm Brother's fairy tale "The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was" (Grimm and Grimm, 1972, No 4) is an apt illustration of Seeßlen's thesis.¹ Ghost movie lovers set out to learn to fear. Learning to fear, Seeßlen maintains, is as important as learning to love, to die, and to exercise power (Seeßlen and Jung, 2006: 16).

Playing with multiple realities and fears, testing out 'the sense of possibilities', presupposes deliberate decision-making, passion, and fun. Such 'mind games' as well as ritualized experiments with angst take place in spaces that Victor Turner would call 'liminoid' (Turner, 1982). Liminoid phenomena, provided by theatre, music, performance art, and film, are characterized as experimental, individualistic, marginal, idiosyncratic, as well as socio-critical (Turner, 1982: 54). In such a liminoid space the experience of 'pure potentiality' is possible, "when the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun" (Turner, 1982: 44). Turner's concept of liminoid space resembles Winnicott's psychological concept of the 'potential space' where the activity of playing suspends inner psychic realities and the actual (outer) world. Play/playing opens up a third indeterminate space where imagination generates new realities (Winnicott, 1991: 53).

When we look for the playful side of the modern individual, and consider cinema as a liminoid space, we soon recognize that there are more than just 'funny games'. There is 'dark play' which, according to Richard Schechner,

involves fantasy, luck, daring, intervention, and deception. [...] Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, and breaks its own rules—so much so that playing itself is in danger of being destroyed.

SCHECHNER, 2002: 119

Schechner points to an observable propensity for dark play and a desire for transgression which can easily be related to horror as a genre, and therefore

1 The tale tells the story of a young man who suffers from his inability to fear. On his quest of learning what fear is, he meets many individuals who try to teach him this human sensation. Though he encounters numerous frightening situations, involving a cemetery and a haunted castle, a hanged man on the gallows, a (feigned) ghost, beasts and monsters, he never experiences fear. Eventually the fearless young man marries a princess who soon gets tired of her husband's complaints of being unable to shudder. She douses him with freezing water and small fishes. This sensation makes him shudder, though not from fear.

to ghost movies. Transgression not only violates and infringes the limits of law and convention but also announces and even lauds laws, commandments and conventions, as Chris Jenks states: "Transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation" (Jenks, 2003: 2). Schechner's explanations of play reveal the transgressive 'other side' of the *homo ludens*, as well as the dystopian potentials of imaginative engagement. Imagination and terror are closely linked, not only in the realm of cinema but also in 'real' life scenarios, as the contributors to "Terror and Violence: Imagination and the Unimaginable" (Strathern, Stewart and Whitehead, 2006) so impressively illustrate (see also Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen, 2009: 10).

One possible approach to the ghost film genre is to analyze it as a ritual of fear which seems to be thrilling and cathartic for many people. Here, relevant parameters include the phenomenal experience, darkness, spatial and mental closeness, repeat viewing and the reactivation of emotions, and interest in others' reactions (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011: 18). This view helps one to understand the (sometimes subcultural) appeal of ghost movies as cult films and the fandom that accompanies them (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011; Czarnecka-Palka, 2012; O'Toole, 2008; Telotte, 1991). Understood as such, ghost movie watching either in cinema or at home belongs to various rites of transgression and subversion which are part of popular culture (Gournelos and Gunkel, 2011; Cieslak and Rasmus, 2012; Mathijs and Sexton, 2011: 97–108).

Why, then, do people like to be scared and why do they pay for this experience? Forms of transgressive pleasure as well as the passion for violence, horror, and terror are commonly explained by Aristotelian catharsis and/or the Freudian return-of-the-repressed thesis. Subversive, anti-structural and anti-normative tendencies are characteristics of ghost movie narratives which fit both readings. As a rule, ghosts represent the moral and manifest as a result of norm violations (rape, torture, murder, suicide). The blatant filmic enactment of amoral behavior attracts the Mr Hyde in us and invites identification. By acting out anti-social impulses through the work of imagination, we acknowledge that amorality is part of us. This acceptance leads to the experience of cathartic moments. It facilitates temporary release from the constraints of structure that arise from biography, gender, society, and culture. In the end, of course, the vengeful ghost makes the destructive effects of anti-social behavior abundantly clear, and corrects amoral disorder. Dr Jekyll retains sovereignty: we can leave the cinema strengthened. Or, seen from another perspective, violence and death, as well as sex, elicit attraction and anxiety in equal proportion. Emotional and imaginary immersion in the realm of fear teaches us something about what is meant to be human. At least, this is the general concept of the catharsis thesis.

Whatever explanation or theoretical argument we apply, imaginative effects and affects generated by film-technology cannot be completely determined. Imagination “is *defined* by its essential indeterminacy”, as Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen (2009: 24) emphasize. Indeterminacy has a constitutive role in people’s lives, and technologies of imagination offer potentialities to live out (in safety) and handle this indeterminacy. For methodological reasons, Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen propose that, if the

place of the imagination [...] is the space of indeterminacy in social and cultural life [...], it can be empirically identified and ethnographically explored with reference to the processes or technologies that open it up.

SNEATH, HOLBRAAD and PEDERSEN, 2009: 24

For the study of ghost movies, this statement reiterates the importance of audience research, which will be outlined in more detail below.

Subversive Ghosts and the Return of the Traumatic Past

The return-of-the-repressed thesis, applied to ghost movies, partly overlaps with the catharsis thesis. Set in spaces for “experimental forms of attention”, cinematic visions of the otherworldly have a subversive potential, as some authors affirm. Media scholar Kevin Glynn asserts:

Rationalist certitudes dissolve into indeterminacy. The maelstrom of demonic horror and dark fantasies supposedly dispelled in the triumph of reason and modernist enlightenment returns with the full force of its nightmarish fury. The supernatural seduces the quotidian through ironic reversals.

GLYNN, 2003: 430

Thus, the magic realism of ghost movies acts as a counterforce to scientific realism. The supernatural, mediated by television and movies, exerts a power of seduction targeting “the presumptive unities that constitute both the subjects and the objects of modernist truth and knowledge” (Glynn, 2003: 425). Ghosts subvert official truth regimes and tell their own truth, which is always a reminder of past injustice, dark legacies and hidden secrets. Accordingly, Avery F. Gordon (2006) refers to ‘haunting’ as “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely”. By ‘haunting’ she describes

those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future.

GORDON, 2006: xvi

This approach coalesces with Derrida's 'hauntology' (Derrida, 1994). Derrida argues that our perception of the world is haunted by both the instability of the once taken for granted and the impossibility of ever having had such certainty (Johnson, 2014: 6).

Ghost movies, seen through the lenses of Derrida or Gordon, not only reflect traumatic events of the past, but can also be analyzed as instruments of social criticism, ironic or moral comments, or as validation of magical machinations beneath a mundane surface. Ghosts appear as the unwanted reminder of family secrets, of moral lapse, of collective guilt, of forgotten relationships. Movie ghosts are "relentlessly reflexive, telling us at least as much about ourselves as they do anything else [...]. They demonstrate those aspects of ourselves we would far rather forget" as Douglas E. Cowan states (Cowan, 2001: 403). Intruding ghosts embody the past. But they exist not only in an indefinite spatiality between death and life, but also in an indefinite temporality. This is a main characteristic of ghost narratives. Ghosts destabilize chronology, the known, the homely, the foundation of our expectations. Suddenly, the promises of modernity and progress appear to be hollow. This is subversively uncanny.

Mediated Ghosts: Southeast Asia's Haunted Modernity

The observations and explanations thus far have dealt with more general questions and theoretical concepts concerning the spectral qualities of technical media, the attractiveness and psychological function of the horror film genre, emotions and bodily affects aroused by cinematic ghosts, configurations of imagination, entertainment and the dark side of modernity. In this section, I direct our attention to ghosts, politics and the media in Southeast Asia's modernity. This modernity can be characterized as an 'alternative' or 'vernacular' modernity in contrast to a 'universal', and implicitly self-proclaimed, Western modernity (Englund and Leach, 2000; Knauff, 2002; Bubandt, 2004).

In recent years, a number of scholars, primarily anthropologists, have investigated and theorized the persistent presence and agency of invisible forces and supernatural agents in Southeast Asia. The scholarly interest in ghosts and

the occult is not driven by a curiosity about folk-traditions or popular religiosity but rather the potential links between the (re)emergence of the supernatural and the visible ruins of progress (Johnson, 2014), the destructive effects of neoliberal politics, bursts of state violence, the erosion of communal cohesion, financial crises, and the growing sense of individual insecurity in daily life.

The uncanny moments of everyday life (and politics) are intensified by media of various kinds. In reference to disordered post-colonial states, Jean and John Comaroff argue that media

open an uncertain space between signifiers, be they omens or banknotes, and what it is they signify: a space of mystery, magic, and uncanny productivity wherein witches, Satan, and prosperity prophets ply an avid trade [...]. Under such conditions, signs take on an occult life of their own, being capable of generating great riches.

COMAROFF AND COMAROFF, 2006: 15

Such an 'occult economy', as characterized by the Comaroffs, is one facet of modern Southeast Asia. Another facet is communication with the spirits. Indeed, the relation between traditional (spirit) mediums and the new (mass) media, to which we now turn our attention, is particularly revealing.

Rosalind C. Morris (2000a) investigates the transformations of spirit possession performances in Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand. The discourse on authentic Thai culture, its places of origins, and the radical changes of past and present are linked with dramatic episodes of the failed 1973–1976 democratic revolution and the 1992 democracy protests. Thai modernity, the author argues, is troubled by a sense of loss. The deeply-felt absence of origins, homesickness, and longing for return to a homelike past are painfully affecting social and personal identity. For nationalist historiography, spirit mediums are emblematic for Northern Thai culture, with spirit possession serving as an icon of alterity, of history and authenticity. Therefore, the examination of how the mediums' traditional representational practices "are encompassed by the technologies of mass mediation and the economies of exchange" (Morris, 2000a: 14) provides a deeper understanding of mediums and modernity. Communication with spirits is in no way a relic of a traditional past refurbished by modern translational and representational techniques, rather it is intrinsically modern. Morris' work throws great light on the transformations of contemporary Thai spirit possession, the embodiment of spirits and its mediation by modernity's media, such as video and television, as well as the ambitions of mediums to reflect critically on spirit possession and to make the occult transparent (see Morris, 2000b, 2002).

In "Funeral Casino" (2002), Alan Klima describes pro-democracy activism in Thailand in the 1990s, the ensuing military massacres and the subsequent exchange with the dead. It is the power of corpses, mediated by photos and films, which conveyed cathartic effects on politics. The images of 'cadavers', interpreted as sacrifices of the movement, became powerful mediums of resistance. Klima emphasizes the significance of the gift of death, our obligations to death, and the ethical potential behind the symbolic exchange with the dead.

In his film *Ghosts and Numbers* (2010), Klima meditates on the devastating effects of the currency crash in 1997. Following the daily life of a migrant lottery seller, we enter ruined buildings in Bangkok, and listen to stories of ghosts and haunting. The Asian monetary crisis reverberated in Thai people's obsession with (lucky) numbers and the spirit world, as Klima illustrates in a filmic narrative interspersed with dream-like elements and spectral sequences.

In his book "Naming the Witch" (2006), James Siegel deals less with spirits and ghostliness, instead analyzing the uncanny forces of destructive violence inherent in the social, through a focus on 'witchcraft'. The author starts with an outbreak of killings of alleged sorcerers in East Java between 1998 and 2000. These witch hunt incidents coincided with the attenuation of state authority, triggered by the resignation of President Suharto in May 1998. Throughout his authoritarian regime, which started with a series of massacres in 1965–1966, Suharto's New Order government had differentiated between good and therefore privileged citizens (connected to the state apparatus), and suspect 'others' who were seen as a potential threat to political order and social harmony. The diminution of state authority ended state surveillance and its verified classifications. It facilitated a climate of general suspicion,

first of all of oneself. Someone else knows one better than one does oneself. When this agent of recognition disappears, the reassurance it gives of one's innocence goes with it. It is possible that one is guilty. Guilty of what is now the first question. Guilty of being a witch, meaning that one has a capacity for hatred and that one might have done anything.

SIEGEL, 2006: 160

To fight off self-accusation, it was necessary to find someone else responsible.

'Witch' rather than 'Communist' or 'Criminal' was the form that accusation took. [...] Seen from the place of those possessed or obsessed by feelings of overwhelming catastrophe, those closest were the unrecognizable face of malevolence. 'Witch', with the subsequent witch hunt, offered a

means for local control of general—or national—malevolence when state control failed.

SIEGEL, 2006: 160f.

Witchcraft accusations in Java, Siegel argues, were attempts to reassert control over phantasms and fears caused by the vanishing state order. Such phantasms, however, were and are part of Indonesian nationalism and not particularities of the Javanese spirit world. The traces of these phantasms and phantoms point back to the hundreds of thousands Communists massacred in the 1960s. It was feared, and the fear was nourished by government propaganda, that they could return “through some unknown process, meaning without formal organization, but saying, also, ‘bodiless’, just as specters lack bodies. This myth was widely subscribed to”, Siegel maintains (2006: 163).

In their works, Morris, Klima and Siegel depict the dark side of Southeast Asian modernity, reflected in the mirror of fantasies, specters, and phantasms. Authoritarian rule, state violence, massacres, and war are the driving forces which bring ghosts into play. “Wherever there is violence in Southeast Asia [...] there are ghosts”, Morris (2008: 230) asserts. Premature, violent death generates a restless ghost as well as trauma among the survivors, and the obligation to conciliate the desolate angry specter.

The ubiquity of ghosts explains the attraction of Derrida’s ‘hauntology’ for many scholars working on politics, religion, media and modernity in Southeast Asia. Derrida’s concern with apparitions, visions, and representations that mediate the sensuous and the non-sensuous, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, and his idea concerning ghosts are based on a single literary source: Act I of Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”, as Martha and Bruce Lincoln (2015: 192) critically note. Through Derrida, specters and spectrality became manifold applicable metaphors to reflect on suffering, injustice, gendered violence, paramilitary terror, trauma, the dead, and other affective figures of the imaginary. But what about the ghost, not as a conceptual metaphor but as actuality? (Blanco and Peeren, 2013b: 2–10). What about the agency of intangibles (Blanes and Espíritu Santo, 2014b)? What if ghosts are “slamming doors, cracking branches, causing illness, and demanding clothes and cigarettes”? (Langford, 2013: 15). ‘Hauntology’ denies ghosts’ ontological status, translating specters into textual tropes, rationalizing and distorting irritating aspects of the phenomenon. To overcome this theoretical shortcoming in a Southeast Asian environment, Martha and Bruce Lincoln (2015) conceptualize a ‘critical hauntology’. For heuristic reasons they differentiate between primary and secondary haunting. Primary haunting is based on the recognition of the reality and autonomy of metaphysical entities by the afflicted individuals. Secondary haunting refers to such entities

in the sedimented textual residues of horrific historic events or, alternatively, as tropes for collective intrapsychic states and experiences, including trauma, grief, regret, repression, guilt, and a sense of responsibility for the wrongs suffered by victims whose memory pains—or ought to pain—their survivors.

LINCOLN AND LINCOLN, 2015: 200

To re-theorize haunting and to link primary and secondary haunting, they refer to the example of Ba Chúc, a Vietnamese Mekong Delta village, in which Khmer Rouge soldiers massacred over 3000 civilians on 18 April 1978 (during the Vietnam-Cambodia border conflicts). The official memorial, where the victims' remains are presented, and the political call to remember can easily be related to secondary haunting. Primary haunting, however, is a matter of fact for the village residents. The spirits associated with the victims of the mass execution still reside in the 'grievous' banyan tree at Ba Chúc, where the worst atrocities happened. Today, these ghosts continue to suffer disquiet and anguish. Such haunting follows a metaphysical logic according to which the soul of the victim of a tragic death is held captive to the place of death. The post-mortem prisoner has to repeat the tragic history of his or her own death by causing fatal (road) accidents, resulting in more fateful inmates at the site (Kwon Heonik, 2008: 128, after Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015: 209).

In their efforts toward a critical hauntology, Martha and Bruce Lincoln hint at common features shared by primary and secondary haunting, namely

their use of ghosts (whether in metaphoric generality or semi-concrete individuality) to arouse strong emotions (terror, dread, shame, and remorse) and reconnect the living and the dead, while advancing ends that are personal and social, political and moral, analytic and pragmatic.

LINCOLN AND LINCOLN, 2015: 211

It is the social lives of spirits and their power to compel mourning, humility, and compassion among the living that is addressed by the Lincolns' critical hauntology. They, in accordance with the above mentioned authors, underscore the importance of ghosts in the collective memory, the public sphere, and the political arena of contemporary Southeast Asia. Politics, as Nils Bubandt (2014a: 120) rightly maintains, "is always haunted by those phenomena that it seeks to repress but which return as ghosts". In the case of Indonesia, such spectral phenomena include homosexuality, the notion of the 'masses', the memory of the 1965/1966 killings, fraud and corruption.

Modern media amplify this kind of haunting, because the media is, according to Derrida (1994: 63), "neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it

spectralizes". Bubandt (2014a: 121) adds that the "media is itself a spectre that helps the conjuring act of making ghosts". As an anthropologist, Bubandt employs Derrida's notion of hauntology (in the same vein as the Lincolns) refusing its abstract, metaphorical and deconstructivist usage.

There is nothing academic, theoretical, rhetorical or metaphorical about the haunting that characterises politics in Indonesia. Spirits have a reality in Indonesian society that makes this haunting acutely anxiety-provoking and directly visceral. What one might call 'political hauntology' in Indonesia is saturated by spiritual entities—*jins*, vampires, Draculas, ninjas, witches—that are acutely real at the same time as they are intensely embarrassing because they question 'the limit that would permit one to identify the political' [Derrida 1994: 63].

BUBANDT, 2014a: 121

Ghosts always cross borders of time and space, past and presence, but as Bubandt cum Derrida argue, they also dissolve the separating lines of politics, religion, economy, and popular culture. The presence of ghosts in the realm of politics is inseparable from their appearance in the cinema or on television. It is not accidental that horror movies are the most common genre in Indonesia. The history of the genre, known as *film mistik*, and particularly the portrayal of ghosts and representatives of Islam therein, reflect the country's political history, as Katinka van Heeren (2012) has shown.

The grand narrative of progress and enlightenment links modernity and democracy with rationality and transparency. On first sight, the persistent presence of spirits and the occult contradicts that dominant pattern: the intimate relation of spirits with modernity and democracy has to be denied. Spirits are embarrassing and unwanted in the narrative of modernity. However, according to Bruno Latour (1993), modernity is characterized by a double process of 'purification' and of 'translation'. That means, Nils Bubandt concludes, that the domains of 'culture' and 'nature', or in this case, 'politics' and 'spirits' are ideologically separated,

even while they are constantly churned up and mixed up in practice [...]. In that sense, the denied complicity between the normative orders of the spirit world, modern secularism, and democratic politics is not a phenomenon that is peculiar to Indonesian modernity. On the contrary: it is a global phenomenon.

BUBANDT, 2014b: 63; see also BUBANDT and VAN BEEK, 2011

Mary Steedly shows how both the aspiration of transparency as well as the dynamics of concealment and the obscure are not only part of the popular perception of politics (such as the life and death of President Suharto), but also of popular culture, such as horror films. In her paper on "Transparency and Apparition: Media Ghosts of Post-New Order Indonesia", she argues that

[d]reams of transparency and apparition are always necessarily incomplete, for both are predicated on a darkness to be illuminated, a secret to be revealed, a ghost to appear; they depend on the suspicion of secret working, whether of political conspiracy or occult forces. [...] Like crime, and corruption, like the numbers of the 'unexplained dead', ghosts are a kind of public secret. Everyone assumes that they exist, but no one can fully plumb their depths.

STEEDLY, 2013: 352, 372

It is secrecy and secrets that boost communication, whether in the family or public sphere. The secret, however, "is a matter of form, not content, so it can never fully or finally be revealed", the political scientist Jodi Dean (2002: 42) maintains. Steedly adds that "[g]hosts are too a matter of form and can never be fully revealed. There is always the possibility of a return, a sequel" (Steedly, 2013: 372).

Politics, the occult and ghosts depend on media and mediation to be communicated. Aesthetic forms and their techno-mediated characteristics are crucial: they make the invisible and unseen both plausible and efficacious. Karen Strassler provides an illustrative example of this by tracing the history of Javanese spirit 'Ratu Kidul's image in paint, photography, television, film, and online. In doing so, Strassler shows how this mythical spirit queen of the unseen world came to be such a visible feature of the post-colonial landscape. It is obvious that religion and politics, the banal and the spiritual, the occult and the public, are inseparable. Moreover, pondering modernity's disenchantment or re-enchantment is futile, because

the history of Ratu Kidul's mediation as image conforms to neither a narrative of modern disenchantment nor one of technological re-enchantment. Rather, as Ratu Kidul's image circulates within Indonesia's heterogeneous and complexly mediated contemporary public sphere, it elicits both banal and spiritually efficacious engagements that coexist and at times jostle uneasily against each other.

STRASSLER, 2014: 127

The media-anthropological approach, as the examples show, offers fieldwork based insights into the dynamics of Southeast Asia's haunted modernity by correlating ghosts, politics and the media.

Film studies scholars investigating horror movies inevitably encounter ghosts and take up impulses of Derrida's hauntology, either critically or without reservation. Murray Leeder's edited volume on "Cinematic Ghosts" (2015a), for example, unfolds the history of haunting and spectrality from silent cinema to the digital era, primarily focusing on Western film history but also with some excursions to East Asia and Thailand. In her book on Asian, especially Filipino horror movies and US remakes of East Asian ghosts movies (*Ju-On/The Grudge* [dir. Takashi Shimizu, 2002], *A Tale of Two Sisters* [dir. Jee-woon Kim, 2003]), Bliss Cua Lim (2009) employs Derrida's stimuli to develop a critique of homogenous time. Lim considers the ghost film an historical allegory and the specter a provocative agent, because he/she constantly brings the traumatic past back to the present and stubbornly demands not to be forgotten.

[T]he ghostly return of traumatic events precisely troubles the boundaries of past, present, and future, and cannot be written back to the complacency of a homogeneous, empty time. [...] [H]aunting as ghostly return precisely refuses the idea that things are just 'left behind', that the past is inert and the present uniform. Put simply, the ghost forces the point of nonsynchronism. It is this challenge to received ideas of time that makes the specter a particularly provocative figure for the claims of history.

BLISS CUA LIM, 2001: 287, 288

In his attempt to develop a particular cinematic paradigm to answer the question "What is Asian Cinema?", film scholar Stephen Teo focuses on the experience of watching and analyzing Asian film as a cumulative whole. In Teo's book "The Asian Cinema Experience" (2013), one section is devoted to "Asian horror and the ghost-story style". The horror genre as such, he argues, is transnational, and the horrifying thrills and excitement of the horror narratives can be experienced without any knowledge of cultural signs and motifs (Teo, 2013: 92). Despite the transnationalism of horror, there is nevertheless something distinct in Asian horror movies. It is "the sociality of spirits [that] sets Asian horror apart from a mere genre of horror affect", Teo (2013: 94) maintains, pointing to a specific Asian ghost story style rooted in folklore, legend and oral tradition, *and* in the socio-cultural experience of ghostly horror. Teo identifies the figure of the 'Asian monstrous feminine', being both abject and heroic, as emblematic of the Asian ghost film and the tensions and anxieties it generates (see the contributions of Scherer, Platt, Wilger, and Baumann in this volume).

The authors in this volume share with Teo, and many of the other scholars whose work I have drawn on in this section, a focus on exploring Asian cinema as experience, utilizing emotion and bodily affects as theorizing factors, and linking ghost movies to the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) of the movie-audience.

The Audience, Again ...

As discussed above, studying ghost movies from an interdisciplinary perspective implies the necessity to bring the audience into focus. The viewers' perspective is of tremendous importance because it reveals something about emotions and affects, imaginations and worldviews, entertainment and identity, and, above all, the spectral side of modernity.

The audience, setting out to encounter ghosts, enters the cinematic world: be it in a theatre, at home alone, or with family, friends or neighbors. In doing so, the viewer implicitly agrees to accept filmic alternatives to so-called everyday reality and, most importantly, to accept the rules and conventions of the specific genre. Ghost movies do not affect everyone. On the contrary: the genre divides the audience into factions.

The penchant for certain film genres carries a value judgment that happens "against the background of the viewer's own knowledge, education, culture, experience and taste" (Fourie, 2004: 282). Contemporary film scholars acknowledge that audiences "are self-conscious about their practices, and this self-consciousness plays an important role in modern identity formation" (Hoover, 2008: 38). For Walter Benjamin, the then new medium of film was a possibility to experience modernity in an unprecedented way (Hansen, 2012: 23–24). These ideas all suggest the analytical importance of looking at the ghost movie audience. The conception of an active audience leads to inquiries about its taste, motivations, meanings, and practices. Furthermore, as Hoover emphasizes, it is important

to make a distinction between intention and function in this regard. Regardless of what is intended by certain mediated texts and genres [by scriptwriters, directors, actors or film-studios, PjBr], what matters is what results from these expressions and their consumption. Thus, the question of who the audience are and what they do becomes the central one.

HOOVER, 2008: 38

An individual's decision for or against a certain genre (be it comedy, romance or horror) has (and has had) reflexive potential. Even if one assumes that popular

cinema is 'only' entertainment, without doubt it still constitutes a productive resource for cultural identity (Jackson, 2006). Identity in the post-modern world is not formed by a search for a solid, over-arching rational essence, but by exercising options. This is 'identity as choice', as Lash and Friedman put it (1992: 7). What fits best to me? What makes me distinctive? Such questions are highly relevant for the aspiring individual, as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) demonstrated. 'Life-style' and consumer orientation are in this way turned into major areas of social self-placement. Seen from the point of view of media anthropology and 'cultural studies', it becomes clear that humans do not only take upon themselves an active role in the production of goods, but also in their consumption. Consumption is the active generation of meanings (Hepp, 1999: 70). This insight throws light on the demand for ghost motifs in bestseller-books, comics, and films.

Ghost movies offer valuable clues about the condition of modernity and the anxieties of its audience. To what emotional needs do ghost movies respond, and what peculiar sort of affects are aroused by the genre? To what extent do age, gender, and class effect the decoding of ghost films? How is entertainment related to individual worldviews and religious convictions? Are the products of the global film industry sources for the viewers' sense-making, or do they simply produce forms of 'banal religion', as outlined above? Such far-reaching questions are central for the study of ghost movies but are rarely addressed, much less empirically researched. Indeed, audience reception in the fields of the controversial horror genre is surprisingly underdeveloped. If the relevance of such a research focus becomes plausible, one goal of this volume will have been accomplished.

Composition of the Volume

The contributions in the volume are based on presentations made at an international workshop held by the research network *Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia* (DORISEA) in Göttingen in October 2012, and on a follow-up panel at the EUROSEAS conference in Lisbon in July 2013. The idea of a kaleidoscopic approach that shows respect for the multifacetedness of ghost movies is reflected in the book's three sections. The sections focus on East and Southeast Asian ghost movie *narratives*, the *cultural contexts* of their origins, and *audience* reception respectively.

The 'NARRATIVES' section explicates characteristic motifs and ghostly figures which are rooted in local or national traditions. Ghosts and spirits are far less defined by liturgical texts (or other literary genres) than gods. Basically,

they come into existence through popular narratives which are open to transformation, variation and alteration. Film serves as the most important modern medium of the *homo narrans* and facilitates the efficacy of former oral and/or literary narratives. It is of special interest to study how and why specific ghostly images are translatable to the pan-Asian or even international audience, and why other ghosts and spirits remain local.

The ontological status of ghosts and spirits in Southeast Asia is different from their position in the West. Ghostly apparitions are oftentimes sensed collectively and are a concomitant phenomenon of political turmoil or crisis. In the section on 'CULTURAL CONTEXTS' not only is the paradoxical ontic-haunting character of ghostly beings investigated but also their socio-historical embeddedness, which is reflected in filmic narratives.

The contributions in the 'AUDIENCES' reception section focus on the cultural context of meaning and symbolism, shared imaginaries and the emotions of movie-goers. The general attraction of ghost movies rests primarily in the peculiar emotions audiences expect and hope they will arouse. Since film watching confronts one with fugitive images as well as fugitive emotions, this field of research has to cope with serious methodological problems by focusing on audience reaction.

In Part 1, 'NARRATIVES', Vivian Lee's chapter "Universal Hybrids: The Trans/Local Production of Pan-Asian Horror" seeks to understand how horror functions in pan-Asian co-productions. She questions if, and to what extent, culture-specific elements of horror are translated, adapted, and preserved in the generation of what the author calls 'universal hybrids' in pan-Asian horror films. Focusing on two popular pan-Asian horror films, *The Eye/Gin gwai* and *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (dir. The Pang Brothers, 2002, 2004), this paper approaches pan-Asian horror from two angles: firstly, how transnational co-production has defined the parameters of filmmaking, and secondly, whether a film as the end product of a creative process subject to these corporate parameters encourages articulations of a trans/local awareness at different levels of self-consciousness, and by this very process also reveals the dynamics between local specificities in the creation of an 'Asia imaginary'.

In "Well-Travelling Female Avengers: The Transcultural Potential of Japanese Ghosts", Elisabeth Scherer investigates a certain type of Asian female ghosts which have become icons of a new Asian Horror Cinema. The figure of Sadako in Nakata Hideo's film *Ringu* (1998) served as the prototype in the development of J-Horror (Japanese Horror) films at the end of the 20th century. Since then, J-Horror has set the style for an abundance of similar works—with cultural specificities—in South Korea, Hong Kong, Thailand, the U.S., and elsewhere.

Martin Platt's "Telling Tales: Variety, Community, and Horror in Thailand" discusses three Thai horror stories, all of which are seen to have historical bases in the 19th or 20th centuries and are anchored in events, objects, and locations. The three stories illustrate the powerful, compelling, and enduring nature of such tales and some of the cultural values embodied in them. They are: (1) the story of 'Mae Nak' (or 'Nang Nak') of Phrakhanong, a woman whose spirit refused to abandon her husband even after her death; (2) 'See Ui', a man who was executed for killing and devouring children; and (3) 'Nuanchawee', a young nurse whose marriage to a doctor ended in her murder. These stories and their reinterpretations, Platt argues, reinforce awareness of a shared body of cultural knowledge and interpretation through which community is continually re-established and re-constituted.

In "Sundelbolong' as a Mode of Femininity: Analysis of Popular Ghost Movies in Indonesia", Maren Wilger analyzes the films *Sundelbolong* (dir. Sisworo Gautama Putra, 1981) and *Legenda Sundelbolong* (dir. Hanung Bramantyo, 2007), as well as the television production *Urban Legend Sundelbolong* (dir. Purnomo A. Chakill, 2009). In the 1981 film, the haunting protagonist Sundelbolong committed suicide, while in the two more recent versions, she was killed, also after being raped. She subsequently became a furious ghost with a hole in her back. Wilger underlines the changing representations of Sundelbolong's ghostliness during the New Order, under the post-authoritarian regime, and in contemporary Indonesia.

In Part 2, 'CULTURAL CONTEXTS', Katarzyna Ancuta uses the concept 'Thai Supernaturalism' to illuminate Thai horror cinema in the chapter "That's the Spirit! Horror Films as an Extension of Thai Supernaturalism". 'Thai Supernaturalism' refers to the hybridization, consumerization, and politicization of Thai popular religion and allows for both a metaphorical (modern) and literal (pre-modern) reading of ghost movies. The paper discusses examples of the mutual relationship between Thai horror movies and Thai spiritualism, suggesting a connection between the popular animistic, mediumistic, and religious practices of Thais, and their love of horror cinema.

In his paper "The Khmer Witch Project: Demonizing the Khmer by Khmerizing a Demon", Benjamin Baumann focuses on 'Phi Krasue', one of the most iconic uncanny creatures of Thai horror cinema. Narratives of encounters with this uncanny being, a floating woman's head with drawn out and bloody entrails dangling beneath it, are very common, as is the image's presence in popular cultural media. Relating empirical data gathered during anthropological fieldwork in a rural community in Thailand's lower north-east to the analysis of two Thai ghost movies, Baumann argues that knowledge of vernacular ghostlore is essential to decipher the cinematic representations' full symbolism. Based on Kristeva's theory of abjection, Baumann shows that Thai

audiences continue to see Phi Krasue first and foremost as uncanny 'matter out of place'.

In "Stepping Out from the Silver Screen and Into the Shadows: The Fearful, Ephemeral Ninjas of Timor-Leste", Henri Myrntinen traces the mysterious, shadowy, dangerous 'ninja' that entered the political imaginary of Indonesia and Timor-Leste some twenty years ago. U.S. and East Asian action movies played an important role in establishing that threatening imaginary. Myrntinen's paper examines the history of how the image of the ninja 'leaped' into the lives of East Javanese and Timorese villagers and provides alternative readings of the panic it caused, both as an exercise in securitization and as a way of policing gender norms.

Part 3, 'AUDIENCES', opens with a chapter by Mary Ainslie entitled "The Supernatural and Post-War Thai Film: Traditional Monsters and Social Mobility". Ainslie investigates the '16mm era' of 1950s and 1960s Thailand, a series of mass-produced live-dubbed 16mm films that drew heavily upon the supernatural animist belief systems that organized Thai rural village life. She argues that these now-neglected films, and specifically their mythological supernatural subject matter, illustrate how post-war Thai cinema engaged with and negotiated the experiences of lower-class Thais, a position in stark contrast to the big budget New Thai industry of today and its urban multiplexes.

Natalie Boehler's "Globalized Haunting: The Transnational Spectral in Apichatpong's *Syndromes and a Century* and its Reception" discusses how the various ways in which the work of Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul is positioned come into existence through a multivocality inherent in the work itself, one that echoes various discourses and displays multiple transcultural trajectories. It is this multivocality which allows for an openness that makes the work accessible to various, and sometimes very distinct, audiences.

In his paper "*Pencak Silat*, Ghosts, and (Inner) Power: Reception of Martial Arts Movies and Television Series amongst Young *Pencak Silat* Practitioners in Indonesia", Patrick Keilbart employs a media-anthropological approach and focuses on the perspective of a particular audience, namely young *Pencak Silat* practitioners in Indonesia. The martial art *Pencak Silat* can be considered the Indonesian national sport and is intrinsically tied to the practice of supernatural powers and mysticism. It is hardly surprising that young practitioners represent a key target group for 'television mysticism' programs.

The final chapter "Ghost Movies, the Makers and their Audiences", is an interview with filmmakers working in Southeast Asia. Kasia Ancuta and Solarsin Ngoenwicit in Thailand, and Mattie Do in Laos, are all involved in the production of ghost films. In their conversation with Andrea Lauser, they offer insights about ghost movie audiences' expectations and cultural backgrounds.

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PART 1

Narratives



Universal Hybrids

The Trans/Local Production of Pan-Asian Horror

Vivian Lee

In Europe and North America, Asian horror has been absorbed into what is now known as ‘Extreme Cinema’, a marketing label tagged to all kinds of cinematic ‘extremes’ or excesses from the non-West. In addition to productions with more explicit national/cultural affiliations such as J-Horror (a shorthand for Japanese horror movies), horror films that exhibit a more regional outlook have also made inroads into the Asian and world markets. This paper looks at pan-Asian horror as primarily a product of translocal co-production. Co-production is not entirely a new phenomenon, but in the last decade or so it has evolved into a dominant mode of filmmaking as a result of large-scale restructuring and internationalization of national and local film industries in the region in response to Hollywood’s active outsourcing and expansion into Asian markets. Focusing on two popular pan-Asian horror films, *The Eye/Gin gwai* and *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (dir. The Pang Brothers, 2002, 2004), this chapter approaches pan-Asian horror from two angles: first, how transnational co-production has defined the parameters of filmmaking, and second, whether a film as the end product of a creative process subject to these corporate parameters encourages articulations of a trans/local awareness at different levels of self-consciousness, and through this very process also reveals the dynamics between local specificities in the creation of an ‘Asia imaginary’. I argue that the critical interest of these two films lies not in the display of extremity or excesses as customarily associated with Asian horror, but a critical sensitivity toward acculturation, a process through which both the fictional characters and the viewer *acquire* the visual/cognitive vocabularies to access the realm of horror, and learn to react to it. As such, they are both horror films and films *about* the encoding and decoding of horror. As universal hybrids, these films shed light on the economic and cultural negotiations in the trans/local production of ‘Asian horror’.

Applause Pictures: A Case Study of Pan-Asian Horror

Applause Pictures was founded by Hong Kong filmmakers Peter Chan Ho-sun, Teddy Chen and Allan Fung Yi-ching in 2000, when Chan relocated his activities

to Hong Kong after some short stints in the U.S., where he directed the English language film, *The Love Letter* (1999) for Steven Spielberg's Dreamworks SKG. The idea of founding a 'pan-Asian' production company probably has its origin in Chan's background: born in Thailand and raised in Hong Kong, he took up film studies in the U.S. and returned to the territory to begin his filmmaking career in the early 1980s. Chan is well-known for his work in comedy and romance, having produced and directed local blockbusters such as *Tom, Dick, and Harry* (1994), *He's a Woman, She's a Man* (1993) and its sequel, and the critically acclaimed *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996), after which Chan began to launch his pan-Asian project through collaborations with regional partners in Japan, Korea, Thailand, and Singapore. Certain distinctive features qualify the company as a pan-Asian enterprise:

- It is a self-professed pan-Asian operation. From the company's mission statement, 'pan-Asian' refers to both the border-crossing operations and the founders' vision of Asia as a transcultural space.¹
- Among the three founders, Peter Chan Ho-sun and Allan Fung Yi-ching have a long track-record of transnational filmmaking. They have studied, worked and lived across Asia and North America. This cross-cultural exposure helped situate their filmmaking careers within a translocal network.
- Applause Pictures is among the most active companies in film collaborations in the region. Chan has had a hands-on involvement in a number of re-make projects with Hollywood studios, hence pushing his pan-Asian enterprise further into the terrain of global cinema.
- Based in Hong Kong with a network of operations and a pool of talent in East and Southeast Asia (mainly South Korea, Singapore, Japan, and Thailand), the company has also been cultivating partnerships in Mainland China, whose increasing presence in the regional and the world markets continues to reshape the topos of pan-Asian and pan-Chinese filmmaking.
- The company set up another joint-venture, Morgan and Chan Films, with Hollywood partner Ruddy Morgan in 2005 to further internationalize its Asian, and most recently Hong Kong-China, co-productions.

The company's profile illuminates the cultural, sociological and economic-industrial aspects of pan-Asian filmmaking common to most transnational

¹ Applause Pictures "was created to forge new links between the film industries and filmmakers of Asia Pacific". Information provided by Applause Pictures at: <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/studio.asp?id=77>.

operations. Its latest internationalization endeavors signaled a change of business strategy to cater to the Mainland and international markets by coproducing pan-Chinese blockbusters with Hollywood partners (*Perhaps Love*, dir. Peter Chan, 2005; *The Warlords*, dir. Peter Chan, 2007; *American Dreams in China*, dir. Peter Chan, 2013).

Encoding and Decoding Horror in *The Eye* and *The Eye 2*

Horror films are among Applause Pictures' earliest collaborative efforts carrying a pan-Asian label, both in terms of financing and production arrangements. It was also through these initial efforts that the company forged new partnerships in Asia and, later, Hollywood. Since 1999, Applause has coproduced with its Asian partners a number of horror films with varied degrees of critical and commercial success. The best-known examples are perhaps *The Eye/Gin gwai* (dir. The Pang Brothers, 2002), its sequel, *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (dir. The Pang Brothers, 2004), *Three/Saam gaang* (dir. Kim Jee-woon, Nonzee Nimibutr and Peter Chan, 2002) and *Three...Extremes/Saam gaang yi* (dir. Fruit Chan, Park Chan-wook and Takashi Miike, 2004). The latter two are omnibus projects comprising three short films from three different places (Japan/Thailand/Hong Kong and Japan/South Korea/Hong Kong respectively). *Three...Extremes/Saam gaang yi* is generally considered superior to its predecessor, with the exception of Peter Chan's own segment, "Going Home". Indeed, horror is the genre that fits well with Applause's pan-Asian agenda. As many critics have noted, there has been a surge of interest in Japanese horror films since the box office success of *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998) and its sequels across Asia, which opened up new markets for horror films from other locations in Asia, especially South Korea and Thailand. In the pan-Asian context, horror and romance are the most common choices for joint-venture projects.

As Pieter Aquilia remarks, horror and romance are "universally popular box office genres" favored by Asian co-productions with an eye on the international market. Little surprise, therefore, Applause would want to consolidate its inter-regional career with two horror sequels. More significantly, it is through making 'The Eye' films that the talent of Oxide and Daniel Pang (collectively known as the Pang Brothers) was first recognized, and after making another horror film for Applause (*The Eye 10/Gin gwai 10*, 2006) the twins began their own transnational trajectory. Yet, besides the financial and organizational infrastructure, what makes these films pan-Asian, hence different from horror films produced in Hong Kong primarily for the local market? What elements in these horror films distinguish these films as pan-Asian, rather than Hong

Kong, Thai, Singaporean, Japanese, and Korean? If horror in general reworks the somewhat universal fear of the 'monstrous' as they also address specific social anxieties, what is the relationship between the specific and the universal in pan-Asian horror? Or, has the socially and culturally specific been so diluted that identification becomes problematic if not reduced to a symptom of cultural consumerism?

These issues can be approached from two angles. First, how transnational co-production has defined the parameters of filmmaking, that is, considerations of corporate/industry culture in relation to financing and marketing; second, whether a film as the end product of a creative process subject to these corporate parameters encourages articulations of a (trans)local awareness in varied degrees and at different levels of self-consciousness, and by this very process also reveals the dynamics between local specificities in the creation of an Asia imaginary. My concern here is the relations between the local and the translocal, and how their mutual entanglement and displacement might shed light on the elusive quality called 'Asianness', an expression that seems to suggest a new (though still problematic) mode of collective identification in the realm of popular culture. I argue that such 'Asianness', though by nature a product of transnational capital susceptible to economic and ideological exploitation, opens up alternative spaces for self-invention that is less susceptible to the ideological claims of nation-states, and therefore can serve as a springboard for translocal allegiances outside—or alongside—the purview of the nation. While the nation as a collective imaginary still holds sway in the production and consumption of cultural products in Asian societies such as China, Japan, and Korea, it is the multifarious manifestations and inherent instability of the term 'pan-Asian' that justify contradictory readings of its cultural images and commodities produced and consumed at different localities. In the case of Hong Kong, 'Asia' and 'China', designating both the imagination of cultural belonging and concrete sociopolitical realities, constitute a curious mix of cultural and economic aspirations that nonetheless reflect the historical uprootedness of the ex-British colony in postcolonial times. It is in this light that *Applause* becomes a worthy case for inquiry, for it occupies a space between two forces—the regional as a constituent of the global, and the national now widely used as a prefix for its official (business) label, that is, 'China, Hong Kong' (Zhongguo Xianggang).

Universal Hybrids and Trans/Local Subjects

The Eye/Gin gwai (dir. The Pang Brothers, 2002) was the first collaborative effort between Applause Pictures and Singapore's Raintree Production. Directed by the Pang Brothers, the film features a Malaysian actress, Angelica Lee

(Li Sinjie), in the lead role, accompanied by a host of actors and production personnel from Hong Kong, Thailand, and Singapore. The film was also Raintree's first initiative to reach out to international markets via co-production (mainly in financing). The box office success of this film not only led to its sequel, *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (2004), starring Shu Qi, a Taiwanese actress based in Hong Kong, but also a subsequent remake of *The Eye* in Hollywood, also produced by Peter Chan. As Chua Beng Huat remarks, Singapore offers a vantage point to study the inter-regional flows of popular cultural products precisely because of the city-state's relative nondescript cultural export; i.e. in the unequal exchanges of media products, Singapore remains a centre of consumption, rather than production (Chua Beng Huat, 2004: 219–210). This may contradict the government's stipulation that the film industry be a means to create and disseminate a new international image of the nation, both as a financial and economic hub and a cultural centre in Southeast Asia, on global screens. Indeed, the relaxation of the city-state's media policy, the restructuring of government-backed production companies, and the introduction of a new rating system have contributed to the revival of the local film industry since the early 1990s, and local directors such as Eric Khoo and Jack Neo have gained in-roads into international film festivals and art house cinemas, making films from homegrown contents with a penchant for comic subversion and/or social critique. However, co-producing successful commercial films with partners in other Asian locations remains high on the government's economic and ideological agenda. Based in Southeast Asia with a close affiliation to East Asian markets (primarily due to the majority ethnic Chinese population), to its regional partners, Singapore is a valuable partner in regional collaborations in terms of financial investment and a multi-lingual management personnel. To the city-state, co-productions targeted at the Asian and Western markets can help put some balance back on the city-state's cultural trade deficit.

While Raintree has the official blessing of the state to expand its transnational network, Applause tells a different yet familiar story of a self-made Hong Kong enterprise surviving on its own professional and commercial instincts. Historically, the absence of institutional backing to the local film industry in Hong Kong underscores its profit-driven character and also a weaker ideological imperative to toe the official line in running its business. This does not mean that Hong Kong films are immune from political forces or interference, but that the film industry is comparatively less subject to political censorship and institutional control.² This structural difference between Raintree and

² The colonial *laissez faire* policy ironically created an environment where both left-wing (pro-China) and 'liberal' (pro-Taiwan or US-backed) cultural organizations could flourish during

Applause, however, is where their complementarity lies, at a time when transnational filmmaking, as cultural branding and cultural export, makes both ideological and economic sense. According to Chan, making pan-Asian films for the Asian market was essentially a commercial decision, and admittedly Applause was probably the first production company that overtly embraces 'pan-Asian marketing' as their founding mission. Driven by this profit-motif, the first horror films did travel well across various Asian markets, thanks to the Pang Brothers' ability to accommodate and translate local elements well into a composite horror text in which the exotic is contained within a narrative and visual framework amenable to audiences at different localities.

Here Chua Beng Huat's audience positioning comes into play with the border-crossing activities of film production, an aspect crucial to the interpretation of pan-Asian films. The interaction between the local and the translocal, and between the situatedness of film viewing and the border-crossing nature of pan-Asian film production informs my reading of the Applause films as universal hybrids. By using this as a working concept I also want to stress the productive tension between the two components of the term: the universal tends to homogenize differences, while the hybrid's self-conscious impurity supplements the tranquil surface of sameness. In this Chapter I focus on how sameness and difference work in the narrative and visual framework of *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002) and *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (2004), and to what extent their universal hybridity distinguishes this type of film from other Hong Kong horror films featuring a Southeast Asia component. The interplay between sameness and difference in pan-Asian horror is a manifestation of what Robertson calls 'glocalization' in cultural production and reproduction constitutive of the global condition, which is distinguished by an interactive connectedness between homogeneity and heterogeneity (1995: 25–44). My discussion focuses on two inter-related aspects of these films: the configuration of space and gender politics in the representation of women and the spatial/cultural Other (Southeast Asia). The spatial configuration of Asia in these films deliberately eschews obvious local references to produce a kind of global (non-)space as the primary setting; while female characters are endowed with greater agency in confronting their accursed fates. This globalized Asia and female agency finally point toward a new image of Southeast Asia very different from its appearance as the exotic, ominous, and feminized Other in many locally-based Hong Kong horror films.

the Cold War era. For a critical introduction to Cold War era Hong Kong cinema, see Wong Ain-ling (2009).

The Eye: An Anatomy of Screen Horror

The story of *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002) revolves around a young woman Mun (Angelica Lee) who, after a cornea transplant, begins to see ghosts and dream about strange places and people. After a series of scary encounters with the undead, she finally resolves to go to Thailand to find out more about her donor, a young woman called Ling who committed suicide after her home village had been burnt down by a fire some time ago. It transpires then that the young woman was born with supernatural vision. Regarded as an ill omen, she was shunned and abused by the villagers. Just as Mun begins to come to terms with her unwanted vision inherited from Ling and gets ready to go home, she is blinded again in a truck explosion that she tries, as Ling did, to prevent.

To those who have seen the film, the most impressive aspects may not be the plot but the way in which the editing and cinematography create an atmospheric eeriness of haunting and being haunted, a mood that is further accentuated by the film score. As the film's title suggests, eyesight, or visual perception, provides the primary access to the supernatural and is also the key to unlock the secrets of the dead and the living. More importantly, the film foregrounds the female characters Ling and Mun as the owners of supernatural vision. The film opens with Mun's voice-over monologue about her the cornea transplant. Mun's recovery in the hospital is punctuated by blurry encounters with odd-behaving patients (later revealed to be departed/departing spirits).

The camera centers on Mun's bewilderment and escalating apprehension of the newly visible environment. In a scene when Mun walks down a darkened corridor, the camera alternates between Mun's blurry point-of-view shots and close-ups on Mun's perplexed face. The quick shot transitions are marked by non-diegetic, synchronically matched sounds. The film's interest in exploring the nature of vision is made more apparent in a conversation between Mun and her psychologist boyfriend, who advises her on how to re-learn her visual vocabulary by matching the verbal with the visual. In this process, the viewer occupies the privileged position of sharing Mun's supernatural vision and observing Mun's learning process from a distance. Nonetheless, for the most part of the film, the alignment of the audience's point of view with Mun's not only establishes Mun as the center of consciousness but also creates a bond between Mun and the viewer, as we participate in her journey of (self-) discovery.

Female protagonists at the center of intense moral/physical/psychological struggle is a stock-in-trade in horror films today. To a certain extent, this sensitivity toward gender, especially the way in which the complex psychosocial dynamics—male anxiety over losing economic/sexual power, the tension

between coloniality and postcoloniality, the ambivalence toward a Westernized modernity project, and the desire to subvert an oppressive patriarchal cultural order—are embodied by the female monster in a wide range of Asian horror films such as *Ju-on/The Grudge* (dir. Takashi Shimizu, 2002), *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998), *Audition* (dir. Takashi Miike, 1999), and *Whispering Corridors* (dir. Park Ki-hyeong, 1998). While it is also a well-known fact that the feminine/feminized Other has been a favorite and much contested trope in the conventions of horror worldwide, female agency and victimization are intricately linked to the dynamics of cross-cultural negotiations of identity. In *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002) this can be seen in the character of Ling, the girl born with supernatural vision. Unlike Mun, who lives a relatively well-off middle-class life in Hong Kong, Ling comes from an ethnic Chinese family in a Thai village. As a freak and a racial minority woman in her community, Ling has all the trappings of the subaltern. Her ability to predict the future, ironically, is seen as the cause of calamities. All this seems to have cast Ling in what Jay McRoy calls the ‘avenging spirit’ in Japanese horror (2004: 3–4). This is not the case in *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002). Ling’s spirit is seeking atonement with her mother, who is aggrieved by her daughter’s suicide. Near the end of the film, Mun summons Ling’s spirit, who then re-enacts the suicide through Mun. The scene uses a series of jump cuts between Ling’s room and the living room to intensify the emotional drama between mother and daughter. The quick succession of shots also blurs the boundary between past (the two women’s memories) and present (Mun’s reenactment of Ling’s suicide), and between the real and the supernatural. When the mother finally goes upstairs and holds Ling/Mun in her arms, mother and daughter finally are able to reconcile with each other, and Mun with her *other* self.

While Ling’s character recalls the avenging spirit, Reiko, in *Ringu* (1998), whose supernatural power becomes a curse and the cause for her murder, Ling is also diametrically opposed to the vengeful female ghost prototype since she does not seek revenge at all, and displays no other superhuman power than supernatural vision. Visually, Ling is more human than ghost-like, having neither the signature long tresses nor protruding eyeballs. As the owner of supernatural power she remains the oppressed, silenced other of a hostile community. Arguably, the source of horror of this film lies not in the appearance or the vindictive violence of the female ghost, but in her inability to act upon the course of tragic events in the human world. Her suicide thus can be read as the tragic consequence of her traumatic vision, a gesture of self-rejection, and a statement of protest.

This sense of helplessness applies to Mun and the viewer’s identification with her. The most horrifying scenes of the film concentrate in the first half,

when Mun suddenly and unknowingly encounters the abnormal. Mun's inability to understand what she sees and give the kind of response commonly associated with supernatural sightings creates a disjunction between the diegetic action and the audience's 'natural' reaction to horror (for the girl onscreen fails to 'scream'). Later on, when Mun finally acquires the visual vocabulary of fear, she attempts in vain to reject the supernatural. The series of ghostly encounters in this part of the film plays with this very human response to the supernatural: almost all the ghosts have a ghostly, emaciated appearance, and they tend to haunt places like staircases, elevators, and hospital corridors. A (female) protagonist being trapped and haunted in an enclosed space is a well-established 'fear factor' the genre. What is unique about Mun is that she has been blind since childhood (thus has no idea of what ghosts look like), and the discrepancy between her conceptual knowledge and her visual vocabulary accounts for much of her bewilderment. Thus, throughout the first part of the film, the viewer, though sharing Mun's vision, is placed at a privileged position not because of what we see, but what we *already* know, and this 'knowledge' comes from our experience of watching horror films and our familiarity with its visual codes, a knowledge Mun temporarily lacks.

In another equally telling scene, Mun fails to recognize herself in a photo taken while she was in the hospital. When her psychologist boyfriend tells her the woman in the photo is actually Mun herself, the camera cuts to Mun looking intensely into a mirror. When the camera moves suddenly to reveal the image of Ling staring back at Mun in the mirror, we are confronted with Mun's frightened and agonized look. This sudden revelation comes as a shock to the viewer since, like Mun, our acquired visual vocabulary is being challenged. Mun's reaction (and ours), thus, is a process of acculturation—a process of learning the visual codes and a certain method of decoding that eventually give her, and us, the scare that is long delayed. As Isabel Cristina Pinedo writes, one source of horror (and pleasure in watching horror films) is the audience's knowledge of and inability to interfere in the impending danger awaiting unknowing human characters on screen (2004: 106–107). In this sense, Mun and Ling are both participants of this spectatorial process, but unlike the cathartic pleasure usually afforded by horror film audience, the two women's catharsis is brought forth by an act of atonement and reconciliation, when Mun accepts the unnaturalness of her temporary vision, and Ling is reconciled with her mother.

The dual center of female agency or female gaze bespeaks the filmmakers' effort in negotiating cross-cultural identities against the conventions of Hong Kong horror films involving a cultural Other, especially when that Other is (from) Southeast Asia. Ling, as a social and cultural other both in the Thai

village and within the broader spatial setting of the film, is no longer the source of evil. Through a series of flashbacks, the film condemns the villagers who demonized Ling. The film has also toned down significantly the cultural and geographical otherness of Southeast Asia in many Hong Kong horror films featuring exotic rites and rituals, such as the so-called *gong tau* (the Chinese name for the kind of witchcraft presumably practiced in Southeast Asia) films that play with and perpetuate the popular imagination of a mysterious and demonic Southeast Asia.³ One recent example in this category is *Curse/Gong Tau* by Herman Yau (2007), in which a Hong Kong cop's short-lived affair with a Thai striptease brings the deadly 'flying head' curse upon the cop and his family. Throughout the film references to Thailand (the most popular Southeast Asian reference in Hong Kong films) unambiguously link the country to moral degradation, black magic, and dehumanizing rituals (such as self-mutilation and extracting 'corpse oil' from dead bodies to trigger a curse). Drawing upon the long-held assumption that Southeast Asia is a primordial land of lawlessness and sorcery, this type of film usually posits a Hong Kong character (usually male) caught in a deadly fight with a vengeful ghost or monstrous being who invariably will be defeated by a more powerful counter-curse, or by some last-minute mishap, or both. Destructive and self-destructive, the ominous Other is often created by some evil cult in Southeast Asia, the birthplace of monstrous sub-/non-/super-humans. Needless to say in the Hong Kong/Southeast Asia binary Hong Kong is always the privileged term, a civilized and modern society falling victim to its backward and barbaric neighbor.

In *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002), Hong Kong and Thailand are two parallel yet intertwined sites in which the two women seek out their respective destinies. When visions of the Thai village and its makeshift clinic invade Mun's dreams, the exotic is only used to trigger a journey of atonement—for both Mun and Ling. As mentioned above, the film plays with the discrepancy in visual vocabularies between Mun, the audience, and the rest of the cast to create suspense and fear. Mun's fragmented dream visions of Ling's hometown serve the same purpose to highlight a process of visual acculturation, so that the fragmented dream visions (a surreal and scary landscape) are eventually replaced by a less threatening 'whole' (the clinic and the Thai village as an ordinary habitat). While the film's *mise-en-scene* still relies on the

3 The association of Southeast Asia with black magic and deadly curses has been a common practice since the early days of Cantonese cinema. The Shaw Brothers produced a number of such films in the 1970s in which Southeast Asia (locally called *Nanyang*, meaning the southern part of the ocean) is seen as the origin of black magic.

contrast between the urban (Hong Kong) and the rural (Thailand) to underscore Mun's spiritual journey, it is not used to demonize the cultural Other but to accommodate differences.

The alignment of vision between Mun and the audience parallels that between Mun and Ling, and the delicate process of visual exchanges and discrepancies further reinforces the mutual displacement and entwinement of these viewing positions. Instead of assigning Otherness to a particular gender and culture, the film engages the visual process of 'othering'—a subtle, perhaps subconscious play, with the inherent instabilities and ambiguities in the process of identification, and the way in which our conceptual and perceptual knowledge is gained through, articulated in, and recycled as cultural images whose meanings are as arbitrary as how ghosts and monsters should appear and relate to humankind. The film's displacement of a long-held local cultural bias into a question/critique of visual acculturation greatly alters the formula of horror films catering to a primarily local audience. In *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002), cinematic horror is no longer a function of the demonized feminine or feminized Other, but a result of a *deconstructive re-visioning of cultural myths as mediated images* in which we are taught what to fear, and how (not) to be scared. Although this subtle process may not be self-apparent when watching the film, the use of more positive, charismatic female characters from a pan-Asian background, and the shying away from an obviously discriminatory visual codification of Southeast Asia in making a film targeting a pan-Asian audience have proved to be an effective way to negotiate the various modes of cultural identification in a translocal context.⁴

The Eye 2: *Translocal Visual Acculturation*

As in *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002), the sequel has a similar pan-Asian cast and the main action traverses two geographical locations, Hong Kong and Malaysia.

4 According to Wang and Yeh, while hybridization in global blockbusters such as *Mulan* (dir. Jingle Ma, 2009) remains a symptom of Hollywood's clever maneuvering of cultural difference in an essentially Westernized/Americanized narrative, films such as Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) embodies the promise of a modern Chinese sensibility in reinventing a traditional genre for a transnational Chinese audience. See Wang and Yeh (2007: 79–82). My use of 'acculturation' here puts more emphasis on the process of visual exchange and inculcation that takes place in a translocal context, i.e. a regional network of cultural production and reception that draws upon a long history of mutual exchange and cross-fertilization.

Generally regarded as inferior to its predecessor in many film reviews, *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (2004) nonetheless merits closer attention for its continuation of the thematic concerns with vision and visual acculturation in *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002). More interestingly, the kind of spatial setting that eventually becomes a visual motif in the Pang Brothers' subsequent films. The film begins with the central character Joey (Shu Qi) attempting suicide in her hotel room in Kuala Lumpur after a shopping spree; then she can see ghosts. Back in Hong Kong, she's haunted by a strange woman for some unknown reason. Pregnant and apparently dumped by her already married lover, Joey gets into a series of mysterious incidents as she tries to prevent ghosts from entering the bodies of pregnant women. Eventually Joey realizes the female ghost who haunts her is actually her lover's wife, who kills herself after discovering her husband's relationship Joey. Joey's unsuccessful attempts at finding a solution in the teachings of a Buddhist master finally leads to another suicidal attempt in the hospital. Near death again, Joey is saved by the female ghost, who then asks Joey to let her pass on to a new life as Joey's newborn.

The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2 (2004) has a number of obvious parallels with *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002), especially its interest in female agency and the importance of visual acculturation and reconciliation. Joey is a typical urban professional woman who is socially successful but conflicted and fragile inside. Her unwanted supernatural vision generates the film's scariest moments. On the other hand, the film's interest lies not in dispelling the haunting spirits, but in acknowledging their existence as part of life's natural cycle. This understanding of the relationship between the human and the supernatural realms differs significantly from conventional Western horror. According to Pieter Aquilia, this perspective on 'ghosts' is common to many Asian films, horror or not. Aquilia attributes this difference to the different religious traditions in Western and Asian cultures, hence their different understanding of life and death, human and non-human, and the natural and the supernatural. 'Asian ghosts' therefore are not exclusively creatures of the dark, but usually appear in daylight and participate in human affairs (2006: 438–439). This also has an echo in the animistic tradition in Japanese cinema, such as Miyasaki Hasao's world popular anime.

In *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (2004), as in *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002), the proliferation of ghosts in everyday life is, ultimately, taken as a natural phenomenon, because ghosts are treated as another life form without the body. This is the knowledge that Joey finally attains through a second near-death experience. However, for the better part of the film the conventional divide between the human and the non-human, good and evil, life and death holds sway in Joey's

perception of and reaction to the supernatural, despite her frequent visits to the Buddhist master for enlightenment. Indeed, the ghosts that seem to be haunting the human world are scarier in appearance than in action and intention. Here the film borrows from the Buddhist notion of reincarnation to conjure up rather horrific scenes of ghosts trying to enter the bodies of pregnant women. In a scene where Joey is bleeding inside a hospital escalator, she is terrified by a female ghost descending head-down from above. Using dim lighting and slow motion, the scene dramatizes the typical features of the avenging female ghost—long hair, ghastly face, and a weightless body in a long white robe that virtually swims in the air.

In this and other scenes, the viewer shares the same privileged vision of Joey, and the ghosts conform to familiar visual codes of the supernatural. Since Joey herself is in danger of being possessed, the alignment of our point of view with hers encourages audience identification with Joey. Yet, our physical distance from the heroine places us at some remove from the woman in distress. This distancing effect is precisely the result of the film's over-supply of ghostly/ghastly images so that eventually we become accustomed to their existence in the 'natural order' projected onscreen. References to Buddhism, too, assist in this process of naturalization and familiarization with a new encoding of old images, for the film seems to have certain assumptions about the audience's pre-existing knowledge of reincarnation, though the visual representation may not entirely conform to Buddhist teachings. Thus, as the film progresses, our empathy is sustained, but at the same time our familiarity with popular Buddhist beliefs also distances us from Joey's hysterical and hostile reactions. In other words, we are one step ahead in the filmic processes of, firstly, denaturalizing/defamiliarizing pre-existing visual codes through visual saturation; and secondly, reconciling the contradictory interpretations of and reactions to these codes.

After all, Joey's fear comes from a very human fear of the unknown, and our acquired habits of projecting this fear onto the non-human—in the form of the monstrous and the supernatural. In a way, like Joey, we are taught to be scared by certain images that have been circulating in the popular imagination since time immemorial. Like Joey, it is our acculturated perspectives that accounts for such fear. As a commercial film made for an audience well-exposed to both Western and non-Western cinematic conventions, *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (2004) can be seen as an elaboration of at least one important, and quite innovative, thematic element in *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002), that is, the nature of horror and its relationship to visual acculturation. The two films also exhibit an awareness of cultural differences in visual

representation and perception, and hence a need to accommodate, rather than eliminate, these differences through a filmic encounter. This process of cross-cultural negotiation and accommodation also explains the configuration of the generic Asian city, hence Asia as a global space in *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (2004).

It has been noted that recently the city in Hong Kong films is envisioned as a postmodern 'non-space', a signifier of the city's contradictory responses to the forces of globalization and the concomitant disorientation and fragmentation of self. While this global space suggests the erosion of the local by the global, hence representing a conscious attempt to imitate the international style of Hollywood high concept films, in *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002) and *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (2004), such faceless non-spaces abound, for instance stylish cafés, hospitals, non-descript residential apartments, and shopping malls, but one also detects a different strategy in accommodating the global and the local, so that Asia exists as an in-between translocal space, as the following discussion will elaborate.

The film begins with Joey choosing a tie for her lover inside a department store. The setting exemplifies the interior of a non-space: from the store's *décor* to the men's apparel on display, it can be any department store in any city today. The scene is composed of a series of close-ups—on the woman's face, on her hands, on the ties she is looking at. What's more, the ties are identical, except in color. As we watch Joey pick the ties and talk to her lover on the cell phone, we sense that something has gone sour in the relationship, and Joey is on a therapeutic shopping spree. From her interactions with the sales in the shop we notice, too, that she is away from Hong Kong. This knowledge comes not from how the place looks but from the fact that they speak English to each other. The accent and the tanned skin of the salesperson suggest that the mall is somewhere in Southeast Asia. Indeed, linguistic hybridity is not unique to *Eye 2* (2004) (or *Eye 1*, 2002, in which a mix of Cantonese, Mandarin, and Thai is used). For instance, the use of different Asian languages (Cantonese, Mandarin, Japanese, Thai) alongside English while highlighting a diasporic cultural awareness in Johnnie To's *Fulltime Killer* (2001) underscores disorientation and fragmentation rather than fostering a cohesive 'regional' identity. While diaspora implies a certain dynamic between homeland and host country, or in time an 'imaginary homeland' and one's present location of (permanent) residence, a sense of difference is maintained in the use of the term 'diaspora' or 'diasporic subject'. Yet, English is primarily a language of necessity rather than choice in *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (2004) in the service of verisimilitude, since English is the common language among different ethnic

and linguistic groups in Asia. In this scene, English is encoded as a signifier of the global non-space, a language of trade and commerce, a medium of social contact between locals and non-locals. Compared to *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002), Southeast Asia's presence is more confined to the first ten minutes or so, as the place where Joey gets tuned in to the supernatural world after her attempted suicide.

After this initial segment, the film returns us to Hong Kong for the remainder of the film, with a short flash back to the hotel room suicide scene toward the end. Thus, in *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (2004), English as an encoded linguistic signifier of the global space, and no less a legacy of British colonialism and post-colonial modernization, suggests less a diasporic than an inter-local or translocal awareness that destabilizes the categories of sameness and difference, as the local and the non-local from within Asia both speak a *foreign* language that identifies them as *non-English*, that is, Asians, of some sort. This linguistic strategy also allows Asian audiences to contextualize, and localize, the global space projected on screen. This global non-space, therefore, is marked by a difference that crystalizes in a localized form of English, and this difference ironically points toward a shared historical experience—that of colonization, decolonization, and modern nation-building—that has extended to the present in Asian societies. The politics of language thus must be noted in the demarcation of these productions within the pan-Asian context.

This understanding of the translocal is visually communicated through the film's *mise-en-scene* and cinematography. Throughout the film, the camera deliberately eschews local landmarks in various shooting locations (Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore, Mainland China), using mainly interior settings and medium and medium-long shots with occasional close-ups. When a change in location is diegetically signalled, intertitles are used instead of panoramic establishing shots of the local cityscape (as in many Jackie Chan films featuring pan-Asian settings, for instance *Project A* (dir. Jackie Chan, 1983) and *The Myth* (dir. Stanley Tong, 2005)). Visually, the non-spaces, due to their lack of distinction, are patched together to create a sense of place vaguely identifiable as 'Asia'. It follows that Hong Kong, the primary setting, is no longer distinguished by how much it differs from the rest of Asia, but how much it looks the same. At a more subtle level, audiences across Asia can still differentiate certain local spatial fragments from foreign landmarks (such as the train station in Singapore where Joey comes face to face with the female ghost), but at the same time these visual gaps, since they are built into the flow of the main action, also constitutes a Foucauldian heterotopic space where

different localities and experiential spaces are morphed into a visual whole. Instead of grounding the negotiation of difference within a diasporic framework, *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (2004) uses the global non-space as a decoy to reconfigure Asia as a translocal space that accommodates, rather than eliminates, local distinctions.

Conclusion

As a Hong Kong-based production company operating across East and Southeast Asia, Applause's activities are geared toward a pan-Chinese market across the region (its recent involvement in Hollywood remakes notwithstanding). As has been mentioned, pan-Asian filmmaking is a vast and diversified field, and Applause is one form this regional practice can take. Its Hong Kong background is reflected in the kind of hybridity or pan-Asian-ness manifested in its productions. While films such as *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002) demonstrates a more open and more self-critical attitude toward Southeast Asia in its representation of the gendered and cultural Other, this otherness is nonetheless domesticated through a common language, Chinese (in the spoken forms of Cantonese and Mandarin). While a pan-Asian cast is used in both films, those in key roles are mostly ethnic Chinese (from Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia). Another tactic to universalize Asian spirituality is the adoption of idiomatic references to Buddhism based on broadly Chinese folklore and customs. In both films, reincarnation is filtered through references to Chinese-style funerals and local rituals. No doubt, this pan-Asian vision is underscored by an awareness of the consuming power of ethnic Chinese communities across Asian societies. Inevitably, Chinese ethnicity—seen not as uniform but already hybridized as well as spatially and linguistically diverse—is used to encode and decode both cultural difference and sameness. This inevitable turn to 'Chineseness', again, is subject to another twist in the pan-Asian trajectory of Applause Pictures when the company, and director Peter Chan himself, returned to Mainland China to make their first big budget films (*Perhaps Love* [dir. Peter Chan, 2005], a Western-style musical with distinctive Asian choreographic elements, and *The Warlords* [dir. Peter Chan, 2007], an historical epic set in the Qing dynasty) to break into the international (Western) markets. The latest turn of pan-Asian cinema toward a pan-Chinese market is now a general tendency of regional co-productions whose operational strategies are increasingly responsive to China's political and economic prominence in the region.

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Well-Travelled Female Avengers

The Transcultural Potential of Japanese Ghosts

Elisabeth Scherer

Introduction

When Samara, the new incarnation of *Ringu's* Sadako (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998), crept out of the television set in Gore Verbinski's *The Ring* (2002), both the appearance and actions of the female ghost were novelties to viewers in North America and Europe. Today, the global audience is familiar with the now iconic spectral woman in white with ruffled black hair as the “poster girl for Asian horror” (Feeley, 2012: 46). The vengeance-seeking female ghost is not just native to contemporary Japanese horror cinema (J-Horror), but is also a trope found in many films throughout East and Southeast Asia including *Inner Senses/Yee do hung gaan* (dir. Chi-Leung Law, 2002), *A Tale of Two Sisters* (dir. Kim Jee-woon, 2003), *Shutter* (dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, 2004) and transnational co-productions like *The Eye/Gin gwai* (dir. The Pang Brothers, 2002).

Although these ghost films share stylistic and thematic conventions, they also incorporate diverse local aesthetics and customs, as

[...] it could be said that the New Asian ghost films were born of the confluence of the Ring-style horror films' experimental aspects and the female ghost tradition in various Asian countries.

LEE HUNJU, 2011: 75

As Wai-Ming Ng (2008: 143) states, local film industries ‘domesticated’ Japanese elements to develop innovative works and, in some cases, to also cater to a new taste for ‘Asian’ horror which had spread among global horror fans.

What is it that made this type of ghost such a worldwide success? Why was it so easily adapted, integrated and transformed? A comparative study of ghost films from several Asian countries is an ambitious task: aside from the difficulty of mastering a diverse range of Asian languages, one has to deal with the complex entanglement of local, Asian and global influences. Lee Hunju (2011) meets this challenge in her dissertation on what she terms “New Asian female ghost films”, however her research largely remains on the surface in terms of the historical dimensions of the films she examines.

In this chapter, I have chosen to take a different approach. I will focus on Japanese ‘ghost culture’ and J-Horror to show how the development of stories and films about female ghosts within Japanese culture has always been influenced by the incorporation and appropriation of foreign cultural elements. By underlining the transcultural influences upon the sphere of the supernatural—such as the adaptation of Chinese literature, the popularity of Western spiritualism and the global genre of horror films—I will characterize Japanese female ghosts as nomadic entities open to transformation and transnational cooperation.

I will begin with a brief overview of the development of the female ghost figure in the Edo period, a period characterized by Buddhist and Confucian conceptions of women as sinful and irrational beings. I then explicate the way in which this stereotype was formed by Chinese literature, the stories of Lafcadio Hearn and by Western spiritualism. Finally, I will argue that J-Horror became a popular and adaptable genre by adopting conventions of Western horror cinema, before examining the notion of the uncanny within a highly urbanized environment.

The Female Avenger in Japan

The stereotype of the avenging ghost woman (*yūrei*¹) dressed in white with ruffled hair developed during Japan’s Edo period (1603–1868), a period distinguished by a lively popular culture. These revenants made their appearances in picture books, on theatre stages, in card games, and in the oral traditions of the period. Although female ghosts had existed previously in Japan—particularly in literature and *Nō* theatre—it was during the Edo period that their classic appearance developed, and the character became an eerie pre-modern pop icon. The most famous of these Edo ghosts is ‘O-Iwa’ in Tsuruya Nanboku’s *kabuki* play “Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan”/“Ghost Story of Yotsuya” (1825). In this story, the masterless samurai Iemon plans the death of his wife O-Iwa so that he can marry a rich woman. After her horrific death, O-Iwa—who had been

1 *Yūrei* is a term that can designate male as well as female ghosts. The term is most often used when discussing the stereotypical image of a white-clothed ghost, an image that became mainstream in the Edo period. For vengeful ghosts without a concrete form, particularly in the Heian period (794–1185), the term *onryō* was used. More neutral terms for ghosts of the dead are *shinrei* and *shiryō*. For more on the terminology of ghosts, see Scherer, 2011: 35 ff.

submissive and self-sacrificing while alive—directs all her resentment towards her unfaithful husband and drives him insane.

The female ghosts of the Edo period appear following the death of women. As ghosts, the women have a strong presence, stand up for themselves and relentlessly pursue revenge. A woman who is so destructive towards a man and who drives the plot forward, however, was only allowed to exist in conjunction with monstrosity, as a deformed revenant that no longer belonged to human society. Characters such as O-Iwa were used in the Edo period to raise issues that were not possible to negotiate directly within the rules and laws of the feudal system.

Women in this system were of very low status—financially, and indeed within most spheres of action, they were almost completely dependent upon men. They had next to no opportunities to demand anything through appeal to the law. Ideologically, this oppression was supported by certain streams of Buddhism and Confucianism, which conceived of women as impulsive, irrational and unclean beings.

Women as sinful beings—possessed by greed and jealousy with a strong tendency to turn into demons or ghosts—were constructed as the Other, in opposition to masculinity.

KUME YORIKO, 2005: 169

Female sexuality in particular, as well as women's reproductive capacity, was viewed as a threat to male-dominated society (Ikoma Natsumi, 2006: 197). The Buddhist "Blood Pool Hell Sutra" serves as a dramatic example of the perception of female sexuality as sinful, a perception that has been widespread in Japan since the Muromachi period (1333–1573) (Shimazaki Satoko, 2011: 218–220; Árokay, 2003: 193–195). According to the *sutra*, on account of their inherent sinfulness, after death all women are consigned to the so-called 'blood pool hell', where they must swim in an enormous lake of blood. The Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism during the Edo period was particularly responsible for propagating the idea of the blood pool hell. Within Japanese Neo-Confucianism, one influential text was the "Onna Daigaku"/"Great Learning for Women", a collection of behavioral rules that characterized femininity as fundamentally impulsive and irrational.² In this text, "The five worst

² Tocco (2003), however, remarks that the text "Onna Daigaku" was just one of many texts during the Edo period that were specially directed at women. Texts about morals or

infirmities that afflict the female are indocility, discontent, slander, jealousy, and silliness” (Cranmer-Byng and Kapadia, 2010: 33).

The female monstrosity found in stories about ghosts and other female monsters was at once a worst-case scenario, in which all the supposedly malign traits of women are brought to light, while also a way of processing the repressed, miserable situation many women found themselves in. By giving the uncanny a familiar if terrible form, the (male) authors of such stories dealt with the problem of the spiritual state of the unhappy dead.

Importantly, many women at the time still died during or after childbirth—a death which was considered especially painful, and which led to many stories of women returning from beyond the grave to care for their children.³ These unappeased mothers, *ubume*, were generally represented in the visual arts with blood-spattered lower bodies.

While this history has formed the cultural background for the female ghosts populating Japanese cinema screens today, it is often only the outer appearance which has remained unchanged: these contemporary figures are charged with other fears. Lee, who analyzes “New Asian female ghost films” across Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Thailand (2011), identifies similar Buddhist and Confucian influences in films dealing with female ghosts from these Asian countries. Confucianism, she argues, has been the main ideology supporting Asian patriarchy since the Han Dynasty, and remained particularly recognizable in Asian ghost films of the 1950s and 1960s (Lee Hunju, 2011: 95). The women in these films conform to the role that society has assigned to them while alive, but in death they are shown as breaking out of the Confucian order and often turning against it. At the same time, Buddhism is seen to work as an effective weapon against ghosts in these earlier examples of Asian ghost films (Lee Hunju, 2011: 92). While this may often be true for ghostly figures from East Asia, I consider Lee’s expansion of Confucian influence to Southeast Asian films problematic. While there are certainly similarities between female cinematic ghosts such as Japan’s ‘O-Iwa’, Indonesia’s ‘Sundelbolong’ and Thailand’s ‘Mae Nak Phra Khanong’, they all are, as this volume shows, hybrid beings, which incorporate numerous influences and interpretations. Indonesian Sundelbolong movies, for example, contain aspects of politically generated gender ideology, Javenese cultural values, and Islamic morality (see Maren Wilger’s contribution).

education—with different intentions—appeared together with literary works and diverse illustrations. The collections also served as reading practice.

3 Tanaka (1997) and Shimazaki Satoko (2011) deal with the theme of a returning mother in greater detail.

In pre-modern East Asia, and also in some cases in Southeast Asia, Buddhist and Confucian thought and values might have led to similar concepts of ideal femininity—and its monstrous downside. On the local level, however, very different visual and narrative characteristics have developed, which are permanently transformed due to societal changes. The spectral metaphors of O-Iwa, Sundelbolong and Mae Nak Phra Khanong, for example, serve other functions today than they did in the 1950s or in the 19th century.

Ghosts as Transcultural Wanderers

In addition to the major religious and intellectual currents of Buddhism and Confucianism, Chinese ghost stories, literary adaptations by Western authors and Western spiritualism were of profound influence on the formation and mythology of female ghosts in Japan.

Chinese sources were adapted as early as the 12th century, such as in the collection of stories “Konjaku Monogatari-shū”/“Anthology of Tales from the Past”. However it was during the Edo period (1603–1868) that Chinese ghosts took on particular importance, with adaptations of Chinese ghost stories forming an important part of the highly popular gothic literature (*kaidan*) of the time (Reider, 2002: 63–66). Fueled largely by the fact travel was not allowed, there was generally a great interest in ‘exotic’ China throughout the Edo period. In Japan, as in Korea and Vietnam, Qu You’s (1347–1433) collection of stories, “Jiandeng Xinhua”/“New stories told while trimming the wick” (1378), circulated most widely. In Korea, an adaptation of this work appeared as “Kumo shinhwa”/“Tales of the Golden Carp” in the 15th century (Cheung, 1986). An unknown Japanese author translated some of these Chinese stories into Japanese in the 1650s and published them under the title “Kii zōtanshū” (cf. Reider, 2000: 275–276). Eventually, Asai Ryōi later set these stories in Japan in “Otogi-bōko”/“Hand Puppets” (1666), which contains the well-known story of “Botan dōrō”/“Peony Lantern”. In the story, a young man falls in love with a beautiful spectral woman and begins a sexual relationship with her, eventually leading to his death.

The well-known Japanese collection of supernatural stories, “Ugetsu Monogatari”/“Tales of Moonlight and Rain” (1776), was also influenced by Chinese models; within the preface alone one can find ten allusions to classical Chinese literary works (cf. Cheung, 1986: 155). For his story “House Amid the Thickets”, for instance, the author Ueda Akinari drew on stories from the Japanese “Konjaku monogatari-shū” and the Chinese “Jiandeng Xinhua”, which both include the motif of a self-sacrificing wife, longingly awaiting the return of the husband who had abandoned her.

In Chinese literature, ghostly women mainly return to the world of the living for two reasons: either they are driven by unaccomplished passion, which must be satisfied, or they cannot find rest because they worry about their family. A romantic relationship between a living man and a spectral woman is a common theme, frequently ending in the man's death. Japanese stories dealing with supernatural affection are often based on these spectral beauties from Chinese literature.⁴

Today's Japanese 'ghost culture' has also been deeply influenced by a Western collector of ghost stories, Lafcadio Hearn. An American of Greek-Irish origin, Hearn moved to Japan in 1890 and stayed there until his death in 1904. He became famous for the ghost stories he adapted from Japanese sources around 1900.⁵ Hearn collected traditional stories for his works and amply embellished them. His own library included many Japanese classics and *kaidan* collections.⁶ However, since he could not read Japanese himself, he was dependent upon the interpretations of his wife who recounted the stories to him. He also regularly sent his wife to *kabuki* performances, which she was to describe to him afterwards (Setsuko Koizumi and Hayato Tokugawa, 2012: 29).

Hearn's works, too, exhibit a fascination for female passion. A constant motif is the return of women after death, either to find the love they missed out on during their lifetimes, or to take revenge. Hearn romanticized and dramatized his versions, as the original stories were mostly unadorned in composition and language. In Kadota's opinion, Hearn shows a tendency to characterize Japanese women as ideal wives and mothers from a Western point of view, without realizing these women's positions as victims of the feudal system (Kadota Mamoru, 2005: 210). Hearn was yearning for an 'old Japan', which he believed was disappearing in the rapid process of modernization. In his stories, he

4 As Yomota Inuhiko (2009: 192) argues, the tradition of the Chinese ghost women may have also served as a model for the legend of Thailand's best-known female ghost, Mae Nak Phra Khanong. However, apart from referring to certain narrative similarities, Yomota does not provide sufficient evidence to support this supposition. As Martin Platt points out in this volume, narratives like that of Mae Nak are "a confluence of oral history, memory, and heritage"—and assumptions about unidirectional influence certainly do not do these ghost narratives justice.

5 He adapted over fifty stories, which are gathered in six collections: "In Ghostly Japan" (1899), "Shadowings" (1900), "A Japanese Miscellany" (1901), "Kotto" (1902), "Kwaidan" (1904) and "The Romance of the Milky Way" (1905) (see Perkins, 1934: 39–54).

6 Hearn's library today is part of Toyama University's library collection. A catalogue of all books is available (Toyama High School, 1927).

therefore constructs a version of the past which corresponds to both a nostalgic longing found among his Japanese contemporaries, and to a Western exoticist discourse on Japan. As Blouin (2013: 11) explains, American writers⁷ like Hearn used “imaginary Japan as a fictive space for contemplating the limits of rationality as well as the sublime scope of modernization”.

Hearn’s ghost stories were and still are highly appreciated in Japan, where the author is better known by his Japanese name, Koizumi Yakumo.⁸ Many stories within the old Japanese collections regained popularity only through Hearn’s retellings at the beginning of the 20th century, and today his adaptations are the most common versions.

One can get an idea of the stations of this transcultural wandering through the story “The Reconciliation”, which appeared in Hearn’s 1904 collection “Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things”. The story first appeared in the “Konjaku Monogatari-shū” (12th century). With the aid of his wife Setsuko’s oral (re)telling of a 19th century edition of “Konjaku Monogatari-shū”, Hearn produced the 1904 English adaptation, which was first translated into Japanese in 1910. In 1964, Japanese director Kobayashi Masaki picked up “The Reconciliation” as one of four of Hearn’s stories for his movie *Kwaidan* (1965), adding another version to this tradition.

Hearn and Japanese cultural figures like folklorist Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) or author Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939) understood the uncanny as a kind of anchor of Japanese identity in the face of modernity. However, with the onset of modernization in the latter half of the 19th century, belief in ghosts and other supernatural beings was more commonly regarded within intellectual discourse as backward, a pre-modern relic. Even though ghosts were still popular in literature, art and theatre, they were now labeled as ‘superstition’ (*meishin*), a word that found its way into Japanese language only in the Meiji period (1868–1912), in opposition to the category ‘religion’ (*shūkyō*), which was itself a product of the late 1850s (Josephson, 2006: 148).

A new form of dealing with ghosts that seemed more fitting for this period of renewal and departure than stories about avenging women was

7 Other Western authors who adapted Japanese ghost stories in the 19th and early 20th century were A.B. Mitford (Algernon Bertram Freeman-Mitford, 1837–1916), Alice Mabel Bacon (1858–1918), William Elliot Griffis (1843–1928) and Sidney McCall (alias Mary McNeil Fenollosa, 1865–1954).

8 Lafcadio Hearn’s works were translated into Japanese only a few years after their first publication in English. The ghost story collection “Kwaidan” for example, published in English in 1904, appeared in a Japanese translation by Takahama Chyōkō [sic] in 1910 (cf. Perkins, 1934: 142). Lafcadio Hearn’s story collections are still available today in many editions in Japan.

Western spiritualism, which gained great popularity in the late 19th and early 20th century in Japan (Takasuna Miki, 2012: 150). This was also reflected in popular culture where the game *kokkuri-san*, a practice of divination similar to Western table turning, became a mass phenomenon in the late 1880s. For this game, a small group of people gathered to invoke a spirit. *Kokkuri-san* was a cultural practice that infused everyday life with magic, and at the same time—because of its Western origin—invoked a semblance of rationality and scientific method, lending the participants with a feeling of control over the summoned ghost. According to Foster, *kokkuri* was “[...] a powerful medium, simultaneously a vestige of the ghosts that possessed the past and a portent of the spirits that would possess the future” (Foster, 2006: 273). Moreover, the first ghost photographs appeared around 1880 in Japan, which is to say examples of failed or manipulated photography, which inspired countless myths and stories (Koike, 2000). These so-called *shinrei shashin*, which are still an integral part of Japanese popular culture today (see Chalfen, 2008), were the first examples of the general skepticism towards technologies of reproduction which would become a predominant topos of J-Horror in the 1990s.

By the end of the 19th century, parapsychology had found its way to Japan through the translation of Franz Anton Mesmer’s and other works. In the first decade of the 20th century, an increasing number of psychical research publications appeared, and newspapers began reporting on the findings of the Society for Psychical Research in England (Takasuna Miki, 2012: 151). One Japanese researcher in the field of parapsychology, who is still well known today, Fukurai Tomokichi, conducted experiments with *tōshi* (clairvoyance) and *nensha* (psychic photography) (Koike, 2000: 59–61). In 1913, Fukurai published his results. Lacking sufficient evidence to support his claims, he was dismissed among experts, and eventually lost his position at the Imperial University of Tokyo. Later he seems to have gained some recognition in the West, as his work was published in an English translation in 1931 entitled “Clairvoyance and Thoughtography”.

The story of Fukurai and his female mediums served as a model for the events leading to Sadako’s death in *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998). *Shinrei shashin* are an established element of J-Horror, and even the motif of *kokkuri-san* appears in several movies. Contemporary Japanese horror cinema is thus reflective of turn of the century Japan, a period in which vigorous debates arose regarding pre-modernity and modernity, and Western science and superstition. J-Horror movies erode the foundations of modernity—a trust in technology and rationalism—creating an atmosphere of in-between, similar to the space of twilight (*tasogare*), which author Izumi Kyōka investigated in his gothic stories in the early 20th century (Figal, 1999: 6).

Japanese and Global Horror Cinema

In Japan, stories about ghosts were adapted to film as soon as it was technically possible to do so. The new medium of cinema contributed to the shaping of the ghost figure in Japan. Though classical Japanese theatre, above all *kabuki*, had an enormous influence upon the first decade of Japanese filmmaking (McDonald, 1994: 23–24), the cinematic possibilities revealed through screenings of Western (mostly French) films opened up a new creative scope. Thus, by the beginning of the 20th century, ghosts had begun appearing and disappearing on screen through the use of editing techniques such as cutting, fading, and double exposure to have the illusion of ghosts appearing and disappearing on screen.

After the Second World War, Japanese audiences as well as film directors showed an increasing interest in Western (horror) movies. In the 1950s and 1960s, following the end of the American occupation, the Japanese horror film experienced a period of prosperity and retained elements of *kabuki* and *Nō* theatre. At the same time, however, directors increasingly discovered the potential of film as a medium, using an expressionist style and montage techniques to portray ghosts. According to Lee Hunju (2011: 87), the stylistic elements of Japanese *kaidan* films of the time inspired Korean ghost movie producers and directors, such as Yong-min Lee, who directed the classic *Salinma/A Devilish Homicide* (1965). In Hong Kong and the West, as Wai-ming Ng (2008: 146) states, “old-style Japanese ghost films” did not gain a significant following and thus had barely any influence on film production in other countries. However, these classic ghost stories and plays dominated Japanese horror cinema until the end of the 1960s, when studios began to turn to horrific creatures of Western origin, such as monsters, vampires and serial killers (cf. Kitajima Akihiro, 2000: 25).

Hybrid works, which featured an intense combination of stylistic conventions from Western horror film with Japanese motifs, began to emerge around 1990. An early example is Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s film *Sweet Home/Suwito Hōmu* (1989), which features a documentary filmmaker (played by Itami Juzō) and his team who are facing the perils of a haunted house. The film’s style was clearly influenced by Western horror films such as *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper, 1982), while the plot also bears resemblance to Edo period stories about haunting mothers (*ubume*). The new J-Horror boom began in the mid-1990s, when *Gakkō-no-kaidan/School Ghost Stories* reached a large audience with one television series (from 1994) and several feature films (from 1995). This series also exhibited stylistic parallels to Western movies of the 1980s. For example, the translucent pink monster that chases the children in the first *Gakkō-no-kaidan*

film (dir. Hirayama Hideyuki, 1995) brings to mind 'Slimer', the green blob creature from *Ghostbusters* (dir. Evan Reitman, 1984).

The emblematic film of J-Horror, *Ringu* (1998), is also a hybrid work. Director Hideo Nakata named Western classics including *The Innocents* (dir. Jack Clayton, 1961), *The Haunting* (dir. Robert Wise, 1963) and *The Amityville Horror* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, 1979) as inspirations (see Totaro Donato, 2000). *Ringu's* plot and the development of suspense further reminds one of the Canadian horror movie *The Changeling* (dir. Peter Medak, 1980), where the crippled, sickly young boy Joseph, murdered by his father out of greed, returns as a ghost and haunts an old mansion. Just like Sadako, the boy's corpse is found in a forgotten old well over which a house has been built. Takahashi Hiroshi, who wrote the screenplays for *Joyū-rei/Don't look up* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1996) and the *Ringu* series, was, as he states, deeply impressed by the film *Ghost of Sierra de Cobre* (dir. Joseph Stefano and Robert Stevens, 1964) which he had seen on television as a child (Yasushi Nakano, 2005: 127–128).

Ringu follows the principle of a discovery-plot (Carroll, 1987: 57), in the course of which the protagonists investigate strange phenomena and little by little uncover the existence of a monster or ghost, and begin to unravel the entity's motives. In classical Japanese ghost stories and films, however, the reasons for haunting are known from the outset. In *Ringu*, only at the end of the film the audience is directly confronted with Sadako's ghost when Ryūji falls prey to her. Prior to that scene, only visual fragments point to her existence. This format, which describes the danger as ever present but vague and intangible, is similar to the way in which suspense is built up in Western horror films such as Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). Lee Hunju (2011: 69) goes as far as to compare the female protagonists of the new Asian ghost movies, who fight against uncanny intrusions, to the 'final girls'⁹ of the Western Slasher genre. According to Wai-ming Ng (2008: 147), new stylistic elements used in J-Horror films include a particular form of lighting made to evoke a dismal, depressive atmosphere, as well as the use of dull colors and metallic sound effects.¹⁰

Thus, the J-Horror works of the 1990s follow an established canon of stylistic elements, which has become increasingly prevalent in a globalized horror cinema today. As Klein states, genre films are particularly suitable to processes of transnationalization:

9 Coined by Carol Clover (1993), the term 'final girls' refers to the last woman or girl alive to confront the killer in slasher films.

10 Wierzbicki (2010: 197) points out that the "sound of disembodied croaking, scraping, wheezing or bubbling" in J-Horror is directly related to the manner of death which brought the ghost into being.

Because of their formulaic construction and their derivation from other films, they do not demand from viewers a deep familiarity with a foreign culture or cinematic tradition, but rather a more easily acquired mastery of a recurring set of conventions.

KLEIN, 2010: 3–4

Local features—such as female ghosts in Japan—thus meet largely neutral forms known to the global horror audience. These elements are constantly rearranged to generate new meanings. This principle is not limited to Japan, rather it can be characterized as a global phenomenon.

Local motifs and newly developed stylistic elements in turn can become part of the global circulation of horror motifs, as was the case with *Ringu*'s Sadako. US producers saw the potential of the hybridity of its material. For a Western audience, the ghost was confusingly unfamiliar, but at the same time the setting, the plot and many of the stylistic features offered enough associations to allow for the viewers to recognize the familiar within the foreign. After the first remake, rights for other J-Horror films were successfully sold to US producers, and Asian filmmakers started to make films “with an eye toward Hollywood” (Bliss Cua Lim, 2009: 198). Asian horror films thus developed “an amalgam of local, regional and global influences, citing not only from one another but also their Hollywood remakes, and vice versa” (Feeley, 2012: 46). According to Byron (2012: 374), these developments have their drawbacks, as there is a tendency to appropriate and commodify local or regional folklores for an international audience.

According to Wai-ming Ng, however, one cannot speak of a homogeneous process of globalization in the horror genre. Whereas Asian horror motifs have spread throughout Europe and the US mainly through a ‘second hand globalization’ in the form of remakes, the original films were circulating within Asia in both a ‘direct globalization’, and a ‘pirated globalization’ through the adopted style and plot of *Ringu* and other hit films without acquiring the rights (Wai-ming Ng, 2008: 143). The new type of horror film also became a transnational phenomenon through co-productions involving several Asian countries. The production company Applause Pictures has been highly successful in this field, producing the films *Saam gaang/Three* (dir. Kim Jee-woon, Non-zee Nimibutr and Peter Ho-Sun Chan, 2002), *Saam gaang yi/Three...Extremes* (dir. Fruit Chan, Park Chan-wook and Takashi Miike, 2004), *Gin gwai/The Eye* (dir. The Pang Brothers, 2002) and *The Maid* (dir. Kelvin Tong, 2005).¹¹ These

11 Vivian Lee deals with this ‘Pan-Asian Horror’ in her contribution to this volume.

co-productions are transnational in terms of financing, marketing, cast, setting, language, crew and tropes (Feeley, 2012: 45), but with a strong focus on Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand. The global boom of 'new Asian horror' is thus actually limited to productions from several East and Southeast Asian source countries, whereas horror is produced only for the local market in most other Asian countries.¹² As such, terms like 'Asian horror' are in fact over-generalizations based on foreign expectations of 'Asian horror' from the few source markets which are globally successful.

The Specters of Urban Modernity

The transcultural flows influencing Japanese 'ghost culture' and so-called J-Horror are related to religious heritage, classical literature, and the stylistic conventions of the horror genre. However, it is not only these flows which have sparked global interest in Japanese ghost films. Most contemporary Japanese horror films generate their impact through the infiltration of the lives and worlds of those living in highly urbanized societies. In my opinion, three fundamental motifs of so-called J-Horror movies make them relevant for an international audience, which is primarily located in developed countries. These three motifs are urban modernity in crisis, uncanny media devices and the dissolution of the nuclear family. It is through these patterns that the ghosts unfold their potential to be a

sign of something [...] that, largely ignored or repressed by the society in which it participates, refuses to be marginalized any longer, but pushes to be recognized.

KRÖGER AND ANDERSON, 2013: XII

The first J-Horror films were strongly influenced by urban legends, predominantly the modern folk stories most widespread amongst schoolchildren in Japan. These stories deal with haunted taxis, abandoned buildings and ghosts on school toilets. Folklorist Miyata Noboru discussed such urban legends in his 1985 work "Yōkai no minzokugaku"/"Folklore of Monsters", while middle school teacher Tsunemitsu Tōru helped this modern folklore to gain nationwide attention with his 1990 collection of stories "Gakkō no kaidan"/"School

¹² The Indonesian Sundelbolong movies that Maren Wilger analyzes in this volume, for example, are largely unknown to an international audience.

Ghost Stories". This atmosphere formed the background for the emergence of J-Horror—which was confined not only to film but also manifested itself in a variety of media such as video games, manga and fantasy novels—around 1990.

Though most J-Horror films take place in Tokyo, they do not present recognizable architectural spots, but rather a familiar yet generic series of interiors, characterless apartment buildings and empty spaces. This mirrors an experience of fragmentation Reed mentions in his thesis on uncanny urban space on screen: "As the design of the city has continued to drift outwards, and the idea of a cohesive urban center has morphed into an empty and meaningless relic, often all that remains is a void" (Reed, 2011: 96).

Whereas pre-modern Japanese haunted houses secured their uncanny atmosphere through their location far from the social life of villages and cities, and an architecture reclaimed by vegetation and torn-sliding doors, contemporary haunted houses are the corpses of modernity's dreams. Apartment blocks, built at a time of great economic growth to house citizens who in turn contributed to the financial success of the country, are slowly crumbling away. Huge medical facilities, constructed decades ago and now abandoned, become signifiers of decay, death and scientific villainy. Buildings like the creepy damp apartment building in *Honogurai mizu no soko kara/Dark Water* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 2002) are symbols of the Japan's 'lost decade' which was ushered in by the burst of the economic bubble in the early 1990s. As Lee suggests, the visual presence of economic instability in J-Horror is one factor that made it adaptable for filmmakers in other Asian countries, who were themselves facing a similar situation following the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Lee writes, "The Asian people's anxieties about Asian modernity in crisis played a significant role in constituting specific themes of the Asian female ghost films made from the late 1990s to the early 2000s" (Lee Hunju, 2011: 122).

But it is not only huge abandoned buildings that are inhabited by specters—people are anything but safe in their own houses or apartments; they are horrified by filthy black hair of unknown origin in their sink, mysterious phone calls and eerie noises. Hiding under a blanket, a strategy children use against the products of their fantasy, is of no use in *Ju-On/The Grudge* (dir. Takashi Shimizu, 2002)—the ghost is already there. As Freud (1955 [1919]) explains in his theory of the uncanny, through the process of repression something once familiar or 'homely' becomes unfamiliar, alienated from the mind and therefore 'unhomely'. In J-Horror this applies in a very literal sense, the house, the home of a family, becomes an 'un-home', an uncanny space where the lives of its inhabitants overlap with some traumatic event. This space is inscribed with memories and thus transcends temporal boundaries: "The haunted house refers to a space of recollection charged with affect: alternately fearsome,

thrilling or tragic". (Bliss Cua Lim, 2009: 206). As Vidler states in his work "The Architectural Uncanny", it has become a leitmotif of postmodernism that the house is no longer a home (Vidler, 1994: 66).

In some J-Horror films, diverse settings are put into contrast to illustrate the intrusion of the (pre-modern) past into the film's present. Sadako in *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998) originates from the island Izu-Ōshima, that is to say from the exterior, the marginal—from a zone where nature is rough and uncontrollable. The backdrop of Sadako's actions is the traditional Japanese *tatami* room, the so-called *washitsu*. 'Old Japan' and the idea of untamed nature are thus constructed as a source of the uncanny—which is in line with Freud's theory, where the uncanny is described as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud, 1955: 219). The filmic ghosts seem to confirm "primitive beliefs which have been surmounted" (Freud, 1955: 248) through the process of modernization, but which are still present, hidden under the surface. As much as the ancient grotesque figure of the *yūrei* is feared, it is at the same time the object of a longing for a time with a supposedly 'intact spirit world', when ghosts were still an accepted and effective tool to deal with loss, otherness and guilt. Through embodying social issues and individual psychic turmoil, by lending them a concrete form, ghosts act as catalysts for the ineffable while facilitating confrontation. This ambivalence of the ghost—its position between dread and desire—has always been an essential aspect in the reception of ghost stories and still accounts for J-Horror's success today.

Another particularity of the J-Horror genre is that ghosts do not simply appear in front of their victims, but rather manifest themselves through various media. The first sighting is never a direct one. Moreover, the films use multiperspectivity to generate an atmosphere of fundamental insecurity. The movie *Jaganrei/Psychic Vision* (dir. Ishii Teruyoshi, 1988) exemplifies this style. *Jaganrei* was a low-budget movie, produced directly for the video market. It is barely known today. Nonetheless, it may be considered the first J-Horror movie, and is said to have influenced directors like *Ringu's* (1998) Hideo Nakata.¹³

Jaganrei's narrative is construed as a 'mockumentary'. In the beginning it is declared that the film consists of original footage shot to promote pop star Satō Emi. It is also explained that the footage has never been used due to a series of peculiar incidents during the shooting, which culminate in the singer's death. The cause of these unfortunate incidents is only revealed by the footage: we

13 Japanese writer and scenarist Konaka Chiaki, who wrote the script for *Jaganrei/Psychic Vision* (dir. Ishii Teruyoshi, 1988), writes about production and reception of the film in the book "Horā eiga no miryoku"/"The Fascination of Horror Films" (2003).

see a blurred, white figure in the background, a figure people are obviously not able to perceive directly. Through the technical transformation of reality via the cinematic code, we can access a realm that is otherwise invisible. In *Jaganrei/Psychic Vision*, the bird's eye perspective implies that we even see sequences filmed by the supernatural being itself.¹⁴

Haunted media devices and the plurality of perspectives that results from the editing of sequences, which derive from different sources, became essential stylistic conventions of J-Horror. In *Ju-on/The Grudge* (dir. Takashi Shimizu, 2002) and *Dark Water/Honogurai mizu no soko kara* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 2002) for example, grainy images captured by surveillance cameras are the first indicators of a supernatural presence. Mobile phones become deadly devices in *Chakushin ari/The Call* (dir. Takashi Miike, 2003), and the internet is a haunted presence in *Kairo/Pulse* (dir. Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 2001). In its skepticism towards modern mass media and mediality itself, J-Horror demonstrates similarities with Western horror films. It is through tape recordings that Reagan's gibberish in *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973) becomes comprehensible, while the ghostly voice in *The Changeling* (dir. Peter Medak, 1980) is inaudible, yet recordable. The motif of the television set as ghost portal can already be found in Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* (1982) and David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). The newest spin-off of the 'Ringu' series, *Sadako 3D 2* (dir. Tsutomu Hanabusa, 2013), even features a special smartphone app, which transforms the viewers' mobiles into haunted devices during the cinema screening and makes the horror experience a more personal one.

Uncanny effects caused by cameras and tape recorders are as old as these technologies of reproduction themselves. As Gunning writes in an article on spirit photography, the technology inspires an uncanny feeling through the dematerialization of reality, which undermines the unique identity of objects and people—creating 'ghostly doubles' (Gunning, 1995: 43). In spirit photography as well as J-Horror movies, the medium seems to possess a more sensitive capacity than the human eye, allowing the ghosts to be captured on film. These images cannot be traced back to a unique original. Indeed, it is this lack of tangible reference, which makes them spectral. Or, as Derrida puts it in an interview on the movie *Ghost Dance* (dir. Ken McMullen, 1983), "when the very first perception of an image is linked to a structure of reproduction, then we are dealing with the realm of phantoms" (Derrida, 1989: 61). But there is one more dimension to this phenomenon, as with the notion of the 'home' and 'un-home', it is also the position between the familiar and unfamiliar that

14 Pinedo (1997:52–52) terms this kind of camera work, which identifies the viewer's point of view with that of the implied monster, "unclaimed point-of-view shot".

invites ghosts to haunt media technology. Using cameras, telephones and video technology is part of our everyday life. These devices connect us to other people, collect our memories, and offer recreation and security. If a ghost conquers our television or—even worse—our mobile phone, this also represents an attack on our ‘home’ and our identity. When Hitomi switches on her television in *Ju-On/The Grudge* (dir. Takashi Shimizu, 2002), it should be a refuge to soothe her fears and a companion to let her forget her solitude. Instead, the familiar face of the presenter becomes distorted, the image freezes, and in so doing, the situation becomes even more uncanny through the mutation of Hitomi’s personal environment.

In the Japanese ghost films of the 1950s, as in the stories of the Edo period, the ghosts often represented an attempt to confront the role of women. In contemporary J-Horror, most of the ghosts are still female, and some of the films—like *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998), where Sadako and her mother Shizuko possess paranormal powers while alive—still emphasize the motif of “women’s naturally-born monstrosities and otherness” (Lee Hunju, 2011: 145). A new and very remarkable development, though, is that the ghosts now also stand for the dissolution of traditional family structures.

The U.S. classic *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper, 1982) pictures an intact, average American family fighting against uncanny, supernatural occurrences. In Japanese films like *Ringu* and *Dark Water/Honogurai mizu no soko kara* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 2002), however, the family is already broken, with parents divorced and the mother living alone. It is perhaps then unsurprising that one of the most prolific J-Horror directors, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, turned completely to social drama in 2008 with *Tokyo Sonata*:

Kurosawa is not actually departing from the J-horror tradition; rather, he is transforming the quotidian experience of Japan’s working class into a discourse on the abject horror of the mundane.

ROSENBAUM, 2010: 116

The scene in which Yōichi meets his father on the street in *Ringu*, for instance, is particularly striking. The two stand still for a moment and Yōichi looks at the man shrouded in darkness, but he does not recognize him as his father. Rather, the man is nothing more than a shadow crossing his path. This scene indicates that the nuclear family is no longer functioning as an influential institution offering support to its members. Relationships are shattered and family members, practically absent from one’s life, can become little more than ghostly figures. The same holds true for *Dark Water/Honogurai mizu no soko kara* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 2002), where a mother struggling with her divorce is not always able to meet the needs of her daughter. The image of a little girl waiting at

kindergarten for her mother to pick her up is emblematic of their situation. When the ghost of a girl the same age as the daughter haunts their apartment, the only solution the film offers is an 'adoption' of the ghost child. This may be read as an opportunity for atonement for the single mother and her failure to properly care for her own child.

Because of their low social status, single mothers are the ideal victims. In the logic of these movies, their daily struggle of coordinating work and childcare, of trying to stay afloat in the treacherous rapids of society, makes them vulnerable to attacks by supernatural forces. In Edo period ghost stories, adult women were victims mutated into horrific ghosts; in today's ghost films, they may also be the guilty party (even if the films portray them in a sympathetic way) because of their inability to sustain a 'normal' family life. Children are depicted as those who suffer the most from divorce and fragmentation of the family: A number of J-Horror ghosts are children, haunting society because of neglect or abuse. According to Nelson, in Japan children stand for hope and the future as well as for a nostalgic, traditional past. In these films then, they become "emblems of a lost past and an uncertain future, a future portrayed as so detached from tradition and national identity as to be frightening" (Nelson, 2009: 13). Kume states that these spectral children also provided a common thread that made J-Horror adaptable to Hollywood: "if children, who are supposed to be lovely, are directing strong evil forces against good people, this causes extraordinary fear and fright" (Kume Yoriko, 2005: 166).

The dysfunctionality of the traditional family appears on two levels in J-Horror, in the 'present' of the film, where family members are haunted by a ghost, and within the past, where some family tragedy lays the foundation for the present haunting. Thus, the trauma that is represented by the ghosts in J-Horror is never comfortably situated in the 'past'—it corresponds with the troubled relationships of the present, of the living. As the protagonists investigate a ghost's motives, they must, at the same time, explore their own subconscious.

Conclusion

Japanese female ghosts are not as unique and endemic as some people claim them to be. Although the stereotype developed in a period when Japan largely closed itself off from the world, Chinese culture still had a huge impact on stories about the supernatural. As Japan opened up again in the 19th century, the earlier figure of the ghost was largely dismissed in intellectual discourse. At the same time, Western concepts regarding the spirit world were integrated

into Japanese society, thereby generating new types of ghost lore and cultural practice such as *kokkuri-san*.

J-Horror films tie in with these influences of Western spiritualism as well as with global conventions of the horror genre, yet the ghostly revenants closely resemble their 18th and 19th century predecessors. Most specters are still female, dressed in white and wearing their hair loose. What makes these ghosts successful beyond Japan is their potential to embody the actual fears of people living in urbanized societies with a high standard of living. People who encounter ghosts in J-Horror are in difficult situations marked by obscure intersections of the present and the past, of traditions and urban loneliness. The ancient figure of the female *yūrei* as the classic Japanese ghost ‘par excellence’ re-emerges in these movies as a signifier of a repressed past, as a pre-modern ‘other’, that is both an object of longing and of fear.

Be it one’s own apartment, one’s mobile phone or the nuclear family, in J-Horror, everything that keeps people grounded, that offers security and a feeling of ‘home’ breaks away. The familiar turns obscure and distorted, and the loveable (such as children) becomes destructive. Ghosts no longer point directly to one act of wrongdoing, but embody fundamental insecurity, even going so far as to affect the protagonist’s identity. Frequently within J-Horror there is some connection to the ghost, some part of the protagonist is in the ghost, some part of the ghost is in the person.

It is its openness, its hybridity and its proximity to complex urban life that accounts for J-Horror’s transcultural potential and success. As every transcultural artifact, Japanese ghost films have “a cosmopolitan side, but also a side of local affiliation” (Welsch, 1999: 205). Their status as ‘cultural revenants’ makes Japanese female ghosts a model for their companions, haunting cinemas throughout Asia and around the world.

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Telling Tales

Variety, Community, and Horror in Thailand

Martin Platt

Introduction

In 1990, a Thai fellow resident of Seattle recommended I rent the film *Mae Nak Phrakhanong* (dir. Daeng Seni, 1978) from a local Thai market, emphasizing the scary fun to be had. I had recently returned from a few years in Thailand, and the title was somehow already familiar to me. Over the following decade, I heard references to ‘Mae Nak’ again and again, until I finally realized that this was much more than just a popular 1980s movie—as I had at first assumed—but a cultural phenomenon with pervasive and lasting significance in Thai society. When I discussed it with friends in Bangkok in the late 1990s, they quickly cited ‘See Ui’ as another tale which ‘everyone knows’. Thereafter, several other narratives came to my attention, including the story of ‘Nuanchawee’. These stories share characteristics of news accounts, legends, folktales, spiritual beliefs, and even *jataka* tales. The stories have been told and re-told, with some modifications, for decades or more throughout Thailand, yet remain largely unknown beyond the country’s borders (with one exception). As such, they show a confluence of oral history, memory, and heritage.

The purpose of this paper is to elucidate an aspect of Thai culture and indeed ‘Thainess’: the telling and re-telling of particular scary stories in different but immediately recognizable forms. I argue that it is the activity of reiterating the stories in a seemingly infinite number of ways, and the fact that they are specifically Thai, and claimed as such, that are their salient features. No one version is privileged above another; there is no definitive, authoritative Ur-story. Thus, no version is claimed to have higher truth value or to be more correct than any other. If there is differentiation among versions, it is based on how satisfying a particular telling is, which in turn depends on how the standard elements of the story are depicted and deployed. Variation is not only permitted but expected, and in fact a new telling of an already well-known story is welcomed, hence the continuing proliferation of versions. However, if favorite elements are absent—especially key frightening elements—then the audience is likely to come away feeling that something is missing, that that specific re-telling was somehow unfulfilling and unsuccessful. In observing

different versions of tales, in a variety of mediums, we can begin to develop a sense of the ways in which these stories can and cannot vary, what makes them so compelling, and therefore why they persist and remain known throughout Thailand.

The existence of these stories in a variety of forms and genres, as well as their countless versions, attests to their deep significance. The focus of this article is however the productivity (in terms of the numerous versions that have and continue to be produced) and durability of the stories. In each version, specific elements of a story can be modified or replaced—within limits—to suit the conditions of the particular telling. When recounted, the story is already known to both teller and listener; favorite details are remembered and savored, while new twists can be appreciated or criticized. The stories therefore exist primarily in told, thus oral, form—as spoken tale, radio play, *likay* performance, opera, and so on. Even when produced in the form of a film or a book, they truly exist only to the extent that they are heard, discussed, and considered, and, in the case of poetry, read aloud. In this way the stories act as a medium constituting a kind of participatory, face-to-face community of shared telling and social connectedness.

For this paper I have chosen to concentrate on three particular stories, all of which have some horror aspect. I believe them to be so widely known as to be effectively universally recognized among Thai speakers in Thailand.¹ Indeed, mere mention of the name of the main character of any of the stories will normally elicit instant recognition and generally a comment or brief retelling of the tale. The stories I discuss here² are: Mae Nak, a woman whose spirit refused to abandon her husband even after her own death; See Ui, a man executed for killing and devouring children; and Nuanchawee, a nurse murdered by the doctor whom she loved unshakably. All of the stories involve unnatural death and some kind of compulsion or obsession, and each has come to be associated with a particular location in greater Bangkok.

Mae Nak Phrakhanong

'Nak' (alternately referred to as 'Ee Nak', 'Mae Nak', or 'Nang Nak', according to the era) was a young woman living with her husband, Mak, in a village in Phrakhanong, possibly in the 19th century. While the young couple were

1 It would be interesting to investigate to what extent they are known and told among different groups such as tribal people in the mountains and sea nomads off the coasts.

2 All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

expecting their first child, Mak was conscripted to fight as a soldier for the state. While he was away, and unbeknownst to him, both mother and child died due to complications during birth. On returning home, Mak, his wife and child resume their happy lives together. At first he suspects nothing, and refuses to believe the villagers who try to tell him he is living with a ghost. However, he gradually becomes suspicious as the villagers who try to warn him die one by one at Nak's hand. In a famous scene that is a signature of the story, he eventually sees the evidence for himself: while Nak is cooking, a lime falls through the floor boards, and not realizing Mak can see her, she retrieves it by extending her arm to a spookily unnatural length. Up until this point, she has been able to maintain the illusion that she, their baby, and the house are all in good order. Mak however finally perceives his surroundings in their true, decaying form. The villagers then try to banish Nak, but her power is too much for them. Finally, a senior monk is able to vanquish her with the righteous strength of the dharma, forcing her to leave her beloved Mak, accept her own death, and return to the afterworld.

In 2000, Anake Nawigamune published a study of 'Mae Nak Phrakhanong' in which he investigated a number of early versions of and comments on the story. The earliest reference he found to the tale was from 1877, when Prince Damrong conducted a poll of people going in and out of the palace, asking them which of four names of prominent individuals they had heard of. Mae Nak was the most widely known, even though the list also included Phraphutthayodfa, King Rama I (Anake Nawigamune, 2000: 25). Anake also refers to a reader inquiry in poetic form (*khlong si suphab*) published in Siam Praphet newspaper in 1899, requesting information about the story of "the demon Nang Nak" (Anake Nawigamune, 2000: 23). According to K.R.S. Kulab, who responded to the inquiry, Nak died in childbirth and was buried at Wat Mahabut. She and her husband, Chum, had a son who dressed up as Nak's ghost and terrorized the village in order to discourage anyone from marrying his father and diverting his inheritance. Anake concludes from this that the story began sometime during the reign of Rama III (r. 1824–1851) or Rama IV (r. 1851–1868), and that Nak was a real person, although the ghost was not real.

Beginning with this first reference from 1877, Anake traces an array of written versions of the Mae Nak story. These include "Nak Phrakhanong the Second" in 1905, written by King Rama VI while he was still crown prince; "Ee Nak Phrakhanong" in 1912, a musical version, considered to be the first time the story of Mae Nak was performed for entertainment (and the first version in which Nak's husband is named 'Mak'); "Mae Nak Phrakhanong", a

1924 novel in poetic form published in Songkhla, in which the author states that he based his version on an old manuscript found in a deserted temple in Samut Prakan (this version incorporates locutions from Southern Thai dialect, indicating possible oral roots there and demonstrating that the story had gone beyond the Bangkok area); a prose version from 1928, said to be a true story told (orally) to a royal personage on July 14, 1927; a *lamtat*³ version in 1929; another *lamtat* version in 1930 by Haji Khiat (Anake Nawigamune, 2000: 29–37); and soon after the opening of the first radio station in Siam in 1928, a serial radio play of Mae Nak. According to Anake, the radio program was much talked about but lasted only a few episodes and was then halted due to “her eerie chilling voice frightening the people” (Anake Nawigamune, 2000: 37). In 1926, the first film version of Mae Nak was made by M.R. Anusak Hatsadin (Anake Nawigamune, 2000: 38). Thereafter, more and more versions appeared in a number of genres, including cartoon novels, *likay* (musical folk drama), *luk thung* (country) songs, and television series. Indeed, the (re)tellings of Nang Nak became “numerous beyond description” (Anake Nawigamune, 2000: 38).

The vast majority of these adaptations have not been researched, other than preliminarily in Anake’s pioneering work. Film versions have, however, begun to attract the attention of scholars, most notably *Nang Nak* (dir. Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999). Nonzee’s film was one of the first in the new wave of Thai cinema to receive international attention, showing at international film festivals and gaining several awards. In a recent article, Arnika Fuhrmann discusses scholarship on the film and analyzes the director’s “Buddhist framing of the legend” and support for “new bourgeois conceptions of Thai sexualities” (2009: 221). These academic treatments—whether published in scholarly journals, presented at annual meetings, or discussed at international conferences—can be seen as further iterations of the Nak story, in yet new forms and interpretations. Fuhrmann makes a highly relevant point for our purposes: “The Thai Film Foundation’s web site lists twenty-three films about Mae Nak made between 1950 and 1999 ... [along with] the question, ‘Which version is the most hair-raising?’” (2009: 28).⁴

3 Defined as “racy folk banter and song show” (Domnern Garden and Sathienpong Wannapok, 1999: 445).

4 The website can be found at: <http://www.thaifilm.com/forumDetail.asp?topicID=3715&page=1&keyword=> (accessed May 17, 2010).

Since 1999, the production of new Nak films has continued.⁵ A 3-D version entitled *Ya Nak* (dir. Tophong Tankamhaeng, 2004) gave Nak yet another title, *Ya* meaning “grandmother”. This treatment recounts the making of a film of Mae Nak, adopting a “film within a film” storyline that seems uniquely suited to such subjects. In the film’s film, the actor playing Nak is named Nat, and the one playing Mak is named Mek. As a result of ill treatment by the producer, as well as her own jealousy over Mek, Nat becomes unpredictable and begins to attack members of the cast and crew, a development which one cast member cannily describes as ‘*nauk bot*’ (not in the script). At times it is initially unclear if events we see are part of the unfolding drama or scenes from the film being made. In the end, Nat kills Mek and cuts out his heart, noting with satisfaction that he, she, and their unborn baby will be together forever. In doing so, her prayers to Ya Nak that their love be as great as Nak’s own have been answered.

Another recent version of the story was the 2005 film *Mae Nak: Winyan Mai Koei Tai/Mae Nak: The Spirit Never Dies* (dir. Seni Komarasun). In this adaptation, familiar characteristics of earlier Nak movies are evident: bumbling villagers, slapstick humor, low-budget effects; indeed the whole film has a distinctly 1970s feel. A careful reading of the packaging of this VCD reveals that the film is indeed an old version “newly re-edited with special effects”. The disc itself is an embodiment of the process we are investigating: a new manifestation, drawing heavily on antecedents but with new elements, all remade into yet another new/old/contemporary telling of a story that is still immediately recognizable.⁶

I now turn to one other important aspect of the Nak story, the Mae Nak shrine. Located at Wat Mahabut, in the Phrakhanong section of Bangkok (the village has long since been swallowed up by the capital’s sprawl) where Nak is said to have been buried (and later cremated), the shrine, like the story itself,

5 Other forms have also proliferated, including an opera by S.P. Somtow performed in Bangkok in 2005, a novel by Sujit Wongthet billed as “showing the ways of life of Thai ancestors” (2007: cover) and even reportedly a spoof. In December 2009, Nak stories continued to be produced. In addition to the short one told to me informally by the taxi driver (recounted above), there were two operatic versions playing in Bangkok. When I mentioned to friends I was working on the story, they immediately suggested we go see one of the operas. However, we were unable to get tickets. They were sold out.

6 Other films continue to appear, like Nak herself. One of the latest presents itself as a documentary. There are also numerous internet discussions of the Nak story, of the making of Nak films, and so on.

has been transformed and elaborated over the decades. It is now a sizeable building just outside the temple proper, and beside the canal where Nak is said to have had her house. Around the shrine are numerous fortune-tellers and stalls selling offerings. Inside is an image of Nak, seated and nearly life size, with layers of gold leaf applied to her face and a large pile of flowers and numerous incense sticks in front of her. Clothes for Nak and toys for her child are also offered in abundance. An attendant keeps the room tidy and regularly combs Nak's long hair. At ceiling level hang several large paintings of Nak, each with a singular visage; the attendant informed me that these are made and given as offerings by people who are visited by Nak in their dreams; the paintings depict how she looked in each person's vision. These different views of Mae Nak parallel the different story versions: while there is plenty of variation, there are also constant elements (e.g., youthful face, fair skin, long dark hair).

On 2 December 2009, in preparation for visiting the shrine, I discussed it with a taxi driver. He told me he frequently takes people there, and noted that Sundays—when people had a day off work—was the busiest time. He agreed that everyone knows the story. He himself could not remember the first time he had heard it. A second taxi driver also knew the shrine and had taken people there. He described how one can ask for anything from Mae Nak, and that often a toy is offered to the child. He also recalled how, as a child in Ubol, he saw a dramatized version of the story staged by a traveling troupe from Bangkok. He commented that the story is known all over: "People know Mae Nak like they know who the prime minister is".

I finally visited the shrine on December 7. The taxi driver who took me there told me a Mae Nak story without my prompting. He said that Mae Nak was forced to remarry after her husband went to war. She was pregnant but no one knew. She did not want to remarry, so she killed herself. Thus her death was a particularly powerful event. In response to my question, he said the shrine was not about childbirth or children (I had heard the shrine described as a place to make offerings in request for a safe delivery or even for fertility). The driver, who came from Roi Et, also agreed that everyone knew the story. If I remember correctly, he recalled he had first been told the story by monks. He described the story as being "over a hundred years old" and "from before Bangkok", noting simply that "Mae Nak is Thailand's history".

What accounts for the phenomenal popularity of Mae Nak stories and inspires so many (re)tellings? In part it seems related to the appeal of star-crossed lovers and enduring love that lasts beyond death, fascination for a furious female spirit, and death in childbirth. There is also sympathy for the tragic female character who has to fight against an entire village/society

arrayed against her, and who remains faithful as a model wife (well, in some ways) despite great adversity, even her own death. Another possible reason for the appeal of the story is what Fuhrmann calls ‘traumatic repetition’, a compulsion to repeat “one’s own traumatic memories and the pleasurable witnessing of another’s”.⁷ Surely there is a kind of pleasure/horror compulsion in many frightening tales; Anake refers to a feeling of *klua klua kla kla* (perhaps translatable as ‘fearful but brave’) when reading some versions of the Nak story (2000: 27). I think a key motivation here is also ‘the pleasure of recognition’, as Fuhrmann calls it.⁸ Audiences love to see/hear certain scenes repeated, no matter how many times, it seems. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable, for instance, in the scene where Nak’s arm stretches to reach the errant lime.⁹

Another aspect of the story provides the audience with a more lasting frisson of simultaneous delight and horror: the knowledge that Nak and Mak’s blissful life of love together is based on a lie, amounting to a mere illusion of happiness which conceals decay and death, and can therefore only be temporary. In Fuhrmann’s succinct rendering, “she’s dead, he’s alive; she knows, he doesn’t; and both lovers want something they can no longer have” (Fuhrmann, 2009: 220). The portrayal of the gradual, painful process of Mak’s awakening to reality, while Nak fights harder and harder to maintain false appearances and protect their life together, still elicits a powerful feeling of suspense, dread, and sympathy in the audience, even though they know the story well and the outcome is never in doubt.

Anake, however, has a different view of Mae Nak’s lasting appeal and continual reappearance. Noting the uncountable versions in every conceivable medium, as well as the many people who make daily offerings “so that the shrine is overflowing”, he concludes that:

All of this attests to the supernatural power of Nang Nak, who has come to dwell in the hearts of Thai people and will dwell there forever until

⁷ Fuhrmann, pers. comm., April 26, 2010.

⁸ Fuhrmann, pers. comm., April 26, 2010.

⁹ According to Fuhrmann, this was “the thing that people hated most about Pimpaka’s version [a film, in 1997]—that it doesn’t have the stretching!” (Fuhrmann, pers. comm., April 26, 2010). In Somtow’s opera, in contrast to, the audience’s repetition compulsion is gratified when the arm stretches all the way around the entire stage (Fuhrmann, 2009: 245). It is interesting to note, however, that the widespread acceptance of repetition or reiteration common to much of Southeast Asia stands in contrast to the strictures in some other societies against repetition in nearly all its forms, whether it be the telling of jokes, the recounting of stories, or the sharing of information.

the world ends. Or has her spirit not yet disappeared and is still hovering around us right here?

ANAKE NAWIGAMUNE, 2000: 38

See Ui

See Ui Sae Eung was a former soldier in the Chinese army who came to Thailand in the mid-20th century. During the 1950s, several children in central Thailand disappeared and were later found dead with their hearts and possibly livers—depending on the version of the story one believes—removed. See Ui was quickly arrested and convicted of the murders. He was found to have cooked and eaten the children's hearts (and livers), and was sentenced to death and executed. Both before and after his execution, See Ui underwent medical examination in an unsuccessful attempt to determine what might have caused his behavior. No reason was discovered. His body was placed in a display case in the medical museum at Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok, where today it remains the museum's most popular exhibit.

There are a number of popular culture versions of the See Ui story, including a television series from the 1960s or 1970s,¹⁰ and a 2005 film entitled simply *See Ui* (dir. Nida Suthat Na Ayuthaya and Buranee Ratchaibun). Initially the film takes a predictably sensationalistic tone, indicated by its secondary title "Ghoul or Man?" The opening frames show bloody footprints, a knife on a cutting board, and then the gruesome cutting of bloody raw flesh. The flesh goes into a cooking pot over a fire, and then the pink broth is poured into a bowl, from which a man drinks as we watch from above, seeing his shaved head and Chinese trousers. Indeed the 'Chineseness' of See Ui is emphasized throughout the film, and is used as a xenophobic entry point to the portrayal of an alien, un-Thai, and ultimately inhuman creature—a cannibal and child-killer. Perhaps to underscore this aspect, the actor playing See Ui is a Chinese national who speaks little Thai (as indicated in the DVD's extra features). In the credits, his name is the only one rendered in roman and Chinese characters but not in Thai. As the film progresses, however, the tone becomes surprisingly sympathetic. Flashbacks show See Ui's suffering in China, the consumption of human flesh in his village, and the beneficial effects of the human heart soup his mother makes for him when he is seriously ill. Near the end of the film, a police detective lies to See Ui by promising that a confession will allow

10 My efforts to trace the series continue.

him to be sent home. Finally, Field Marshall Sarit is shown ordering that the investigation be wound up quickly and the execution speedily carried out “for the peace of mind of the country” (dir. Nida Suthat Na Ayuthaya and Buranee Ratchaibun, 2005). The question raised is whether See Ui was really responsible for all the child murders for which he was convicted, or whether he was a scapegoat.

Although the film was broadly distributed in both VCD and DVD formats, and the earlier television series was presumably widely seen as well, I would argue that the importance of the story is borne not by popular culture representations of it, but rather by the simultaneous existence and circulation of different recounted versions of the story. Even the film itself, or rather its accompanying special feature, refers to “the story that terrified the whole country”,¹¹ emphasizing that it is a *reuang lao*, or orally conveyed narrative. In addition, there are websites that retell and discuss the story, and comments are left in which readers attest to having been frightened as children into behaving well, lest See Ui come and eat them.¹² Contributors to these sites also debate the issue of guilt or innocence of See Ui, and frequently refer to the fright value and enjoyment they derived from the story and the posted comments.

Most significant for the phenomenon of the See Ui tale is the physical presence and presentation of his body, which serves as the underlying point of reference for the story. Not only is the story widely, even universally, known, but it is in a sense anchored to the display case in the august institution of Siriraj Hospital, from where the story also emanates. Even those who have not seen the display know it is there, and has been for decades, lending a lasting permanence to the tale even as the details and meanings of that tale are modified, re-cast, and debated. The body’s mere existence, especially in the way it is seen and encountered, reinforces the macabre and shudder-inducing aspects of the story while simultaneously seeming to confirm their truth. This occurs even in the absence of any evidence, because the authority of the museum and of Siriraj stand behind, and surround, the body.

The Siriraj Medical Museum is not easy to find in the extensive complex of Siriraj Hospital, which covers a vast area in Thonburi. When I visited in 2009, I

11 See Trailer of *See Ui* (dir. Nida Suthat Na Ayuthaya and Buranee Ratchaibun, 2005).

12 See, for example: <http://happy.teenee.com/xfile/tamnan/103.html>, which also contains photographs from the legal case (accessed May 24, 2010); <http://webboard.yenta4.com/topic/20> (accessed May 24, 2010); and <http://www.showded.com/myprofile/mainblog.php?user=05082528&jnId=15368> (accessed May 24, 2010).

had to ask a number of strangers for directions. Rather than asking the whereabouts of the museum, I simply asked, "Where is See Ui?" Each person I spoke to immediately knew what I was referring to and responded helpfully and matter-of-factly, as if it were the most normal question in the world (although not all knew the answer). The museum itself contains several sections and exhibits, covering such topics as birth defects and parasites (with examples in glass jars), the 2004 tsunami (with video and diorama), and forensic medicine (with evidence, perpetrators, and related objects).

Surprisingly enough, See Ui's body is not the only one on display. Upon entering the forensic section, the visitor encounters half a dozen glass cases, each topped with a sign and containing a body. The sign on the first case says, "Dead Body with Natural Mummification" in English, and, more succinctly, *mummy tai mai nao* ("Dead Mummy that Doesn't Rot") in Thai. Next to it is See Ui's case. The sign says, "See Quey" [sic] in English, but, "See Ui Sae Eung (Human Who Ate People)" in Thai. The body is in a standing position, leaning to one side, and wired to the back of the case, with its feet in a stainless steel basin to catch any residual fluids. It is a deep brown color, naked, shriveled, and shiny. Accompanying materials state that beeswax must be applied every year to preserve the body.¹³ There is no obvious difference between See Ui's body and the 'mummy' in the next case.

What is most interesting to me is that the body of See Ui is accompanied by three very different versions of the story in Thai (a fourth, in English, is a translation of the third).¹⁴ One version, attached to the side of the case, is clearly the oldest. It was typed on a typewriter and enclosed in a wooden frame, and is accompanied by a black and white photograph of See Ui prior to death, his open mouth revealing a missing tooth. Another version, glued to the back of the case, is printed on a plastic sign. The third, and presumably most recent, is a recorded version, available for rental from the museum's front desk. Given their divergence, both in style and content, it is worth considering them here in detail, and quoting the two written versions in their entirety.

13 Taped materials accompanying the exhibition are available for temporary rental in the museum.

14 The fact that all three versions of the story are on display simultaneously, rather than having a new one replace an older one, demonstrates that there is no hierarchy of authority and that no one telling supplants or takes precedence over any other. On the contrary, it is clear that the museum curators themselves are aware that each version has its own importance and that all can and do exist simultaneously as part of a greater whole.

The first version reads:

See Ui was a Chinese soldier who deserted the armed forces, who were fighting against each other. He secretly [illegally] entered Thailand in the South. While traveling from northern China down to the south, he captured many girls (children) and ate their hearts, until he fled to Nakhon Phathom Province. He killed the child of a woman vendor in the Nakhon Phathom market and ate the heart; then he stuffed the corpse under the base of Phathom Chedi. From there he fled to Rayong Province and applied to be a plantation worker, where he worked only five days. When the father and mother of a boy went to work in the plantation, they left their child in the care of See Ui. When they came back home at mid-day, the child and See Ui had disappeared, so they went out to search for him, finding the boy's corpse hidden under a tree. Below his chest was an incision where his heart had been taken out.

Next, a police official of Rayong Province was able to arrest See Ui that same day as he was fleeing. He reported it to Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the Head of the Revolutionary Council, who, by virtue of the power of the Revolutionary Council under Article 17, ordered an execution by shooting immediately upon completion of the investigation the following day.

Photo by Wirat Wisetsiri 2501

Phim Thai [and] *Siam Mitr* newspapers [this last line handwritten].¹⁵

The more recent version on the plastic sign reads:

Record/History of See Ui, Human Being Who Ate People

On January 2, 2501 [1958], in Rayong Province, Mr. Nawa Bunkan noticed something wrong when his son, Sombun, had not come home by nightfall, so he went after him, because that afternoon he had gone to buy vegetables at a farm. The father and his neighbors went searching until late, and found Sombun's body at the edge of the forest. They also found See Ui, the defendant, who admitted killing the boy in order to eat his heart and liver.

Mr. See Ui's method of killing was to grab the child and cover his nose and mouth until he died. Then he took a knife and slashed upwards from under the ribs, and extracted the heart and liver, keeping them in a food

15 Siriraj Hospital. Untitled. [Typed sheet attached to the side of See Ui display case], undated A.

cupboard until it was time to eat them. In order to destroy the evidence, he went back to burn the body, but he was caught before he could carry it out.

The defendant confessed and thus was sentenced to death by the provincial court, but the sentence was reduced to life imprisonment based on his confession. The prosecutor appealed, and the court of appeals issued a verdict of execution; the case reached its conclusion.

While he was imprisoned in Bang Khwang Prison, physical and mental medical examinations were carried out. The results were normal and did not meet the requirements for sentence mitigation according to the criminal code.

[rubber stamped]

Department of Forensics

Faculty of Medicine, Siriraj Hospital

Mahidol University

24 September 2551 [2008].¹⁶

The audio version lasts three minutes and reminds the listener of a narrated film or radio play, with accompanying music. It begins with a dramatization. The voices of children are heard, one calling to another,

“Daeng, let’s go play away from the house”.

The narrator notes,

“Mr. See Ui Sae Eung looked normal, but he frightened Thai people throughout the country between 1954 and 1958, in Prajuab Khiri Khan, Bangkok, Nakhon Pathom, and Rayong”.

It is stated that he was

“vicious and cruel”, and then, “what was more frightening than finding him preparing to dispose of a ten-year-old’s body was his confession: that he killed six people to eat their heart and liver”.

Screaming is heard, and then the sound of a heart beating.

“A committee of physicians examined him and found nothing abnormal, either in his body or his mind. But he had the erroneous belief that eating children’s hearts and livers would make him strong....He was sentenced and executed by shooting”.

The sound of gunfire is heard.

“Professor and Doctor of Medicine Songkhla Niyomsaen, Head of the Department of Forensics, asked for the body officially in order to examine the brain”.

16 Siriraj Hospital. *Prawat See Ui, Manut Kin Khon* (Record/History of See Ui, Human Being Who Ate People). [Plastic text on back of See Ui display case], undated B.

At the end, the narrator notes that,

“The story of See Ui is remembered everywhere, causing many people to want to know the murderer from a previous time. This museum has thus unofficially become known as the ‘See Ui Museum’.”¹⁷

If we compare these three versions, several aspects emerge. The earliest version is undated (except for the photo), and it is unclear if the information or only the photo comes from the two newspapers named. This account emphasizes that See Ui is Chinese, an army deserter, an illegal immigrant, and of course eats human hearts. It also focuses on the role of Sarit and the speed of execution, not stating but perhaps implying that his intervention may have been improper. The second version dwells on the gory details, describing the killing and cutting up of the corpses, as well as stating that not only the hearts but also the livers were eaten. The other emphasis in this account is on the legal aspects, with specific terminology employed to bolster the impression that all was carried out “according to the criminal code”. In addition, a date and source for the information is given, further indicating a concern with credibility and correct authority. The audio version, while not neglecting the elements of previous accounts, further highlights the horror, the role of Siriraj, and the fact of the story’s effects being felt throughout the country, both in the past and today. Furthermore, it departs from a dispassionate telling of the ‘facts’, and recognizes more explicitly the entertainment value of the story, providing sound effects and music to enhance the listener’s experience. Perhaps most telling of all, however, is that it departs from the written genre and returns to a sound format, thereby putting into play yet another version of the story in oral form, and one that is associated directly with the actual physical body of See Ui in its universally known location. Interestingly, See Ui’s body is the only one in the museum for which a sound recording is available.

Nuanchawee

Nuanchawee was a young nurse in Bangkok who became involved with a doctor named Athip. As her attachment to him grew, his interest proportionally waned; he had a reputation for infidelity. Nuanchawee began to wait for him at the hospital where he worked both day and night, and pressured him to marry her. At one point he met her family at her insistence, and discovered

¹⁷ Siriraj Hospital. Untitled. [Audio version], undated C.

that she had led them to believe that the wedding was imminent. The more he resisted her attention, the more she showed her determination, even appearing at his house with her belongings and saying she was moving in (which she was prevented from doing). Athip became increasingly unpleasant and eventually violent toward her, hitting her in the face outside his office one evening in full view of colleagues and patients. Still Nuanchawee did not give up. She lodged a complaint with the police, and spoke to his boss at the hospital. Finally Athip agreed to officially register their marriage, and they did so. Nuanchawee withdrew her complaint with the police. However, Athip continued his involvement with another woman, and Nuanchawee continued to demand his attention. Then she disappeared. Her body was later found in the Chao-phraya River. Police investigation eventually revealed that Athip had taken her to a secluded house, where his hired men stabbed her to death. They then threw her body off the Nonthaburi Bridge, which had just been completed and opened to traffic that year (1959). All those involved were arrested and convicted, but Athip's sentence was commuted and he served only a year in prison. Another aspect of the case, however, has had a more enduring outcome: the bridge from which her body was dumped has been known as the Nuanchawee Bridge ever since.

Various versions of the Nuanchawee story exist in oral form as well as on the internet and on film. The 1987 film *Nuanchawee* (dir. Banjong Kosallawat), was recently made available on DVD. The way this film is constructed shows that it is made for those who already know the story. It starts out with the discovery of the corpse and the riddle of her identity, though of course the viewer already knows who she is and how she died. Details are then gradually filled in. Foreclosing suspense by revealing her fate right from the beginning only makes sense as a narrative strategy if we already know that she ends up being murdered. As with the story of Mae Nak, the enjoyment comes from seeing (or hearing) the already familiar events unfold. We know what is coming, even though the characters do not, and we can look on in pleasure-horror as they encounter their inevitable fates.

In Banjong Kosallawat's particular telling, the tale is framed as a crime drama and centers on the police investigation interspersed with flashbacks to Nuanchawee's life. Nuanchawee is depicted sympathetically as a caring and faithful woman who loves her partner. In one scene, the police detective berates Athip for being insensitive and inconsiderate, "like all unfaithful men", and then goes on to praise Nuanchawee as "a sincere woman,... a Thai woman who felt true love and who had much devotion in her love for you" (dir. Banjong Kosallawat, 1987/2009). Not everyone takes this point of view, however. One

internet account essentially portrays her as a stalker, and one comment on the site, while noting that she did not deserve her fate, stated, "I would have killed her, too".¹⁸

The Nuanchawee story also has an important connection with Siriraj Hospital (aside from the fact that both Nuanchawee and Athip completed their respective studies there). In the forensic section of the Medical Museum, just two meters from the body of See Ui, is another glass case. Instead of a body, it contains a number of objects related to Nuanchawee's murder, including her diary (opened to a page recounting a violent attack by Athip from early 1959, the year she was murdered), the bloody clothes she was wearing when her body was found, and the knife that was used to kill her. The sign at the top of the case reads in English, "Evidence From Dead Body In Murder Case": an anonymous appellation. In Thai, however, it simply says, "Nuanchawee Legal Case". No further explanation is necessary.

One further aspect of the Siriraj Museum deserves note: the museum is popular with school groups, and by the exit is a kind of interactive table. Next to rubber stamps in the shape of skulls, innards, and other relevant images, there is also a Visitor Log (or "book for indicating thoughts/opinions"). Written comments in early December 2009 included the four following entries in different handwriting (in Thai): "Nuanchawee's life is so very sad"; "Very useful, I gained a lot of knowledge"; "Very scary"; and, "Awesome".

Conclusion

The three stories considered here, Mae Nak, See Ui, and Nuanchawee are examples of a phenomenon of tales repeatedly told, enjoyed, and interpreted. I contend that the continual reiteration of the stories repeatedly generates a group-based sharing that reinforces a sense of connectedness and community. These three stories, and many others, are part of a commonly held lore consisting of the knowledge, beliefs, and memories that constitute heritage. The numerous genres and countless versions in which the stories exist and re-emerge testify to their importance beyond that of merely a passing fiction or entertaining yarn. Their pervasiveness and staying power over many years throughout Thailand, while only rarely passing beyond its borders, further indicate their

18 See www.forfanclub.com/articledetail.php?aid=75&cid=38 (accessed November 21, 2009).

cultural salience and heritage status.¹⁹ In some ways the stories can be compared to *jataka* tales and the Ramayana in that they are frequently told and alluded to, and generally recognized as widely known. However, unlike those didactic religious texts of Indian origin, there is no original or authoritative version of these stories. Just as the portraits of Nak do not resemble the image at the shrine because they are not depictions of the shrine image, but of each dreamers' individual vision or conception of Nak, so each story manifestation diverges from others, rather than reflecting some official version. For any recognized story, there are an infinite number of tellings at different times and places.

The three stories discussed here show considerable differences in origin, theme, and subject matter. Mae Nak was a terrifying ghost, perhaps mythical, perhaps from a distant past, who nonetheless attracts a steady stream of offerings at her shrine. See Ui was a foreign cannibal whose unspeakable and incomprehensible actions were detailed in newspapers. Nuanchawee was a committed nurse who became the unfortunate victim in a well-documented murder case. Nonetheless, there are fundamental commonalities. First, each story centers on death: Nuanchawee is murdered, See Ui kills children and then is executed, and Nak dies initially, then massacres fellow villagers, and finally dies conclusively. A second common feature is that each story depicts an individual who, under the pressures of circumstance, carries natural instincts and conditions beyond the limits of social acceptability to a physical extreme. Nak's spousal attachment and family protectiveness result in post-mortem deception and slaughter; See Ui, illness and hunger bring about killing and cannibalism; and in Nuanchawee's case, love and devotion lead to obsession and a murderous backlash. In each instance, the audience is left to consider issues of sympathy and blame, guilt and injustice, such as to what extent the protagonist

19 In the greater Southeast Asian context, a parallel can be seen between Nak and Burmese *nats*. *Nats*, indigenous to Myanmar/Burma, are considered to be spirits whose origin lies with real (now legendary) figures from a distant past. They can bring about calamity if not propitiated. Offerings are made to them for specific purposes; different *nats* are seen to preside over particular realms or issues and often to have different preferences. Although there is a primary site for the location of *nats* (Mount Popa), *nat* figures in various sizes are visible in shrines throughout the country. They are also available for purchase in spiritual equipment shops (such as those along the approach to the Shwedagon Pagoda). Most of these characteristics also apply to Nak: images and amulets of Nak are available at Wat Mahabut, not only in the commercial stalls surrounding the shrine and along the *soi*, but also at a small shop within the grounds of the temple itself. For a discussion of *nats* and their presence in Burmese society, see Sadan, 2005.

has been treated unfairly, or has acted unreasonably. Perhaps it is the fascination with these unresolved issues, along with the attendant horror, that helps keep these tales in existence and compels their periodic reanimation.

A final element that these three stories share, and one that might also play a role in their enduring nature, is the fact that each is associated with a particular physical location. There is the Nak shrine in Phrakhanong, the Nuanchawee Bridge in Nonthaburi, and the See Ui display case containing his actual body at Siriraj Hospital. Do the physical manifestations—shrine, bridge, body—keep the stories alive? Or are those things themselves maintained by the power of the memories and tales? There is also the Nuanchawee display case at Siriraj, which, with its many objects of direct relevance to the story, would seem to be more evocative than the bridge, which has no visibly discernible connection to her. However, the great majority of museum visitors come to see See Ui rather than Nuanchawee, who is less well known, the attendant informed me. Indeed, it seems that of the three stories, only Nuanchawee might be losing popularity, gradually fading from view and perhaps eventually yielding her place of prominence. Why would that be? Possibly her story is not sufficiently memorable. Whereas See Ui's tale is unique in its horror, and Nak's draws special power from the spirit world, Nuanchawee's is not especially different from other murder stories. In addition, while Nuanchawee's story does have an associated location, there is no actual embodiment of Nuanchawee herself there, nothing that is equivalent to the offering-laden image of Nak at Wat Mahabut or the desiccated body of See Ui in his famous vitrine. It may be that in the future, Nak and See Ui endure, while Nuanchawee is replaced by another tale told in the heritage of Thailand.

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‘Sundelbolong’ as a Mode of Femininity

Analysis of Popular Ghost Movies in Indonesia

Maren Wilger

Introduction: *Hantu* Sundelbolong

Indonesian folklore is populated by various kind of ghosts or *hantu*.¹ While they used to haunt the living through ghost stories (*cerita hantu*), in contemporary culture they are presented in multifaceted ways on the silver screen to tell modern ghost stories, and part of the discourse of modernization.²

In this chapter, I start with a short description of the nature of ‘Sundelbolong’, one of the many vengeful female spirits in Indonesian lore, before providing a brief introduction to the political and cinematic background of

1 *Hantu*: ‘Spirit’, ‘specter’ (Heuken, 2009: 181). In general terms, ‘*hantu*’ contains more than the European/Western understanding of ‘spirit’ or the German ‘*Geist*’. The term *hantu* is also used to describe possession by demons and presents good and evil supernatural beings. It appears to be insufficient to use Western classifications, such as ‘undead’, ‘spirit’ or ‘vampire’ for Southeast Asian beings, since the categories of *hantu* are much more fluid than the Western ones. While an undead entity in the Western hemisphere is statically characterized as being completely apart from the living—as being dead—, *cerita hantu* contain the idea that those beings can be tamed and transformed back into a living and human form again. Indeed, *hantu* Sundelbolong can be transformed back into a human when a knife is driven through her neck. It seems like *hantu* have greater physical potency and effect the living more than Western spirits, the undead or vampires do. *Hantu* can, for example, steal infants, be created by *ilmu hitam* (black magic), and may be living as normal humans by day and appear as *hantu* by night. A good example would be Nils Bubandt’s anthropological accounts on the ‘Suanggi’, an entity in the form of a young female mostly known in parts of eastern Indonesia. Bubandt states that this entity is known in North Maluku as ‘o tokata’ and is “[...] both a spirit AND a living person who carries out nefarious and cannibal acts at the orders of this spirit. The same duality of the witch as both spirit and malevolent human being is common throughout North Maluku” (Bubandt, 2012: 9). Those descriptions are similar to the Javanese ‘Penanggalan’, since both are known for separating their heads from the torso at night to let the disembodied head fly around. It is common for Southeast Asian ghosts to obtain several abilities, forms and states of being. See for example Benjamin Baumann’s paper within this volume for a detailed description of ‘Phi Krasue’, a Thai ghost that is known to separate its head from the body.

2 See Bräunlein (2009) for further elaboration on the entanglement of the discourse on ghosts and modernity.

Indonesia. The main aim of this chapter is to extract features of Sundelbolong and its inherent representations of femininity in the horror movie *Sundelbolong* (dir. Sisworo Gautama Putra, 1981) and two later productions, *Legenda Sundelbolong* (dir. Hanung Bramantyo, 2007) and the made-for-television film *Urban Legend Sundelbolong* (dir. Purnomo A. Chakill, 2009).

'*Hantu Sundelbolong*' ("Ghost of a perforated prostitute") must be seen in the context of similar female spirits in Southeast Asia.³ As part of a large pantheon of female spirits, depictions of her mingle with and are complementary to several ghosts in Malayan and Southeast Asian folklore. Sundelbolong is comparable to the Malaysian 'Pontianak', Indonesian ghosts 'Kuntilanak' and 'Penanggalan', as well as the Balinese 'Langsuyar'/'Langsuir'. The myths about these spirits are diverse, overlapping and sometimes even contradictory. Thus, *hantu Sundelbolong* must be recognized as a hybrid creature exposed to several influences on the Malay Archipelago, and passed down through oral traditions from one generation to the next (Siddique, 2002: 25–26).

The first ethnographic accounts of Sundelbolong can be found in Clifford Geertz's monograph from 1960, "Religion of Java":

[...] A sundel bolong is a beautiful naked woman, but her loveliness is marred by the fact that she has a large hole through the middle of her back. She has long black hair which hangs down over her buttocks and so conceals the hole. Opinions seem to differ as to whether or not she is attractive to men. Some say that when a man sees her he is immediately frightened and runs away. Others say that on the contrary she is very attractive and usually asks the man to go off with her, an offer very difficult to reject. If he goes, however, she castrates him.

GEERTZ, 1960: 18

This understanding of Sundelbolong focuses on her outward appearance. She has long black hair and has a dangerous, *femme fatale*-like influence on men. But Geertz's description does not include the cause of her death or her motive for stalking (predominantly) men. Popular sources state that Sundelbolong died as a consequence of rape, giving birth to the resulting child inside the grave. It is said that she is also interested in kidnapping newborns. Sundelbolong's motive is revenge—a desire she satisfies by killing her former torturers (Argo Wikanjati, 2010: 48).

3 See Elisabeth Scherer in this volume for a similar example.

Sophie Siddique categorizes Sundelbolong as a 'vampire ghost' (Siddique, 2002: 24). However, this definition is not suitable to describe Sundelbolong since the term 'vampire' is a Western construct, charged with various meanings and characteristics forced on several spirits in Southeast Asia through the process of globalization.⁴ Vampires are commonly depicted as blood suckers with piercing teeth, and since they have once again become popular, as pale, aristocratic gentlemen. However, Indonesian *hantu* cannot be fitted into those categories without forcing them into a concept already filled with such pre-determined meanings. Even if there are comparable features between *hantu* and 'vampire', such as the fear of pointed objects or the interest in harming humans, even in conjunction with 'ghost', the imposition 'vampire' as a concept may lead to improper associations, and is thus unsatisfactory.⁵

Drawn from the various presentations of Sundelbolong, significant criteria for the definition of a *hantu* as a Sundelbolong seem to be the following: Sundelbolong is always female; has long black hair; a grotesque hole through

4 It is striking that early accounts of many Asian ghosts do not contain any vampiric features (such as piercing teeth, drinking blood) while cinematic appearances and later descriptions tend to include or compare those entities to vampires. A popular example of this tendency is the 'Aswang', a conglomerate of several entities in the Philippines. The most interesting aspect of this creature is its extendable tongue, which can reach through the ceiling of a house to suck the foetus out of a pregnant woman. Other examples of Asian entities that have been similarly re-branded are the Thai 'Krasue', the Indonesian and Malaysian 'Pontianak', 'Mati-anak', 'Leak', the 'Langsuyar' and the 'Penanggalan'. The latter were already characterized as vampires in 1900 by William Skeat in his book "Malay Magic" (Skeat, 1900: 5), even though the only common feature with Western vampires seems to be that those entities are afraid of pointed or bladed objects. Blood-sucking was not commonly mentioned. It would be more fitting to see all the Southeast Asian ghosts that are primarily vengeful female ghost and commonly detach their heads or torso to fly around with 'dangling intestines' as one genealogy, instead of forcing a global 'vampire' category on each entity. What seems to be more overarching in cross-cultural comparison are the reoccurring themes of female vengeance and the abject in form of filth, intestines and also blood.

5 I have previously made a comparison between 'Pontianak', as a good example for Southeast Asian ghosts, with the Romanian 'Strigoi' to unveil vampiric features (Wilger, 2013). Although at the time I decided that 'vampire' could be a valid category for comparison, I have to admit that I faced many problems when forcing an artificial genealogy upon those Southeast Asian beings. That genealogy of a 'globalized vampire' only occurred in modern pop culture, using the symbolism of vampiric features and adapting those for many Asian ghosts. Bubandt (2012: 9) found that some entities in North Maluku are also referred to as a 'drakula'. Thus, there is a tendency to create an overarching genealogy of a 'globalized vampire' that probably did not originally exist.

her upper body; had an ‘improper life’, was raped, and became pregnant; and is driven by vengeance to kill the men who abused her.

Like many other uncanny entities, Sundelbolong has been depicted in various movies since the 1960s. But it was the screen debut of actress Suzanna as Sundelbolong in Sisworo Gautama Putra’s *Sundelbolong* (1981), which has become iconic in the national Indonesian imagination. Without doubt, Suzanna’s passionate acting made a major contribution to the ghost’s iconization. Since then, film productions have typically relied on this archetypal visual characterization of Sundelbolong, dressing her in a white robe, and giving her a pale complexion and black circles around the eyes. This portrayal also corresponds to the established imagination of ‘*the Asian ghost*’ which has become well known to an international audience: the uncanny female with white robe and long dark hair.⁶ Indeed, Sundelbolong and ‘*the Asian ghost*’ have come into being through a series of reciprocal influences: from local legends and their latter cinematic adaptations to cross-regional representations.

Representations of Femininity during the New Order

The *Orde Baru* (New Order) was proclaimed under President Suharto, to create distance from the *Orde lama* (Old Order) under Sukarno (1945–1967). After a military coup, Suharto took power in 1967, autocratically ruling Indonesia until 1998. *Pancasila*, the national state philosophy, was used to create a ‘common national identity’⁷ and to legitimize repressive state power. Moreover, Suharto took advantage of public institutions such as the Department for Censorship (*Badan Sensor Film*, BSF)⁸ to pursue his own political and economic interests (Manning and Diermen, 2000: 8).

The gender ideology of the New Order period was a product of state interest. Government rhetoric and programs were used to construct a concept of womanhood—as well as manhood—which was transported from the center

6 In relation to the transcultural potential of the archetypal ghost images see Elisabeth Scherer in this volume.

7 The presentation of a national identity is a powerful ideological instrument, but at the same time a centralized utopia, since the size and the diversity of Indonesia makes the idea of one national identity almost impossible.

8 The *Badan Sensor Film* was implemented during colonial rule by the Dutch and continued to exist as a department in Sukarno’s and Suharto’s term (Sen, 1994: 13). Nowadays the Board of Sensors is called *Lembaga Sensor Film* (LSF).

to the peripheries of Indonesia. The discourse of gender and sexuality in that period defined womanhood primarily as being a 'good' wife (*isteri*) and mother (*ibu*)⁹ who serves her husband (*suami*) and raises/takes care of the children (Suryakusuma, 2004: 162–164). According to this doctrine, a woman could not exist independently but only in relation to her *suami* or her *bapak* (father). Suryakusuma characterized this ideology and doctrines as 'State Ibuism', which carries political, economic and cultural notions (Suryakusuma, 1996: 53). National organizations like *Dharma Wanita* ("The Duties of Women") promoted the nuclear family and the culture of *ikut suami* ("Follow your husband") as 'modern ideals' (Suryakusuma, 2004: 172). This social and political construction of womanhood, based as it was on traditional values, defined women simply and primarily as dependent housewives and mothers, condemning every behavior that was outside this norm.

But the politically created gender ideology was not the only factor influencing the understanding and representation of women. Cultural values—in Java these were primarily the values of the old *priyayi* elites¹⁰—had a great impact on what was seen as 'good' and 'bad' behavior. The juxtaposition of *halus* (pure) and *kasar* (rough, impolite)¹¹ was central to the *priyayi* worldview. Individuals who managed to behave in a sophisticated way and master and oppress emotions and passions were seen as *halus*, and therefore in possession of spiritual potency. This potency could predominantly be gained by men, since they were seen as less passionate and emotional than women. Indeed, in many cases, women were characterized as *kasar* (Brenner, 1995: 20–31). Furthermore, women should behave according to their *kodrat*¹² or apparent inner nature, which included socially attributed obligations such as taking care of children

9 Even though it means mother, the term '*ibu*' is also a polite form to address women without children.

10 *Priyayi/Prijaji* were the representatives of the hereditary aristocracy with pre-colonial Hindu-Javanese roots. Later, they were appointed to public employees by the Dutch colonial power. Within this aristocracy, class etiquette and status played an important role (Geertz, 1960: 6).

11 "[h]alus means pure, refined, polished, polite, exquisite, ethereal, subtle, civilized, smooth. [...] kasar is merely the opposite: impolite, rough, uncivilized; a badly played piece of music, a stupid joke, a cheap piece of cloth. Between these two poles the *prijaji* arranges everyone from peasant to king" (Geertz, 1960: 232).

12 *Kodrat* or 'inherent nature' includes the idea that the nature of women does not only incorporate biologically 'typical' female characteristics, like menstruating, pregnancy and breastfeeding, but also social attributed obligations such as the household and taking care of the children. This is used as justification for gender politics influenced by ethnic and religious groups (Suryakusuma, 2004: 130, 136).

and the home. The idea of inherent masculine superiority, of men's ability to gain spiritual potency through self-control also corresponds to religious views, as Suzanne Brenner states:

These two sets of gender ideologies, Javanese and Islamic, present an unproblematic image of men as potent, self-controlled, and in possession of the higher mental and spiritual faculties that allow them to maintain order in their own lives and in the social and supernatural world. Women, on the other hand, are depicted as spiritually impotent, less rational than men, lacking in self-control. Such categorical statement about the nature of the sexes are well in keeping with an ideological system that places men at the center of the social, moral, and symbolic order.

BRENNER, 1995: 31

Thus men were presented as the preserver of order, while women were seen as a potential danger due to their spiritual impotence. This gender construction could also be observed in the Indonesian film landscape. As films were considered an important means of supporting the idea of a "national culture and identity" by promoting a national, political, center-oriented mainstream culture based on the principles of the *Pancasila*, the film industry adapted these New Order representations of femininity and masculinity (Heider, 1991: 10).

Many of the films produced in this period followed a suspense plot that revolved around the symbolic order. These films begin with a state of order, something then appears which threatens and transgresses the existing order, disturbing or even destroying it, before the symbolic order is restored at the end of the film (Heider, 1991: 35).¹³ It is interesting to note that the focus of the plots is not primarily the juxtaposition of good and evil (and the triumph of the good), but rather on the elimination of chaos, disorder and confusion to reach a restoration of the normative order. A character is never entirely evil, but rather what Heider calls an 'agent of disorder' who must be removed to ensure harmony and order. The character of a woman who is not behaving in accordance with the sexual norm stands for an atypical model of femininity,

13 This form of suspense is not only used in cinematic plots but seems to be an omnipresent motif in a number of stories worldwide. In the Indonesian case it was already present in Javanese *wayang* puppet shows and could also be observed in many films of the era. *Wayang* shows, based on the epics of the "Mahabharata" and "Ramayana" include the defense of a symbolic/social order as the central motif and involve the juxtaposition of order and chaos, of *kasar* and *halus* (Heider, 1991: 36; Geertz, 1960: 270).

and can be seen as an example of such an agent of disorder (Heider, 1991: 36). Krishna Sen summarizes:

In one sense there are no good or bad women in Indonesian cinema. There are only models of femininity—in a state of natural perfection or vitiated usually by the actions of predatory male sexuality. [...] But when a woman's sexuality is aroused outside the sphere of monogamy, it signifies a crisis in the symbolic world. One mode of dealing with this problem is through the witches and female ghosts in the horror films.

SEN, 1994: 144

The horror genre is almost unique in Indonesia in explicitly portraying sexuality and/or the female body. In most cases, this takes the form of violence and demonstrations of power by men against women (Heider, 1991: 67, 69). In these films, the female body is quite often portrayed as a threat which interferes with the normative order. But the presentation of women as sexually threatening is not exclusive to the New Order or to Indonesia alone. In writing about the 'monstrous feminine', Barbara Creed points out that global mythology as well as cinematic narratives contain various depictions of sexual, monstrous or demonic women.¹⁴ Creed sees the transgression of symbolic order as a core element of the 'monstrous feminine'. That is, a division between the *human/natural* and the *inhuman/supernatural* is created by positioning the 'monstrous feminine' as "shocking, terrifying, horrific, and abject" (Creed, 1986: 44, 49, 53).

Sundelbolong (1981): *The Revenge of a 'Monstrous Feminine'*

As noted above, Suzanna's passionate interpretation of *hantu* Sundelbolong in *Sundelbolong* (dir. Sisworo Gautama Putra, 1981), has become iconic within the national imagination. The movie achieved cult status in Indonesia as well as abroad, and Suzanna was crowned the 'Queen of Indonesian Horror film'.¹⁵ I therefore deal with the film in detail in this chapter, before comparing it with more recent adaptations—the film *Legenda Sundelbolong* (dir. Hanung Bramantyo, 2007) and the television production *Urban Legend Sundelbolong*

14 See Ainslie and Schere in this volume.

15 Suzanna Martha Frederika van Osch played Sundelbolong in several horror films in the 1960s and 1970s, including *Beranak dalam kubur/Birth from inside the Grave* (dir. Ali Shahab Awaludin, 1972) and *Ratu Ilmu Hitam/Queen of Black Magic* (dir. Liliek Sudjio, 1979).

(dir. Purnomo A. Chakill, 2009)—and bringing the transformation of representations of femininity into particular focus.

In *Sundelbolong* (1981) we are introduced to Alisa (Suzanna), a young woman, whose life takes a positive turn: She marries Hendarto (Barry Prima), a man who wants to free her from her previous 'inappropriate and *kasar* life' as a prostitute. The drama evolves, as Hendarto is ordered to leave Indonesia for 9 months to work as an officer on a ship. Alisa remains passive and helpless without her husband. She is soon confronted with her past. She meets her former procurer Mami (Ruth Pelupessy), as well as Mami's employee Rudi (Rudy Salam). Mami and Rudi have heard that Alisa's husband is abroad, and try to entice her with money to return to her old profession. When she refuses, Mami commands Rudi and other henchman to capture her. This ends in an intense and graphic scene, where Alisa tries to escape but is eventually raped in an old barn.

Following the rape, Alisa lays charges against the pair. However, the court finds the pair not guilty after Alisa's credibility is questioned for being a 'loose woman'. Shortly afterwards, she discovers she is pregnant as a result of the rape. When Hendarto announces his return, and after having vivid hallucinations of deformed infants, Alisa sees no way out and commits suicide. The night after the funeral she rises from the grave as Sundelbolong. The 'natural order' is threatened from this point onwards, since she uses her new, supernatural powers to hunt her tormentors.

Thematically, the film focuses on the feelings of guilt that drove Alisa to commit suicide, as well as her subsequent revenge on those who harmed her. Because of the rape and her past, Alisa seems to feel unable to fulfill the ideal of a 'good wife' and would-be mother. But her transformation to Sundelbolong makes her the 'monstrous feminine', taking her even further away from the ideal. At the beginning of the film Alisa corresponds to the ideal appearance and normative ideals for a 'good Indonesian woman'. Her hair is combed straight back and covered in public, her clothes are well arranged and clean, she is presented as a submissive and completely dependent wife. After being offered work as prostitute again, she is—of course—offended and refuses. Money and prostitution are both seen as *kasar* (rough, crude).

But under this surface lies another model of femininity, as the viewer later comes to know. Shortly before being raped, her hair dissolves, she lashes out and screams. She becomes active, a first sign of the impending destruction of order. Wild, disordered hair can be seen as a sign of chaos, free sexuality, mental confusion or madness (Heider, 1991: 62). Disorderly hair is also shown in a flashback scene where Hendarto proposes to Alisa. At that time she is still

a prostitute, wearing a wild and curly wig, big golden earrings and smokes a cigarette. The way Hendarto proposes signifies a kind of domestication. He puts the white wedding dress he had chosen for her on her body, while she sits, thus determining her future 'honorable' clothing as his wife. He then takes the cigarette out of her hand and pulls off her wig. In doing so, Hendarto transforms her into a virtuous woman, no longer a woman who fails to conform or fit normative values. Indeed, he is establishing social order by making sure Alisa follows him, her new husband (*ikut suami*).

When Alisa later realizes she is pregnant, she is terrified and decides to consult a doctor to get an abortion. This scene shows the ideological mediated attitude towards abortion. The doctor lectures her about the 'duties of a woman', which require her to bear the child no matter what. He defines her extra-marital sex as '*pendosa besar*' (a major sin), since she disobeys her fate and wants to kill the unborn child. Even though the child is not Hendarto's, it can still produce a nuclear family. The doctor convicts her morally for thinking about an abortion—it is seen as *kasar*. This scene as well as the court scene in which Alisa's voice is not heard or accepted and her status is questioned because of her past shows that those with authority, in both cases men, own the power of definition and discourse over women and their bodies.

In the form of Sundelbolong Alisa is no longer the humble woman, but rather the 'agent of disorder'. She no longer corresponds to the notion of a 'good' *ibu* or *isteri*. She has become an active avenger who is feared by men, especially her former tormentors. Her grotesque, bloody back is in stark contrast to her pure, white robe. To seduce men, she changes her outward appearance, turning into various female characters, who in each case, dress in revealing and 'provocative' outfits. She determines the appearance of her own body to use it as an instrument to fool men. Her sexualized body is a demonstration of power, allowing her to take advantage of the male imagination and meet expectations in order to exact her revenge. Sophie Siddique argues:

What this monstrous womb reveals is the very disruptive and transgressive potential of the Sundelbolong to destabilize the pervasive gender and state ideologies of Suharto's New Order government.

SIDDIQUE, 2002: 27

In my view, however, Siddique's argument only applies to the part of the film dealing with Alisa's grotesque reversal as Sundelbolong, and the actions she then takes. Ultimately, Sundelbolong's destabilizing potential is broken because after taking revenge, she is tamed by patriarchal and religious

authority.¹⁶ She is banished to “the place where she belongs”, the afterlife. No longer the embodiment of the ‘good woman’ or mother who behaves according to her *kodrat*, she has no right to exist in society.

The final scene is set in the graveyard, next to Alisa’s/Sundelbolong’s grave. Two groups are present: her husband Hendarto with the police and religious authorities for support, and ‘the last man standing’ Rudi with a *dukun*¹⁷ and some subordinates. After she has killed the *dukun* and his subordinates have fled, Sundelbolong is finally confronted with the last of her living torturers, Rudi. He humbly asks to be spared. Standing over him as he is on his knees, and ignoring Hendarto’s pleas for her to stop, she kills Rudi. It seems like this shift of power and her disrespect towards her husband cannot be tolerated. Indeed, her failure to follow her husband’s orders legitimizes the subsequent action of the religious authority. They pray koranic verses together to banish Sundelbolong and her threatening potential. In the final moment of the film, before leaving this world, Sundelbolong transforms back to the form of Alisa and appears to accept her fate.

In short, the character of Sundelbolong represented the destruction of order, while the male religious authority is responsible for the subsequent restoration of that order. Thus, restoration is characterized by the need to tame a woman/Sundelbolong, who acts according to her own desires, and to once again subject her to patriarchal rules. Women are only accepted as compliant to the social rules when under the protection and control of their husbands. This ensures their appropriate status. If the husband is absent for a period of time, the status of the woman becomes insecure. A woman who is independent from a husband and does not conform to religious rules is often classified as dangerous to the established order. Sundelbolong is a risk, even more so than Alisa was as a prostitute. To rectify this, it seems that she must be banished from this world. Although Alisa was a ‘weak character’ as a prostitute—she smokes, was addicted to money and wears provocative clothing and a wig—she nevertheless achieves redemption by recognizing the ‘right path’ and marrying Hendarto. In contrast, by symbolizing the willful woman, there is no possible redemption for Sundelbolong. She has to leave this world because she poses a threat to order in her form as *hantu*. In the end, the film reaffirms the state ideology in so far as the ‘monstrous feminine’ is banished, and order is restored.

16 See van Heeren for detailed discussion of religious authorities in (horror) films and especially in television productions (van Heeren, 2012).

17 A *dukun* is a shaman, medicine man, healer; *dukun beranak* is a midwife (Heuken, 2009: 129).

Post-Authoritarian Modes of Femininity: New Images and Transformations in the *Era Reformasi*

Indonesia's economic, political and cultural landscapes were markedly changed in the wake of the 1997 Asian Financial crisis and with the overthrow of General Suharto after 30 years of authoritarian rule. *Era reformasi* (Reformation Era) seemed to be a step toward a more open and democratic society. This shift also brought about a change in the importance of religion in the collective identity building of Indonesians. Islam became increasingly visible, both publicly and politically, while Indonesia's new policy of decentralization and regional autonomy led to the rise of local conservative Islamic movements (Hefner, 2000; Blackwood, 2007). Those changes had effects on gender notions and the construction of womanhood. The discourse of promoting ideal womanhood and manhood as a duty shifted to condemning sexuality outside marriage and, more generally speaking, an increasingly standardized religious understanding of women and normative marriage.¹⁸

Era reformasi has also seen democratization and privatization in the film industry and the general media landscape. Following 2000, several private national television stations have emerged, and film or television productions with mystery, ghostly or horror elements have experienced a renaissance. They have been produced in large numbers. One reason was probably their undiminished popularity among Indonesian recipients (Anwar, 2002: 1). Even though the state still has a censorship board (now called *Lembaga Sensor Film*¹⁹), it seems that during the euphoria of *reformasi* it has lost a certain amount of control over the content of broadcasted material, especially television productions. Following decades of harsh (self-)censorship of the film industry, new possibilities and genres have emerged. Around 2008 however, a conservative backlash—influenced by the emergence of Islamic movements and the newly introduced anti-pornography law—could be observed, with the formulas and interests of old once again prevailing (Baker, 2011: 5). Films became increasingly judged

18 The criminalization of sexual acts was written into updates of the Dutch-introduced Penal Code, "[...] to bring it more in line with Indonesian culture and religion" (Blackwood, 2007: 300). This tendency was mirrored by efforts for an anti-pornography law in the 1990s and 2006, culminating in the Bill against Pornography and Porno-Action (*Rancangan Undang-Undang Anti Pornografi dan Pornoaksi*) in 2008. This is often referred to simply the 'anti-pornography law'.

19 The LSF judges films on the basis of religious, ideological-political, socio-cultural and public policies. Elements that "are harmful for the (religious) moral and customs" should not be shown (LSF, 2010).

against the background of religious morals by various actors, such as the public, religious groups and censors.

As Van Heeren argues, the post-authoritarian horror film productions started to depict the lives of contemporary middle class teenagers and their confrontation with supernatural powers (2012: 148). Baker sees those teenagers as new 'agents of disturbance' (Baker, 2011: 172). Even though most of the films introduced new formulas, like the internationally popular binary of 'good' versus 'evil', the New Order elements were still retained. The juxtaposition of *kasar* and *halus* remained valid and religious authority could still be found as an 'agent of order'. In relation to television mystery series and films, pious Islam is typically depicted as the only force able to overcome supernatural powers. In incorporating the position of religious authority, producers sought to ensure that troublesome content passed censorship (Van Heeren, 2012: 153–154).

Legenda Sundelbolong (2007): *Showing the Transgressive Potential of Sundelbolong*

Directed and written by Hanung Bramantyo, *Legenda Sundelbolong* (2007) stands out in contrast to the two other films depicted in this chapter. Unlike most of the horror productions in contemporary Indonesia, the film is set in rural area and an Indonesia of the past, around 1965.²⁰ It shows the life of workers at a tea plantation. The plantation owner Danapati (Tio Pakusadewo) is a kind of archetypal villain with a lust for young girls and a bad temper, both of which are partly due to his troubled childhood and abusive mother. The plot revolves around the beautiful *ronggeng* dancer²¹ Imah (Jian Batari Anwar) and her husband Sarpah (Baim), who decide to move to the small village Sindagsari (West Java) together, so that Sarpah can work at the plantation. There are some similarities to *Sundelbolong* (1981): Imah is faced with prejudices stemming from her former occupation as a dancer, and her husband Sarpah is forced to leave

20 Interestingly, Hanung Bramantyo added political components to the plot and alludes to the 1965 anti-communist massacres in Indonesia. For the history of 1965 depicted in Bramantyo's horror films *Legenda Sundelbolong* (2007) and *Lentera Merah/The Red Lantern* (2006) see (Baker, 2011: 185–188).

21 The *ronggeng* dance is performed by women accompanied by music and has a certain erotic nuance because the female dancers invite males to dance and get paid tips. As such, the dance has quite an ambiguous reputation.

her unprotected while going to Sumatra. That enables Danapati, who has already set his eyes on Imah, to trick her into his mansion. Unlike in *Sundelbolong* (1981) the rape is not explicitly shown, but is implied when Imah awakes in the bed of her kidnapper and finds blood on her thighs. She eventually manages to escape by surprising and overpowering one of Danapati's servants. She finds help in the village. Later, she realizes that the rape has left her pregnant. Afraid of Danapati, the villagers inform him, prompting his subordinates to catch her. She tries to escape but eventually gets raped again close to a watercourse in the woods. When Sarpah manages to return home, he again sees his wife. However, it becomes apparent towards the end of the film that Imah has long been dead. She had been thrown off a cliff, and appears to him only in her ghostly form, as Sundelbolong, pretending that nothing has happened.²²

The end of this film differs greatly from that of *Sundelbolong* (1981). There is no final showdown at a graveyard, and it is not Imah/Sundelbolong, but rather Danapati who is confronted by an angry village mob. After being seen a last time by Sarpah at the place she was killed, Imah/Sundelbolong leaves voluntarily. But Sundelbolong's furious potential is not destroyed. In the final scene she is shown flirting with a young man sitting at the place she had vanished, the last shot showing her smiling directly into the camera.

The mis-en-scene is different from the two other productions. The scenery is eerier, political allusions are intertwined into the narrative, and the status of Imah/Sundelbolong is more fluid. She returns 'alive'—but obviously changed—to her home and interacts with her husband on his return. Since the story is situated in the past, Imah is presented in a more Javanese manner. Indeed, in the form of Sundelbolong she sometimes even wears a traditional *kebaya* (blouse) and *sarong* (batik fabric), rather than 'provocative' clothing. She tricks her perpetrators and plays mind games with them, but does not simply rely on being a '*femme fatale*'. She even takes the shape of a man, transgressing gender boundaries to reach her goal. Moreover, as in *Urban Legend Sundelbolong* (2009)—which I focus on next—she is murdered rather than committing suicide. Finally, as in *Urban Legend Sundelbolong* (2009), Imah/Sundelbolong's furious potential is connected to possession and her ability to possess others. In contrast, in the 1981 film, Alisa/Sundelbolong is presented as the threat herself.

22 In fact, Alisa in *Sundelbolong* (1981) is also shown to return to her husband while pretending to be Alisa's 'twin-sister' Sita, but at this point of the movie it is already obvious that she is Sundelbolong.

The self-empowerment of Imah is a key aspect of the film: she manages to escape, knocks out a servant and even helps another girl to escape. Acting this way, she is Imah and not Sundelbolong, she is a woman who takes action into her hands even though left alone by her husband. The presentation of her as Sundelbolong is based on Suzanna's image, but some traits—such as her traditional *roggeng* dance outfit and the fact that she lost an unwanted child—are added. Several scenes depict a bloody, unborn child who she drags out of her perforated torso. Imah is denied an abortion by a doctor, since he and the villagers assume it is Imah's fault she was raped because she was a *roggeng* dancer, which is seen as *kasar*. Whilst this fits the discourse on sexuality, the trauma of Imah is highlighted in more graphic ways than in the later *Urban Legend Sundelbolong* (2009) or in *Sundelbolong* (1981), in which Alisa's confusion is addressed only by showing her hallucinate about deformed babies after seeing the doctor.

Whilst sexual intercourse as a violent act of power prevails in both other productions, the film also offers a glimpse on sexuality within marriage. After moving into their new home, Sarpah carries Imah into the bedroom kissing her neck and closing the curtains, thereby implying sexual intercourse. Significantly, later on, after she returns (possessed by/as Sundelbolong), traumatized by the rape, she denies Sarpah sexual intimacy. While sexuality within marriage is still presented as the only appropriate form of sexuality, problems within marriage and trauma are also addressed.²³

Urban Legend Sundelbolong (2009): *Being a Modern Urban Muslim*

Urban Legend Sundelbolong (dir. Prunomo A. Chakill, 2009) is a typical example of a made-for-television film produced during the post-2000 mystery and horror boom. It essentially follows the story of the iconic film *Sundelbolong* (1981). There are, however, noteworthy changes in its production. The television production does not follow a linear storyline. Only through flashbacks does the audience come to understand what happened to the main character, Alisa

23 Stressing the individual trauma of Imah/Sundelbolong also corresponds to Nils Bubandt's thesis that Indonesian *hantu* tend to be increasingly influenced by psychological notions of the self. He states "[...] the focus is now less on 'busting' the ghosts and more on understanding the ghost's 'interior' psychic life and its experience of the world" (Bubandt, 2012: 4).

(Cut Memey).²⁴ She is a young woman who lives together with her younger sister, Anisa. Both of their parents have died, leaving Alisa to play the role of the guardian to Anisa. Alisa is engaged to Odi (Gilbert Marciano), the son of the religious leader in the neighborhood. Unlike in the original version, Alisa does not commit suicide.

Three young men, Sam and two of his friends, rape and impregnate Alisa before killing her to mask their deed as a robbery-murder. Alisa's violent death causes her transformation into Sundelbolong and initiates the killings. Whereas Alisa in *Sundelbolong* (1981) only seeks revenge from the people who cause her death, Alisa also kills Sam's girlfriend Chika, as well as kidnapping the new born baby of an innocent woman by pretending to be a midwife. After hearing about the horrible incidents and with the help of Odi, her younger sister Anisa tries to reveal the truth surrounding Alisa's death.

New formulas and modes of femininity can be observed in the film. As discussed above, a key characteristic of Indonesian cinema during the New Order was the Javanese story telling structure of order—disorder—order, and the absence of the analytical category of 'good' versus 'evil'. However, due to the non-linear storyline, this structure is not possible in *Urban Legend Sundelbolong* (2009). It can be argued that the remake introduces a binary model of good and evil in its representation of womanhood. It is striking that unlike the earlier films in which the supporting female roles are minor, there are two female main characters in the film. Both women demonstrate possible and culturally accepted ways of femininity. Prior to becoming Sundelbolong, Alisa is depicted as a woman who knows what she wants and who politely rejects the idea of marriage. She however does not turn down her boyfriend's proposal, rather asking for more time as marriage is costly and she is currently financing Anisa's education. She does not practice Islam but is most likely a Muslim. However, after Alisa transforms into Sundelbolong, a radical change in the way she dresses and presents herself is to be observed. She wears revealing clothing to lure her victims, eats raw meat, and generally corresponds to the archetypal image of Sundelbolong.

As in *Sundelbolong* (1981), her frenetic form has to be tamed at the end of the film. Compared to the other productions, the process of banishing her seems significantly more violent, Alisa/Sundelbolong is presented as 'evil', even trying to lure Odi to follow her into death. Unlike *Sundelbolong* in the 1981 film, she

24 Her nickname is Lisa, but the name could be understood as paying obvious homage to *Sundelbolong* (1981).

does not accept her fate and fights back. Odi's father, the religious authority, explains:

There is no dead one returning to life, except he/she is a demon. [...] this is not Lisa! It is a demon that has taken possession of Lisa's body.²⁵

This shows that the femininity presented in the form of Sundelbolong is situated outside female nature. Revenge, arbitrary law and the untamed nature of Sundelbolong are constructed as the 'other': they need to be banished from this world, as in the original film.

In contrast, the other main character, her sister Anisa²⁶ shows a higher degree of Islamic piety. She occasionally wears a *kerudung* (veil) and complies with obligatory daily prayer. Like her sister, Anisa is also highly self-confident. After she finds out that Sam might have killed Alisa, she confronts him and swears that he will face justice. Indeed, she shows the most agency at the end of the film, appearing to displace 'ibu' as the ideal form of Indonesian womanhood: modern Indonesian women should be young, independent, well-educated and pious Muslims. This change of womanhood is also signaled by the contrast with representations of women in the original film. While the original limits any possible identification with a female character, *Urban Legend Sundelbolong* (2009) puts Anisa in the center of the action.

It is clear in the juxtaposition of female characters in *Urban Legend Sundelbolong* that Anisa is the ideal modern woman. Transformed into Sundelbolong, Alisa no longer fits into the earthly world, while Anisa, who at the end is in a relationship with Odi, represents the ideal of womanhood in contemporary Indonesia. The ideology of 'State *Ibuisim*' has to accommodate to the resurgence of Islam and veil itself in order to survive.

Conclusion

Using the representation of Sundelbolong as a mirror for femininity in the changing political, social and cultural landscapes of Indonesia, I have

25 "Tidak ada orang yang sudah mati hidup kembali. Kecuali adalah iblis [...] Dia bukan Lisa! Dia adalah iblis yang memanfaatkan jahat Alisa" (*Urban Legend Sundelbolong*, dir. Purnomo A. Chakill, 2009).

26 Interestingly, Anisa means 'woman' in Arabic and is a very popular female name among Indonesian Muslims.

highlighted some key aspects of conceptions of womanhood in the productions. *Sundelbolong* (dir. Sisworo Gautama Putra, 1981) presented the propagated state ideology of the New Order in so far that the symbolic order needed to be restored in the end with the help of religious authority.

Unlike the 1981 film, the television production *Urban Legend Sundelbolong* (dir. Purnomo A. Chakill, 2009) proposed a new model of femininity which is young, urban and deeply intertwined with religious morality. In contrast to the prior films which depicted women as deeply connected to their husbands (even beyond death), the most recent production showed two independent women taking action against male domination. Nevertheless, one mode is acceptable and the other is not. Anisa survives, while Sundelbolong has to be tamed. Indeed, only *Legenda Sundelbolong* (dir. Hanung Bramantyo, 2007) shows Sundelbolong 'surviving' in her frenetic form, maintaining her transgressive potential and offering another model of femininity, one in which the 'monstrous feminine' can survive.

In conclusion, the newer representations of Sundelbolong still contain aspects of 'State Ibuism' and the Javanese distinction of *halus* and *kasar*, since the influence of the New Order state ideology as well as cultural notions have not completely vanished. An observable change within the films is the growing importance of religious morality applied to the discourse of femininity. This reflects the contemporary national popular discourse on sexuality in Indonesia. *Legenda Sundelbolong* (2007) stands out as unique, as Sundelbolong's potency cannot be expelled from the world, a symbolic order can therefore not be restored.

Whilst emphasizing more religious notions, *Urban Legend Sundelbolong* (2009) allows the two female characters, Alisa and Anisa, to present and articulate their modern ideals, such as the importance of education and the possibility of non-normative family structures. In addition, Anisa investigates the crime against her sister herself, and even addresses Alisa's tormentors face-to-face. The movie tries to address those positions, but the relationship of Anisa with her sister's former fiancé Odi reveals that she still needs to be in a proper relationship and cannot remain entirely independent. Thus, the existing models of femininity are partly questioned in the remakes of *Sundelbolong* (1981), but only the later versions, especially *Legenda Sundelbolong* (2007) manage to re-write the legend of the 'monstrous feminine' Sundelbolong, offering a mode of femininity that young women can probably relate to more than the iconic film version of Sundelbolong. In *Legenda Sundelbolong* (2007), Sundelbolong is not presented as simply *kasar*, or 'other', but rather as a troubled female, trying to cope with the things done to her. Her status of being Imah/Sundelbolong is

fluid: the line between a ‘normal’, living woman and the *hantu* Sundelbolong remains relatively blurred.

The aspects I have focused on in this chapter should be seen as tendencies rather than truisms of Indonesian horror and its depiction of female *hantu*. While popular folk tales (*cerita hantu*) had already incorporated the imagination of the ‘monstrous feminine’, those (and many other) ghost narratives were modified for the silver and later the television screen, were they reached wide audiences. Due to (self-)censorship and reflecting popular discourses, Sundelbolong was formed and fitted into the frames of the New Order, and more recently, into contemporary Islamic morality. Thus, each depiction of Sundelbolong has a common core, but embodies different models of femininity: a model that does not allow a freely acting woman and wants to tame her in accordance with the New Order; a model of femininity that gives space for the possibility of a transgressive female potential; and finally, femininity according to pious Muslim notions. However, this chapter has focused on just one sphere of discourse in Indonesia, the socio-religious and popular landscapes. It remains unclear how, and to what extent, female—and male—audiences relate to portrayals of femininity and masculinity in such films and television productions. Still more detailed audience analysis is needed in that matter. What is clear, however, is that these productions have an undiminished popularity among Indonesians, and are consumed by a huge audience.

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PART 2

Cultural Contexts



That's the Spirit!

Horror Films as an Extension of Thai Supernaturalism

Katarzyna Ancuta

Horror films have been the subject of detailed academic scrutiny. They have been philosophized, historicized, and politicized. They have spawned discussions on gender, race and class, and most recently on national and cultural trauma. None of this, however, seems to be of particular importance to the extensive community of horror fans who, quite predictably, constitute a significant part of the films' audience. As evident from multiple fan sites and communities, horror fans' expectations seem to be plain and simple: they want to be scared and entertained, the scaring being, in fact, part of the entertainment. Thai horror audiences are no different in this respect. And it is through investigating these audiences that we get to understand the prominent positioning of horror within Thai culture.

Thai horror films are frequently divided into pre-1999 and post-1999 productions. 1999 marked the release of Nonzee Nimibutr's *Nang Nak*,¹ a realistic rendering of the classic Thai ghost story of a faithful spectral wife ('Mae Nak') who refuses to be separated from her husband, told in a form Ingawanij dubbed "the 'new look' heritage film" (Ingawanij, 2007: 181). Described by Ingawanij as

1 Thai film producers and distributors do not tend to follow the official rules of Thai Romanization, or indeed agree on one preferred version of the transliteration of Thai film titles. This results in the cross-listing of many films under seemingly different titles which are, in fact, variations of the same name. This article references Thai films under the standard rendering of the titles in English as appearing on IMDb.com, acknowledging the use of this database as the most likely source for journalistic and scholarly citations. At the same time, however, it must be noted that since the data on IMDb.com is entered by the filmmakers themselves, it is as flawed as any other source. It is quite common to find the same word spelt differently in different titles (e.g. *See Prang* but *Ha Phraeng*, or *Pee Mak* but *Baan Phii Sing*), or to find inconsistencies in the spelling of the names of actors and directors (e.g. Sopon or Sophon Sukdapisit). Most titles are composed of separate words, while others for some reason are hyphenated (e.g. *Soi-lat-daa-laen*). Many of the smaller Thai productions have no IMDb.com presence at all. Moreover, 'official' English titles of Thai films are likely to change with each update of the film page (e.g. the "Happiness" segment of *4bia* used to be called "Loneliness"). At the same time, given that there is no official Thai film database and the existing sites listing recent Thai film productions (all of which are run by local film enthusiasts rather than film organizations) are incomplete and inconsistent, following the spelling used on IMDb.com seems the most logical choice.

“a high quality national film of an ‘auterist’ vision” (2007: 181), *Nang Nak* connected with its Thai audience largely thanks to its arousal of nostalgic sentiments conveyed through the symbolic narrative of ‘Thainess’—a compilation of historical stereotypes operating within a recognizable hierarchy of knowledge, power, and morality (2007: 183). Indeed, these idealized signifiers of past Thai greatness were much in demand in the bleak aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Having outscored any previous local productions at the box office, *Nang Nak* became the first modern Thai film to gain wider international attention and find a foreign distributor. Anchalee Chaiworaporn and Adam Knee attributed its unprecedented success to the film’s “higher production values than those associated with Thai horror films in decades past while simultaneously making use of indigenous story materials” (Anchalee Chaiworaporn and Knee, 2006: 62). The success of *Nang Nak* contributed to the revitalization of Thai cinema as a whole, but more importantly for this paper, it put the horror genre very much in the spotlight.

Keeping with local genre expectations, post-1999 Thai horror films have remained almost exclusively supernatural. They tend to focus on stories of vengeful ghosts and black magic in contemporary urban settings. They have not escaped the influence of Japanese and Korean horror often seen as trend-setting in the region. The indigenous Thai animistic spirits and other folkloric creatures familiar from pre-1999 films have today been essentially relegated to horror comedies, which are often seen as directly descended from the 16-mm productions of the 1970s. Although there have been attempts to introduce psychological horror into the mix, so far these films have proven rather uninspiring, frequently complementing psychology (or psychoanalysis) with supernaturalism. With the development of multiplex cinemas in the country, Thai films now compete against Hollywood giants. While typical Thai productions find it hard to beat special effects-packed foreign blockbusters, when it comes to horror things appear to be different. Judging by ticket sales, Thai audiences seem to show a strong preference for local ghost films over similar foreign productions. This article attempts to account for this comparative popularity of Thai ghost films with Thai audiences.

Keeping It Real

Horror films remain among the most significant Thai cinematic productions in terms of the revenue, popularity with local and international audiences, and recognition of their aesthetic merits at various genre festivals. Thai horror

films frequently find foreign distributors and secure international cinematic release where other Thai films fail. In 2008, *Shutter* (dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, 2004), a haunting tale of a photographer and his ghost-seeing camera became the first ever Thai horror film to get a Hollywood remake (*Shutter*, dir. Masayuki Ochiai, 2008). The phenomenal success of *Pee Mak Phrakanong* (dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun, 2013)—a comic version of the story of the ghostly Mae Nak—became the highest grossing Thai film of all time.² The film also landed its production studio, GTH, a deal with Singapore's Sentosa Theme Park, becoming one of the park's regular Halloween Spooktacular attractions (*Sentosa Press Release*, 2013). Thanks to its staple offerings of horror films and comedies aimed at young urban audiences, GTH has established itself as the most commercially successful film production studio in Thailand. Many smaller producers are trying to follow in their footsteps.

Thai audiences have a large appetite for Thai horror and, as evidenced by the box office figures, appear strangely resistant to foreign (especially Western) supernatural horror films, even to those which receive an enthusiastic reception from the international horror community. While Thais flock to the cinemas to watch every expensive, over-the-top, special effects-filled fantastic blockbuster, the more standard, smaller foreign horror productions tend to play to virtually empty theatres.³ Thai horror films fare much better in this respect.⁴ One explanation for this may be that Thai audiences seem to have vastly different expectations regarding local and foreign horror films. Local horror productions tend to be seen as significantly more 'realistic', benefitting from the widespread socio-cultural beliefs that ghosts and spirits, like the ones

2 According to www.boxofficemojo.com in 2013, *Pee Mak Phrakanong* made over 30 million USD (more than 18 million USD in Thailand alone), making it the highest earning Thai production ever. *Iron Man 3* (dir. Shane Black, 2013) was the second highest grossing film in Thailand that year, earning 8.8 million USD.

3 In 2012, the latest instalment of the *Resident Evil* saga (*Resident Evil: Retribution*, dir. Paul W.S. Anderson, 2012) grossed almost 3.5 million USD in Thailand but *The Cabin in the Woods* (dir. Drew Goddard, 2012) made less than 700,000 USD and *The Woman in Black* (dir. James Watkins, 2012) only 150,000 USD.

4 In 2012, the most commercially successful Thai horror film was a hospital ghost love story *I Miss U/Rak Chan Yaa Kid Teung Chan* (dir. Monthon Arayangkoon, 2012) which made almost 1.5 million USD. That year, a rather mediocre Thai production, *407 Dark Flight* (dir. Isara Nadee, 2012) exceeded well over one million USD, even if its popularity could easily be attributed to the film's promotion as the first 'real 3D' Thai feature (earlier Thai 3D films were not actually shot in 3D but rather included short segments of very basic 3D animation within the film). In 2011, Sophon Sukdapisit's *Ladda Land/Soi-lat-daa-laen* (2011) grossed almost 4 million USD in Thailand alone.

shown in films, can actually invade the ordinary lives of the viewers. Foreign horror films, on the other hand, are predominantly seen as a form of fantastic entertainment, and can only terrify their Thai audiences if they tap into the same cultural reservoir of fear the domestic films rely on. In practice, this means that foreign horror movies featuring vengeful spirits, black magic, and other monstrosities which have local counterparts will likely be seen as more terrifying than those involving vampires, zombies, werewolves, giant monsters, serial killers, or nature-gone-wild plots non-Thai audiences have come to recognize as common markers of the Western horror genre.⁵ Expensive, spectacular Hollywood productions end up drawing larger audiences to the theatres nonetheless, but if foreign horror films lack that blockbuster quality they frequently go unnoticed.

The success of Thai productions with local audiences seems to depend on the degree of realism they are seen to convey. While in the logocentric West supernatural horror has long been relegated to the realm of the fantastic, in Thailand ghosts and magic are very real, the belief in the supernatural vindicated by popular religion. In fact, just like any other Thai business venture, no film production can get off the ground without an offering being made to the spirits to ensure good luck during production and good profits at the box office.⁶ Thai horror films draw in equal measure on long-standing supernatural presence in folklore and popular culture, and on details of prominent, gruesome and shocking current events which capture the popular imagination. Many Thai horror film plots are dramatizations of actual events or are built around legendary ghost figures known to every Thai. As such, audiences seem to frequently know the story before they have actually seen the film. Take the story of the above mentioned and most enduring of Thai ghosts, Mae Nak Phrakhanong, as an example. Immortalized in over 30 movies,⁷ including at

5 For a discussion of how these expectations and preferences shape Thai zombie narratives see my article on “The Smiling Dead, or, on the Impossibility of Thai Zombies” (Ancuta, 2016).

6 The ceremony, known in Thai as *piti buang suang papayon*, consists of the offering of food (typically pork, mushroom, duck, and chicken), alcohol, and incense to various deities by a shaman. This may be done to appease the spirit of the land (*chao thi*), or the spirit of the road (*chao tang*) on which the shooting takes place, or simply to ensure a more general blessing from gods and angels. In recent years it has become quite popular to include a vegetarian feast for the Hindu god Ganesh in the offerings, as Ganesh is considered the patron of arts. While there is no doubt that many filmmakers deeply believe in the spiritual merits of such a ceremony, as these events frequently bring together a number of movie stars and celebrities, they are also public relations events.

7 The actual number will likely never be known. Some sources list over 40 productions, although it is difficult to distinguish feature films from television series and documentaries, or to verify the data.

least one in 3D, as well as in a poem, a novelette, a play, a radio drama, a musical, an opera, and an animation, Mae Nak is said to be a ghost of a devoted wife who refused to leave her husband's side even though she had died in childbirth during his absence.⁸ Although there is no evidence that a woman called Nak ever existed, and the accounts of her supposed life and death differ from one version to another, her ghost continues to be venerated as a minor deity at her shrine located on the grounds of the Wat Mahabute temple in Bangkok. In short, her legend lives on. In the late 19th century, Prince Damrong, a reputable Thai historian, conducted a poll at the gates of the Grand Palace, which revealed that Bangkokians knew more about the supposed life of Mae Nak than about King Rama I (O'Neill 2008: 13). In 2013, the success of *Pee Mak Phrakanong* (dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun, 2013) turned Mae Nak into an international phenomenon.

Mae Nak's ghost may have been haunting Thai popular imagination for well over a century, but she is by no means the only one. According to Thai popular beliefs, people who die untimely violent deaths, be it an accident, murder, or suicide, are likely to return as vengeful spirits or *phii tai hong* (spirits of the violently dead). Needless to say, every accident, murder, or suicide big enough to make headlines is likely to create celebrity spirits capable of inspiring their own film adaptations. Recent examples of this trend include Chatchai Katenut's short feature "Flame", a segment of the movie *Still/Tai Hong* (dir. Poj Arnon et al., 2010), which consists of four short films by four directors. "Flame" is based on the 2008/9 Santika nightclub fire which killed over 60 people who found themselves "trapped in a building with no sprinklers, no fire exits and no emergency lights" (Head, 2009) on New Year's Eve. Poj Arnon's *Sop Dek 2002* (2011) was hastily put together only months after the news of the discovery of 2002 aborted fetuses at Bangkok's Wat Phai Ngern shocked the nation (Uribarri, 2010). Even the Thai section of the Pang Brothers' Hong Kong/Thai co-production *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002) turned to the infamous 1990 LPG tanker explosion on New Petchabure Rd. in Bangkok for inspiration. The "fires in the area raged for over 24hrs before being fully contained" (*Pattaya Daily News*, 2010), killing 59 people and injuring many others. The part of the film set in Hong Kong was fictitious.

Thai horror films tend to pay meticulous attention to the details of horrific events familiar to their audiences through press photographs and witness accounts. For instance, the seemingly imaginary killer doctors from *The House/Baan Phii Sing* (dir. Monthon Arayangkoon, 2007) are practically carbon copies of the actual Thai murderers, Wisut Boonkasemsanti and Serm

8 For more about the Mae Nak story, and its seemingly infinite incarnations, see Platt in this volume.

Sakhonrat. Likewise, the ghost of Nuanchawee bears an uncanny similarity to the old photographs of Nualchawee Petchrung, a nurse whose body was found in Chao Phraya River in the 1960s under a bridge that today (unofficially) bears her name.⁹ With the film's main storyline focusing on a journalist investigating a haunted house, such nuances will most likely be lost on foreign viewers, especially since finding reliable information about the crime in English (and even in Thai) is quite a feat. Even if Thai horror fans do not always agree on their versions of the described events, this does not stop them from relating to the films on the basis of their apparent 'realism'. This is so because Thai horror films display a high degree of intertextuality in their construction of cinematic ghosts generated in a dialogic exchange with broader social discourses, cultural beliefs and media forms. As a result of this, there seems to be no clear distinction between the production of ghost stories as entertainment and wider interactions with the world of spirits, which begin to blend into each other.

In 2006, the then president of the Thai Director's Association Prachya Pinkaew—best known to foreign audiences as the director of *Ong-Bak* (2003) (the first Thai Muay Thai movie to make waves abroad)—suggested that to improve Thai cinema directors need to reach out to their local audiences and involve them in a more direct discussion. One practical result of his idea was the establishment of a discussion club which operated for two to three years.¹⁰ During the club meetings, which were held before the release of most major Thai productions, regular Q&A sessions with film directors, producers, scriptwriters, and actors were organized. The audience consisted mostly of other filmmakers, film crews, and anybody interested in joining in and talking about the film. This was different from the usual PR events organized for the media, as the purpose was not so much to promote the movies as to engage the audience in a critical discussion.¹¹

9 In its attempts to reconstruct the crime, the film goes as far as to include the shot of the actual clothes in which Nualchawee was found. These can be seen on display at the Siriraj Forensic Medicine Museum in Bangkok.

10 Successive presidents of the Thai Director's Association seem to have abandoned the project. This may have something to do with the growing competition between Thai production studios and between the directors themselves.

11 I had a chance to attend almost every meeting of the Directors' Club between 2006 and 2008. The meetings were organized roughly once a month. Most of the time I was the only foreigner present during the screenings and the subsequent discussions. Since my knowledge of the Thai language is rudimentary at best, the movies were screened with English subtitles and the organizers were kind enough to provide me with several interpreters in order to involve me in the discussions.

Obviously, such events are nothing extraordinary, as film fans gladly welcome any opportunity to quiz filmmakers about every minor detail of production. However, while some Thai fans asked the usual questions about film budgets and star gossip, numerous others seemed more directly concerned with verifying the realism of the story. They enquired about the health of the minor characters that fell ill in the movie; they reported that the buses portrayed on film were apparently driving along wrong routes; they complained that certain streets shown in the movies had had their names changed. Audience members were eager to offer their own versions of the famous ghost stories which had inspired the films, or even recount their private supernatural encounters. The directors of horror movies were frequently asked about the ghosts they saw while working on their projects and invited to share their paranormal experiences. And indeed, quite a few of them did.¹²

Even if only a few Thai filmmakers would be prepared to expose themselves as staunch believers in the supernatural, there is no denying that ghosts in Thai films are connected with a broader social field of practice. The individual beliefs of filmmakers and audience members in ghosts and spirits, or lack of thereof, does not change the fact that the supernatural plays an important role in Thai social life. Animistic film blessing ceremonies, or the use of fortune-tellers to divine an auspicious date for the cinematic release are well-suited to the spiritual climate of a contemporary Thailand dominated by popular spirit-medium cults. Pattana Kitiarsa referred to this as

a 'third space' where conventional Theravada Buddhism, state and *Sangha* authorities, multi-original religious beliefs and practices and the drive for material success in the capitalist market all come to coexist and produce a hybrid moment of religious change.¹³

PATTANA KITIARSA, 2005: 468

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- 12 During one such Q&A session, the director of *The Spiritual World* (2007), Tharatap Thewsomboon, admitted that he had made his movie to please the ghosts he kept seeing. In the movie, the heroine seems to be slowly losing her sanity as she is followed everywhere by ghosts. Knowing that she can see them and cannot block them out, the ghosts never leave her alone, trying to force her into dealing with their unfinished business. The director claimed that like his protagonist, he was guided in his life by the spirits and that the movie was in fact a poetic version of his own story.
- 13 Kitiarsa cites the study of Ekkachai Sanitsuda estimating that by the 1990s there were "more than 100,000 mediums in Thailand whose services generated over 20 billion *baht* per year" (quoted in Pattana Kitiarsa, 2005: 471).

Magic and mediums permeate the private and public lives of contemporary Thais, in both rural and urban communities. Astrologers, fortune-tellers, spirit mediums and Chinese geomancers are in themselves sought-after commodities. They solve heartbreaks, act as career advisers, determine dates for auspicious events, and occasionally come up with lucky lottery numbers. There is nothing, it appears, they cannot handle—from matters of national security to such seemingly trifling issues as magically altering the color of one's car.¹⁴

Taking all this into consideration, it is possible to see cinematic ghosts in Thai horror films as performing similar functions to those of 'traditional' ghosts in Thai society: voicing cultural anxieties, expressing moral critique, or exposing social traumas. Just like 'traditional' ghosts they are embedded in a dense web of intertextuality and take an active role in Thai social life, permeated as it is by supernatural beliefs and practices.

Making Magic

Supernaturalism in Thai cinema—in relation to the portrayals of the paranormal within Thai horror movies, but also the utilization of magical rituals within the media and entertainment industry—needs to be contextualized within a broader sphere of beliefs and practices of Thai people. To understand the extent to which the two are intertwined it is enough to look at the public life of a country whose state affairs are regulated as much by politicians as by astrologers and fortune-tellers. Even without much knowledge of Thai politics, it is easy to notice that both past and current Thai political clashes have been punctuated by religious and magical rituals. During the 2008 anti-government protests, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) was reported to 'block' the spiritual power of statues around Government House by ceremonially 'closing' their eyes, or, even more drastically, by strategically surrounding these statues with used tampons and sanitary napkins, as menstrual blood is generally believed to render magic useless (Chang Noi, 2008). In an even more theatrical gesture, in 2010, the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) performed a Brahmin blood ritual which involved pouring litres of human blood in front of Government House and the Prime Minister's

14 One of the relatively recent additions to the Thai fortune-tellers' repertoire is the distribution of car stickers that magically 'change' the color of your car to a more 'lucky' one. The stickers, which proclaim that "this car is blue, red, white", etc., are meant to be performative utterances ensuring spiritual protection and save the owner money on a paint job.

home (*Al Jazeera*, 2010). Despite the presence of the Brahmin priest during the blood-pouring ceremony many sources reported it to be Khmer black magic. This can be attributed to the fact that in Thai popular imagination, Khmer magic is not only believed to be the strongest but also the most sinister (Henley, 2010).

The widespread belief in the aggressiveness of Cambodian supernaturalism is often reflected in Thai cinema. Almost every powerful sorcerer portrayed on film seems to be a master of Khmer magic, or occasionally a Khmer-Malay hybrid.¹⁵ Guelden writes:

Sorcerers, a feared class of spirit doctors, are famed for 'shooting' invisible missiles into victims, making wax doll effigies, using deadly poisons, and helping clients to ensnare lovers.

GUELLEN, 1995: 112

Obviously, cinematic depictions usually abandon the more anthropologically accurate readings of the sorcerers' craft for the sake of the spectacle, but the four activities mentioned by Guelden seem to be perpetually on the menu. Out of the four, the invisible projectiles that unexpectedly manifest themselves inside the victim's body appear to be a great favorite. In more recent Thai movies we have seen a rusty nail (*Necromancer/Jom Kha Mung Wej*, dir. Piyapan Choopetch, 2005), razor blades (*Art of the Devil/Khon Len Khong*, dir. Tanit Jitnukul, 2004), fish hooks, and even live geckos (*Art of the Devil 2/Long Khong*, dir. The Ronin Team, 2005) bursting through the characters' skin. Moreover, as Khmer magic is popularly associated with magical ingredients obtained from corpses, unsurprisingly in *Curse of the Sun/Suriyakhaat* (dir. Kittipong Panyataweesap and Anat Yuangngern, 2004) a Khmer sorcerer is called upon to resurrect the dead and turn them into deadly and conveniently silent assassins.

Stories about magical invisible missiles depicted in the movies are deeply rooted in existing beliefs. Many Thais would swear to their authenticity. Guelden recounts a conversation with a man who admits to having a cloth made

¹⁵ Apart from Khmer sorcerers, the second largest ethnic group associated with powerful magic are the so called *khon Kaek*. The term, meaning simply 'a guest', is slightly problematic as it relates to Malays, Indians and even Arabs and originally indicated foreigners who were not Buddhist. Since many of those foreigners settled in the South of Thailand, the southern part of the country is frequently associated with 'Kaek' magic. Events such as Phuket Vegetarian Festival with their display of exotic, dangerous-looking magical rituals, such as walking on fire or piercing one's body with swords, help promote the southern provinces as common locations for Thai cinematic horror.

of a burial shroud removed from his body by the spirit doctor (Guelden, 1995: 114). An art student I met in Sa Kaeo in 2009 swore her friend was operated on to remove six live baby turtles from his stomach (personal communication). But the magical repertory does not stop there. It is not unusual to hear Thai people blame unlucky relationships on being tricked with love charms into becoming infatuated with the ‘wrong’ people, or attributing their bad luck to a curse. Sorcerers and magicians feel equally at home in remote rural provinces as in the city. More often than not, however, spiritual and mediumistic rituals and practices are called for to serve the one and only purpose that seems to dominate the lives of modern-day believers—making money.

Much has been written on the materialism of Thai popular religion and its relation to the financial practices of Thai capitalism. Peter A. Jackson explored Thai religions of prosperity, or “popular movements that emphasize the acquisition of wealth as much as salvation” (Jackson, 1999a: 245). These movements have become prominent since the 1990s. Alan Klima wrote about the association of mediumistic practices with post-1997 underground lotteries, gambling, and personal money lending (Klima, 2006). Shrines, like that of Mae Nak, stay open all night on lottery nights. Although originally conceived of as a patron of lovers and those seeking exemption from military service, it seems that today the cult of Mae Nak, like many others, thrives mostly due to her predictions of the winning lottery numbers. The numbers, it is said, manifest themselves in the bark of the *takien* tree, which reputedly grows over her grave, after it has been rubbed with camphor oil (McDaniel, 2011: 176–177).

This is not to say that all Thais share an indiscriminate enthusiasm for the supernatural. Even today, the Thai media tend to portray spirit mediums as representing “backward and irrational beliefs and behaviour that are of no value in a modern society” (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2002: 170). Still, while preaching the rational approach, in practice the Thai media and entertainment industries, like any money-making Thai enterprise, seem to depend on mediumistic practices themselves. In July 2012, PaSang YaSorn’s television production company held a press conference to launch the next series of its programs. The press invitation proudly announced that “[o]n 23rd July, a new force in the Thai entertainment industry will be born”, and promised the attending journalists a rare opportunity to meet with the lady known as E.T.,—a Burmese fortune teller to the rich and famous. As the invitation explained:

When political leaders, heads of industry, and celebrities across Asia need advice and guidance, who is the single person they turn to? [...] E.T., as she is known, is perhaps the most widely respected fortune teller in

Asia. [...] She respects the confidentiality of her clients, particularly the rich and powerful, but it is known that she advised Thaksin Shinawatra, and has advised to Indonesian, Singaporean and Malaysian political leaders. It is said that the Myanmar capital was moved to Naypyidaw partly as a result of E.T.'s advice. [...] Whereas many fortune-tellers give vague predictions, many are amazed that E.T. often gives names, details, dates and facts. Her services come at a price, and the rich and famous must often wait up to six months for an appointment.¹⁶

personal email communication

Magic and the supernatural have become a successful marketing strategy for the Thai film industry as well. In 2004, the producers of *Shutter* (dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, 2004) shocked their audiences by admitting they had used 'real' spirit photographs in the production of the movie. In 2005, before the cinematic screening of *Long Khong/Art of the Devil 2* (dir. The Ronin Team, 2005), the audience was warned that any attempts to pirate the movie would be met with a curse administered by a Khmer shaman. In 2006, the search for an 'authentic' supernatural experience almost led to a political crisis when the producers of *Ghost Game/Laa-thaa-phii* (dir. Sarawut Wichiansarn, 2006) insisted on filming their ghost movie inside the infamous (and potentially haunted) Khmer Rouge S-21 prison. The 2013 release of *Pee Mak Phrakanong* (dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun) was accompanied by testimonials on television from young men apparently 'saved' from being drafted to the military after Mae Nak's intervention.

In November 2008, Thai cinemas saw the release of *Ha Taew* (dir. Nati Panmanee, 2008), an action-fantasy movie with magical themes apparently produced by one of the most famous Thai spiritual tattoo artists, Sompong Kanphai (Ajarn Noo Kanpai). The title of the film refers to the five sacred columns of Buddhist scripture, one of the more frequent motifs in the *Sak Yant* magical tattooing that Kanphai is renowned for. Known internationally as Angelina Jolie's tattoo artist, Kanphai is famous for the magic he performs on his tattoos. A DVD edition of the movie started with an introduction to *Sak Yant* art and the promotion of Kanphai, and included a small *ha teaw* amulet said to have been blessed by the master himself. This could be seen as the next logical step in the supernaturalization of the industry.

16 Interestingly, while the former PM Thaksin Shinawatra generated a lot of bad press due to his alleged penchant for Khmer magic, his name is used to testify here to the qualifications of E.T. as a medium.

These examples seem to confirm that while conceived of as works of fiction, Thai horror films successfully tap into an array of the everyday spiritual beliefs and practices of their local audiences. This, to a certain extent, explains the expectations of ‘realism’ on behalf of the viewers, as well as the strategies of documentation used by the filmmakers to authenticate their movies.

Moving On

Unsurprisingly then, the most successful Thai horror movies are ghost stories in a realistic setting that often pertain to real-life events. Most of films focus on the vengeful spirit of the violently dead, *phii tai hong*, a somewhat perverted embodiment of the Buddhist concept of *karma*. Within the ghost film narrative Thai vengeful spirits usually serve a double function. On the one hand they act as an instrument of karmic retribution, delivering punishment to their wrongdoers. On the other hand, unable to let go of their anger and other earthly emotions they are trapped in a cycle of karmic repetition, forced to re-enact the moment of their death. Additionally, some ghosts can teach us about the power of karmic redemption, acting as the agents of positive change, and paying off their karmic debt by helping others.

Karmic concepts of retribution and redemption are behind most Thai horror plots. At times, however, the idea is taken a little further. *The Coffin* (dir. Ekachai Uekrongtham, 2008) is an example of this. The plot refers to the ritual of ‘spiritual rebirth’, *non long sa dow kraw*, which involves staging one’s own funeral while still alive. Wat Prommanee in Nakhorn Nayok is one of many temples in Thailand performing regular ceremonies for a fee. It is perhaps better known outside Thailand because it caught the eye of a “New York Times” reporter:

Nine big pink coffins dominate the grand hall of the temple, and every day hundreds of people take their turns climbing in for a few moments as monks chant a dirge. Then, at a command, the visitors clamber out again cleansed—they believe—of the past.

MYDANS, 2008

The article quotes satisfied customers, like Nual Chaichamni, a 52-year-old masseuse who “liked the feeling so much that she had done it six times” (Mydans, 2008). The entire ceremony lasts only 90 seconds, much to the relief of the queuing groups of devotees. “Phuket Gazette”, however, reports on a variation of the process—a personalized fake funeral involving the cremation of

the empty coffin after the initial ceremony. The newspaper reports the case of Kulap Chomduang, an 80-year old diabetic woman suffering from high blood pressure and uterine cancer who made a miraculous recovery thanks to the 'cheating death' ceremony performed at Sop Tui Temple in Lampang province. According to this article:

Mrs Kulap's children came up with the idea of holding a ceremony of gifting an 'empty' spirit to Death so he would not pay attention to their sick mother.

PHUKET GAZETTE, 2012

While none of the rituals are as spectacular as the one portrayed in the film, the connection between them is obvious.

Horror movies and ghost movies in particular, are filled with the imagery of death, seen as the necessary introduction to the afterlife. Once again however, popular beliefs add a new angle to this connection, for in Thailand movies are often screened for the dead or spirit audience, as well as the living one. I first heard about this custom from film director, Bandit Thongdee, soon after my arrival in Thailand in 2006. When I asked what inspired him to become a film director, he mentioned growing up in a village with his grandmother. He said that as a kid he used to sneak out of his room at night to watch films at the temple. When I enquired why the films were screened at the temple at night, he answered: "you know, for the dead people" (personal communication). Since then I have come to learn that film offerings have become a popular alternative to the traditional music and *Khon* dance still performed at more celebratory funerals, especially those of public figures. Similar offerings of arts have frequently been made to all sorts of local spirits and deities. Some of those are also being replaced by film screenings, courtesy of Thai mobile cinema. On the Thonburi side of Bangkok, around Rama 11 Rd., for instance, snake movies are regularly played at night to please the snake spirit, thought to reside in the neighboring fields under the guise of a king cobra.

On 21 March 2006, the prominent Erawan Shrine to the Hindu deity Brahma in central Bangkok was smashed up with a hammer by a 27-year-old man, Thanakorn Pakdeepol. The man was apprehended and beaten to death by angry bystanders who were later charged with homicide and almost immediately released (Monthathip Poo, 2006). The shrine has always been famous for the dancers contracted to perform in front of the deity. Yet since the destruction of the effigy, many Bangkokians have come to believe that the dancers are there to appease the angry spirit of the man killed for its destruction. The violent death the man suffered qualifies him as a potential *phii tai hong*. The economic

and political significance¹⁷ of the shrine makes it an inconvenient site for a possible haunting. The appearance of the damaged shrine as a haunted space in *The Victim/Phii Khon Pen* (dir. Monthon Arayangkoon, 2006) seems to echo these sentiments. In the movie a ghost possesses an actress through the traditional Thai headdress she is wearing. The decision to magically teleport the woman from her room to the dancing stage of the Erawan Shrine has no special significance for the plot, apart from contextualizing the scene in contemporary Bangkok.

Similar contextualization of the plot within the existing network of local superstitions can be found in *The Screen at Kamchanod/Phii Chang Nang* (dir. Songsak Mongkolthong, 2007), a movie about a film screening for ghosts. The film is said to have been inspired by an event which reportedly took place in 1987 in the north-eastern province of Udon Thani and has since become part of Thai ghost lore. A mobile cinema projection company received an anonymous phone call requesting a night screening at the Kamchanod Forest. The projection started at 9pm, with the film showing to an empty venue. Later in the night a large crowd of women dressed in white and men dressed in black appeared out of the forest. They all watched the film without a word. At 4am the screening finished and the audience vanished as suddenly as they had appeared. When the projectionists enquired about the incident at the nearby village of Wang Tong nobody seemed to know anything about the show. In fact, no one had even heard the loud sounds of the screening echoing through the night. The projectionists concluded that they had shown the movie to ghosts (Bartlett 2009).

The story does not mention which movie was apparently screened to the ghosts in the forest. The bizarre film clip used in *The Screen at Kamchanod* (dir. Songsak Mongkolthong, 2007) to recount the story looks like an experimental rendition of the notorious videotape recording from Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998). Nevertheless, most actual funeral screenings show films the deceased are known or thought to have liked. In 2008, funeral ceremonies for HRH Princess Galyani Vadhana included multiple screenings of *The Legend of King Naresuan/Naresuan* (dir. Chatrichalerm Yukol, 2007), a film deemed appropriate for royalty. But the more 'ordinary' dead are as likely to be treated to Thai comedies as to films from *The Lord of the Rings* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2001–2003)

17 Erawan Shrine is considered particularly auspicious for profitable business ventures. Needless to say it is a great favorite with many influential Thai businessmen and politicians (who are often one and the same). The association of the ousted PM Thaksin Shinawatra with the shrine was so strong that many people took the destruction of the effigy in 2006 for an omen that signaled that the end of his government was nearing. Indeed, soon after, Thaksin was removed from power by a military coup (Keyes, 2006).

trilogy or other Hollywood blockbusters. Who knows, perhaps the next stage will involve cremating the dead with their smartphones and tablets, as suggested in the “Happiness” segment of *4bia/See Prang* (segment dir. Yongyoot Thongkongtoon, 2008). This may allow them to program their entertainment themselves.

It is clear that we can learn much about Thai horror by investigating the supernatural beliefs and practices of Thai audiences, just as we can expand our knowledge of Thai supernaturalism by watching Thai horror films. While this is obviously not the only way to approach Thai horror it should not be ignored. As Kitiarsa advocated, “you may not believe but never offend the spirits” (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2002). The narratives of ghosts and magic in Thai horror films and the supernatural practices within the Thai media and entertainment industry are both part of a much more complex network of social and cultural interactions between the living and the world of the spirits that are commonplace in contemporary Thailand. Ghosts in Thai movies may do their cultural work easing the social anxieties and healing the ‘wounds’ of the nation, but they can do so all the more effectively because they already hold a prominent place in the lives of Thai people.

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The Khmer Witch Project

*Demonizing the Khmer by Khmerizing a Demon*¹

*Benjamin Baumann*²

Introduction

The process of generating a language and set of institutions for constructing locations and populations as dirty or clean did not simply eliminate traditional notions of filth; it amalgamated these ideas, putting them to new uses.

W. COHEN, 2005: XVIII

In their edited volume *Engaging the Spirit World: Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia* German anthropologists Kirsten Endres and Andrea Lauser argue for the eminently spirited character of contemporary Southeast Asian societies (Endres and Lauser, 2011). Following Rosalind Morris (2000), Alexander Horstmann adds that “mediation through new media technologies” is essential to bring about the contemporary socio-cultural configurations Endres and Lauser call ‘spirited modernities’ (Endres and Lauser, 2011: 5; Horstmann, 2011: 148). While the heuristic value of framing the multiple socio-cultural configurations of contemporary Thailand under the encompassing label of ‘modernity’ is debatable (P.A. Jackson, 2008, 2014; Kasian Tejapira, 2000: 10–11; Pattana Kitiarsa, 2010; Taylor, 2007), a paradigmatically modern medium—film—may indeed help us to grasp their eminently spirited character (A.A. Johnson, 2013; Meyer, 2003: 202).

[T]he current generation of Thai horror films contains powerful ethnographic material with which one can rethink not only the now classic issue in the sociology of religion of the persistence of magic and spirits in an age of post- or late-modernity, but also “the subtle and complex interconnection among everyday forms of relatedness in the present,

1 The topic was first presented at a conference held by the German research network DORISEA (Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia). See *DORISEA Working Paper 19* (2015) on <http://www.dorisea.de/de/node/1839>.

2 I thank Peter A. Jackson, Justin McDaniel, and Guido Sprenger for their critical remarks on previous drafts of this paper.

memories of the past, and the wider [historical and] political context in which they occur (Carsten 2007: 1)".

PATTANA KITIARSA, 2011: 202

*Phi*³ constitute the major category of uncanny protagonists featured in Thai ghost films. *Phi* is an essential but highly relational and contextual cultural concept that cannot be translated unambiguously (Stanlaw and Yoddumnern Bencha, 1985: 142). As a 'thick category' it continues to challenge anthropologists trying to decipher the symbolism of its various manifestations. Pattana Kitiarsa suggests translating *phi* with the well-known term 'ghost' as it "specifically implies vernacular perceptions of ghostly presence and uncanny haunting" (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2011: 203). I follow Pattana's lead in this paper to identify representations of *phi* as 'ghostly images' on the basis of their uncanniness without implying any moral judgment that differentiates categorically between 'bad' *phi* and 'good' *thewada* (Rajadhon, 1954: 153; Tambiah, 1970: 59; Van Esterik, 1982: 2; Davis, 1984: 263). I use the adjective 'ghostly' here as a referent to the category *phi* and to bypass more problematic categories like 'spiritual' or 'supernatural', which reproduce the logical premises of modernist rationalism and distort the logic of folk epistemology (Kapferer, 2001; Levy et al., 1996; Van Esterik, 1982; White, 2003).

Simultaneously, I draw a methodological boundary between 'uncanny beings' and 'ghostly images' in order to account for the ontological difference between encounters with *phi* in 'real life' and their discursive representations in popular media and beyond. With the term 'uncanny being' I thus intend to meet the demands of the 'ontological turn' (Paleček and Risjord, 2013) and take 'things' encountered in the field 'seriously' without reducing them to our modern way of thinking by denying their 'reality' and exclusively identifying them as symbols or representations of something else (Århem, 2016; GDAT 2010, cited in Ladwig, 2011: 22–23; Sprenger, 2016). In contrast to 'uncanny being' the category 'ghostly image' is inspired by the premises of the 'spectral turn' (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013a: 2, 2013b) and thus explicitly designed to address the symbolic and representational dimension of *phi* in popular culture and discourse, where "ghostly manifestations are always constructions embedded within specific historical contexts and invoked for more or less explicit political purposes" (Weinstock, 2004: 8).

This distinction between ontology and metaphor is purely methodological and I am aware that it is *haunted* by the same scientific rationalism that impedes an emic understanding of the category *phi* (Bräunlein, 2013: 139). However, both categories may help us to frame how uncanny encounters with

3 The transliteration of Thai words is based on the *Rachabanditsathan* system.

phi are always simultaneously ontological and metaphorical while drawing our attention to the limits of an analytic language still bound by the logical premises of Cartesian dualism (Kapferer, 2001, 2013; Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987: 10–12). Given their ontological status in the various configurations of contemporary Thai society, an analysis of *phi* has to acknowledge the dialectic of ‘uncanny being’ and ‘ghostly image’ that shapes a *phi*’s contextual meaning in accordance with the practical requirements of a given speech event.⁴

My approach in this chapter is guided by the theoretical premises of a ‘dialectical structuralism’ (Hodder, 1982; Tilley, 1982). It tries to account for the particularity of historical contexts and the meaningful actions of cultural agents in processes of social change (Sahlins, 1985). Given the rise of ghost films as an important genre of New Thai Cinema after the financial crisis of 1997 (Ainslie and Ancuta, 2014) I will try to explain why a particular (ghostly) symbol is used in a particular historical context. The chapter is thus an attempt to decipher the cultural meaning of a particular *phi* dialectically. I propose to treat a film’s release as a contextualized speech event and my goal is to relate a *phi*’s ghostly image and its changing repertoire of ghostly features to the practical requirements of this speech event. Thereby, I wish to show how *phi* function like floating signifiers in Thailand’s contemporary public sphere (Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 159–160, 1987: 63–64). Thus, I will argue that because of their polyvalent features and ambiguous nature in folk epistemology, *phi* are able to centre socio-symbolic messages in Thai cultural idioms. As such *phi* fulfil crucial functions in the discursive reproduction of Thai identity (Stäheli, 2000: 21–26). However, their symbolic utility in the public sphere rests on their ontological status in the private spheres of Thailand’s contemporary sociocultures.

Phi Krasue

Usually depicted as a woman’s flying head with drawn out and bloody entrails dangling beneath it, ‘Phi Krasue’ is one of the most iconic of Thailand’s *phi*. Given the commonality of encounters with this uncanny being in ‘real life’⁵

4 Ludwig Wittgenstein introduces the term ‘language game’ to address the contextuality of meaning, linking meaning making to the practical requirements of a given speech event (Wittgenstein, 1984, cited in Rehbein, 2013: 124–127). Elaborating on the late Wittgenstein and his language-based approach to cognition one may thus identify any socially meaningful practice as a contextualized speech event (Rehbein, 2013: 124–125).

5 While outside of Thailand this iconic Southeast Asian witch may be known purely by its filmic incarnations, it is important to keep in mind that in Thailand Phi Krasue’s existence is not limited to the fictitious and metaphorical in film, novels and comic books but that it is frequently encountered in ‘real life’ too.

and the continuous presence of its ghostly images in popular cultural media it is remarkable that there is very little research investigating this specific phenomenon. In a recent overview of Thailand's *phi* So Phlainoi describes the uncanny phenomenon in the following way:

Phi Krasue has many regional names but usual belief portrays it as a woman that likes to possess other women. It likes to eat 'dirty' or 'filthy' things and is characterized by its appearance as a pulsating ball of light. *Phi Krasue* emits this light during its nightly search for food. Especially rural villagers believe in the existence of this *phi*. If they see a large and flashing green light they will immediately think it is *Phi Krasue*. Villagers say that it moves around as a head with liver, kidneys and some other entrails attached to it. Whenever someone gives birth *Phi Krasue* will smell the blood and rush to the place to eat of the woman giving birth or the newborn baby until its victim wastes away. Thus there is the custom to place thorny Jujube⁶ branches underneath the house, especially in the corners used to defecate, for *Phi Krasue* fears that its entrails will get caught up in the thorny branches. *Phi Krasue* is rather an old woman than a young maiden and besides raw and stinking food it also likes to eat human faeces. This is the reason why it is frequently encountered near public toilets.

SO PHLAINOI, 2009: 41–43, my translation

Despite the book's title, "Tamnan Phi Thai" / "Legends of Thailand's *Phi*", which indicates that the legends of Thailand's *phi* will be revealed, So's account neither mentions Phi Krasue's historical origin nor retells its origin myth. The same is true of *Krasue Sao/Ghost of Guts Eater* (dir. S. Naowarat, 1973),⁷ arguably the first Thai ghost film to feature Phi Krasue as a major protagonist, and all subsequent Thai films featuring this ghostly image made in the 20th century. Since ghost films have largely replaced orally transmitted ghostlore as the major sites for the reproduction of ghostly images, they represent essential contexts for the analysis of a *phi*'s contemporary meanings. Thereby, one has

6 Ziziphus jujuba

7 The film was considered missing in Thailand until I found a Swedish collector of horror films who discusses the film on his homepage. Katarzyna Ancuta helped me to contact this collector, who agreed to share a digital copy of his vhs original with us. The film is now also available for viewing at the Thai Film Archive (Ainslie and Ancuta, 2014: 155). For a detailed discussion of the film and the changing characteristics of Phi Krasue's ghostly image in Thailand's public sphere see Baumann, 2014.

to keep in mind that the ghostly images of mainstream Thai cinema are objects to a semi-colonial gaze that structures Thailand's public sphere. Peter A. Jackson has identified the cultural logic of this gaze as a 'regime of images'. In a Foucauldian sense, this regime determines a public image's appropriate visual content, while being simultaneously sensitive to and a subject of the contextuality of Thai meaning making (Jackson, 2004: 183–194).

Since uncertainty and ambivalence surrounding a particular *phi's* origin are general features of vernacular ghostlore, omitting identification of Phi Krasue's historical origin in these popular cultural contexts thus reproduces the cultural logic structuring vernacular ghostly classification in rural Thai folk epistemologies (Sangun Suwanlert, 1976: 69; Tambiah, 1970: 320). 'Mae Nak's⁸ ghostly image is a significant exception to this general rule of popular ghostly imagination. The focus on Mae Nak's legend in more than 20 films, which locates her historical origin in what is today Bangkok, has served various ideological projects, and has essentially turned her into Thailand's 'national ghost' (Fuhrmann, 2009; Knee, 2005; McDaniel, 2011; Songyote Waeohongsa, 1999, cited in Ingawanij, 2007: 181).

The ongoing reinvention of Mae Nak's legend found a temporary climax in Nonzee Nimibutr's hugely successful filmic adaptation *Nang Nak* (1999), which triggered not only a boom of heritage films in post-economic-crisis Thailand,⁹ but also resurrected the ghost film as a genre of post-modern Thai cinema (Ingawanij, 2006: 2007). Asked to explain *Nang Nak's* extraordinary success at the national box offices, Nonzee regards his treatment of Mae Nak's legend as factual reality as key, highlighting that he is the first director to take her origin myth as a real story instead of a fairy tale.

8 Mae Nak (or Nang Nak) represents the best-known example of a broad species of ghostly classification known in Thailand as *Phi Tai Hong*. *Phi Tai Hong* is most appropriately translated as 'ghosts of bad deaths' and most *phi* encountered in Thai ghost films belong to this category. Since 'bad deaths' are inherently contextual phenomena this is a rather inclusive category of ghostly classification that encompasses any non-natural death, like victims of traffic accidents and murders, suicides, and women dying during childbirth. The latter phenomenon constitutes a named sub-category known as *Phi Tai Tang Glom* to which Mae Nak obviously belongs (Ancuta, 2011: 134). This subspecies of *Phi Tai Hong* is especially feared for its malevolence and inclination to harm pregnant women and small children and blends into another category known vernacularly as *Phi Phrai* (Rajadhon, 1954: 166–168).

9 Economic crisis here refers to the Asian financial crisis of 1997, which after more than ten years of constant economic growth—known as the 'boom-years' (P.A. Jackson, 1999)—not only abruptly ended the dream of becoming rich for many Thais, but also caused a growing awareness of contingency that contributed to a social climate of vulnerability that characterizes post-financial-crisis Thai society (Viernes, 2013: 239).

Why wouldn't anyone treat this story like it was real? I spent two years researching everything I could about the legend of Nang Nak, because it's based on a true story.

NONZEE NIMIBUTR, cited in M. DAVIS, 2003: 64

The cinematic reinvention of well-known legends and figures from Thai folk history and vernacular mythology as the narrative force of post-crisis blockbusters like *Bang Rajan* (dir. Tanit Jitnukul, 2000) and *Suriyothai/The Legend of Suriyothai* (dir. Yukol Chatrichalerm, 2001) is arguably a lasting effect of *Nang Nak's* (1999) success. In their intertextuality (Goodnow, 2010: 16–17; Kristeva, 1986: 111) these heritage films reproduce not only core elements of *Nang Nak's* (1999) narrative structure, but also the assumed factuality of the portrayed historical events, which embed the plot in a nationalist frame of reference (Knee, 2008: 124; Sinnott, 2000: 426). Given the economic success and international recognition of these films it is not surprising that a film promising to combine the two main genres of post-crisis Thai cinema under the title *Tamnan Krasue* ('The Legend of Krasue')¹⁰ (dir. Bin Banluerit, 2002), was released in 2002, shortly after these blockbusters. However, it is intriguing that Phi Krasue's origin myth, which constitutes the film's narrative core, represents a contemporary invention without any predecessors in vernacular ghostlore or folk historiography.

Phi Krasue's Idiosyncratic Origin Myth

Tamnan Krasue/Demonic Beauty (dir. Bin Banluerit, 2002) portrays events in 13th century Northern Siam, an epoch largely outside popular Thai historiography. The plot arises from the first epigraphically backed revolt of Siamese nobles against their Khmer overlords in the year 1220 (Wyatt, 2001: 52–57). The film's initial protagonist is a young Khmer¹¹ princess who is forced to marry a

10 Instead of a literal translation *Tamnan Krasue* (2002) was released with the English subtitle "Demonic Beauty".

11 For the sake of clarity, I will use the category Khmer throughout this chapter although the film identifies the princess' socio-cultural origin as *Khom*. The usage and genealogy of the category *Khom* in Thailand's public sphere is a complex issue that deserves a separate study (Denes, 2006: 122; Vail, 2007: 115). Thai historian Charnvit Kasetsiri argues that the word *Khom* derives from the old Siamese category '*Khmer krom*', meaning lowland Khmer (Charnvit Kasetsiri, 2003). However, in Thailand's contemporary public sphere *Khom* is usually used as a cultural category to identify an old script used to write Pali and Thai that was banned from official contexts under the Sangha Act of 1902 (Vail, 2007:

Siamese nobleman. When her affair with a Siamese soldier is revealed both are sentenced to death. The princess manages to escape her execution with the help of an old Khmer ‘witch’ and her knowledge of ‘black magic’. Magically transformed into Phi Krasue, the princess enters the dead body of a Siamese village girl who looks like her twin (both are played by the same actress). Resurrecting the village girl’s body from death the princess assumes her identity and starts to live in her place among the Siamese villagers. After more and more villagers have uncanny encounters, the village monk discloses the truth about the village girl’s uncanny resurrection.¹² In a magical battle the Siamese monk defeats the Khmer witch and succeeds in exorcising Phi Krasue using ‘white magic’. Although it seems as if the *phi* is destroyed, the film reveals that it is the Khmer witch’s immortal soul that fused with the princess and took possession of the village girl’s dead body. After the village girl’s dead body and the princess’ soul are finally freed from the witch’s spirit, the film ends by showing how it enters the next village girl, turning her into Phi Krasue. The film closes with the final words “from this moment *Phi Krasue* was known in Thailand” (see figure 6.3).

Tamnan Krasue/Demonic Beauty (2002) is arguably the first attempt to construe in film a historically founded origin myth for a Thai *phi* other than Mae Nak. However, this cinematic (re-)invention of founding legends for

125). According to Justin McDaniel, present-day Khmer and *Khom* scripts follow the same graphic principles but are not identical (McDaniel, 2011: 238). *Khom* script is today used in a variety of ritual contexts all over Thailand. Although positively connoted in these contexts, *Khom* remains an ambivalent category, surrounded by a mystical aura of antiquity and spiritual potency (Denes, 2006: 51). The culture that founded Angkor tends to be associated with the category *Khom* in Thailand’s public sphere. This association allows for the drawing of a symbolic boundary separating the categories Khmer and *Khom* qualitatively in Thai nationalist rhetoric. In these ‘imperial imaginaries’ Siam is portrayed as having absorbed *Khom* culture after King Naresuan of Ayuthaya conquered Lovek in 1593. According to this logic Thailand represents the legitimate heir of Angkor’s cultural heritage (Charnvit Kasetsiri, 2003; Denes, 2006: 124–126). Here I am following colloquial Thai usage, which draws no clear conceptual boundary between the categories *Khom* and Khmer (Sujit Wongthet, 2010: 86). Khmer-speaking interlocutors in Buriram were rather indifferent towards the conceptual boundaries of both terms. Chutima Pragatwutisarn’s analysis of the novel “Amaritalai” indicates that this is also true in scholarly contexts, where the category *Khom* also stands as an equivalent for ‘ancient Khmer’. In her analysis Chutima uses both categories interchangeably, while simply dropping the prefix ‘ancient’ in the course of her paper. Starting with an analysis of *Khom* she ends up talking about Khmer (Chutima Pragatwutisarn, 2011).

12 The audience perception research I conducted with students of Buriram’s Technical College identifies the sudden resurrection of the dead village girl as the film’s scariest scene.

mythological figures after the Asian financial crisis mirrors the political (re-)invention of various origin myths for local culture heroes throughout the 20th century. These origin myths have become central elements of the cults that have developed around such local figures of folk history. While the meaning and significance of some of these figures remains rather localized, others have gained regional importance and constitute essential contexts for the imagination and expression of regional identities (Baird, 2014; Denes, 2006; Keyes, 2002). The modern Thai state is usually an important agent in the public promotion of these mythical narratives, which portray local culture heroes as crucial players in the ‘domestication’¹³ of peripheral populations and regions by bringing them under the centralized authority of the Siamese court (Denes, 2006; Keyes, 2002). However, counter narratives that challenge the official myth of peripheral populations’ smooth integration into the centralized Siamese state may also manifest in these cults (Baird, 2014).

Although principally possible, these dead or mythological figures from local histories are rarely classified as *phi*, and are usually regarded as *thep* or *thewada*, a term emphasizing their tutelary potential (Rajadhon, 1954; Tambiah, 1970: 59–61; Van Esterik, 1982). This classification is marked by the use of honorifics like *chao*, *chao pho/mae* or *phra/phy*a when addressing them (Baird, 2014; Denes, 2006; Irvine, 1984; Keyes, 2002). Even Nak is usually addressed without using the ‘ghostly’ pre-fix *phi*. Her common designation with the kinship-derived prefix *mae* (‘mother’) as ‘Mae Nak’ by her devotees indicates that a relationship of mutuality is possible with her (Johnson, 2015; McDaniel, 2011; Sahlins, 2011). Mae Nak and her urbanized cult thus exemplifies the domestication of a once malevolent *phi tai hong* through the worship of devotees, who accept a *phi*’s tutelage and enter a reciprocal patron-client relationship.¹⁴ In contrast to the national iconization of Mae Nak in *Nang Nak* (1999), the

13 I choose domestication here as it fittingly translates the logic structuring the Siamese elites’ dealing with peripheral populations that were regarded as ‘wild’ and ‘uncivilized’ and whose integration into the Siamese state entailed their ‘civilization’. However, in this process of national integration these ‘wild’ inhabitants of uncivilized spaces were treated rather animal-like, which turns domestication into the most appropriate metaphor which simultaneously establishes a conceptual link to the taming of culture heroes as localized guardian spirits under the aegis of the Thai state (Thongchai Winichakul, 2000; Turton, 1978, 2000).

14 In their attempt to outline a Central Thai folk taxonomy of ‘ghosts’ and ‘spirits’ Manasikarn and Amara state that the pre-fix *nang* signifies ‘bad’ whereas the pre-fix *mae* signifies ‘good’ female *phi* (Manasikarn Hengsuwan and Amara Prasithrathsint, 2014: 48). I cannot say much about the actual practices or devotees’ perceptions at the Mae Nak’s shrine in present-day Bangkok, but people in Buriram continue to see her as the paradigmatic *phi tai hong* and continue to use the pre-fix *nang* rather than *mae*.

ghostly image of Phi Krasue in *Tamnan Krasue* (2002) emphasizes the latter's free-floating character, its denial of reciprocity and thus the impossibility of its domestication.

When spirits are successfully bound, new types of entities become possible; they can even be transformed into gods. A bound spirit, put to community use, therefore has to be distinguished from a free, or unbound, spirit.

LEVY ET AL., 1996: 14

In its portrayal of Phi Krasue the film adapts various narrative elements of Jintawee Wiwat's¹⁵ novel "Amaritalai" (1976). Chutima describes "Amaritalai" in turn as an adaptation of Henry Rider Haggard's novel "She" and Bram Stoker's "Dracula", indicating the high degree of intertextuality marking pop-cultural (re-)production in 'modern' Thailand (Harrison and Jackson, 2009). Written in a time marked by war, the presence of foreign troops, a growing fear of Communism and 'ethnic' insurrections threatening the national borders from within, Chutima identifies "Amaritalai" as a national allegory manifesting the fears haunting Thai society in the 1960s and 70s. *Tamnan Krasue/Demonic Beauty* (2002) thus not only adapts the protagonist's monstrous femininity and her royal *Khom* origin but also the novel's general outlook (Chutima Pragatwutisarn, 2011; Creed, 1986). The novel, however, does not identify its monstrous and blood sucking female protagonist with *Khom* origin as Phi Krasue.

Thus the film breaks with the implicit rule of omitting a malevolent *phi's* historical origin by introducing various narrative elements that strengthen Phi Krasue's metonymic relation to ancient Khmer culture.¹⁶ This attempt to transform the metaphoric relation between the categories Khmer and magic into a metonymic chain—where Khmer stands for black magic and black magic represents 'Khmerness'—manifests the 'semiotic imperialism' of Thailand's 'regime of images' and its intent to craft a civilized image for the modern Thai 'self' with the category Khmer as its primitive 'Other' (Dissanayake Wimal, 1996; P.A. Jackson, 2004; Leach, 1976: 14). The central elements of *Tamnan Krasue's* (2002) semiotization of the Khmer-magic-link are the location of Phi Krasue's origin in 13th century Angkorian Khmer culture, while identifying a Khmer 'witch' as its initial creator and a Khmer princess as its primordial host.

15 Pseudonym of the Thai novelist Jintana Pinchaliew (Chutima Pragatwutisarn, 2011).

16 Edmund Leach defines metonymy as an intrinsic or prior relationship, implying that A and B belong to the same cultural context. Very roughly metonymy is where 'a part stands for a whole'. Correspondingly, a metaphoric relationship is marked by the absence of an intrinsic or prior relationship, A and B belong to different cultural contexts. While metonymy implies contiguity, metaphor depends upon asserted similarity (Leach, 1976: 14).

My analysis of anthropological, historical and popular cultural sources indicates however that the link between Phi Krasue and Khmer culture was non-existent in Thailand's public sphere prior to *Tamnan Krasue's* (2002) release. As such, the film's narration of Phi Krasue's origin myth represents an idiosyncratic construction. Its design manifests the premises of Thailand's 'imperial imaginary' (Denes, 2006).

In the following section I will explain the idiosyncrasy of the origin myth by analyzing its ghostly protagonist's symbolism and relating it to the *Zeitgeist* dominating Thai society during the film's production and release. The central questions guiding the analysis are why *Tamnan Krasue/Demonic Beauty* (2002) associates an iconic creature of Thai ghostlore with 13th century Khmer culture, why this origin myth is regarded as logically coherent and why the film's semiotics, which link Khmer culture metonymically to 'black magic', are accepted by Thai audiences, even if these audiences belong to the Khmer-speaking minority of Thailand's lower Northeast.

The Semantics of Phi Krasue's Vernacular Ghostly Image: The Uncanny 'Filth Ghost'

I argue that the plethora of Thai ghost films are produced for 'knowing spectators' (Ingawani, 2006: 155), who recognize ghostly images on the basis of an atheoretical knowledge that is inscribed in their bodies (Bourdieu, 1977: 89–90; Douglas, 1972: 29, 41; Mannheim, 1980: 73). This embodied knowledge of classifying ghosts is imparted through myths and bodily practice during primary socialization and tends to reproduce the symbolic configuration prevalent in the social context of its production (Bourdieu, 1977: 78).

The fear of dangerous spirits, the *phi*, acquired during early childhood often does not disappear when a person grows up. Somebody who has to walk home in the middle of the night without company may well become extremely apprehensive, and a sudden noise or a moving shadow may suffice to convince him that something dangerous lurks in the dark. It is not considered unmanly to be afraid in the dark.

TERWIEL, 2012: 76, italics in original

This is exactly what I encountered during my fieldwork in rural Buriram.¹⁷ After a long day observing funeral rituals in a rural village it was already long

17 Buriram is one of the three provinces in the lower Northeast that is home to the majority of Thailand's indigenous Khmer-speaking population. The local Khmer dialect

after midnight. I prepared to leave the house of the deceased and said goodbye to some of the older men still busy chatting and preparing things for the next day. Pho Phranit, one of my key informants, a former *Kamnan* and soldier in his late seventies, stopped me and said “Benny, we need to find you a motor-bike, you cannot walk home alone”. I said “okay” and we tried to find someone who would give me a ride. As most young men had already left the ritual site and it was getting late, I said to Pho Phranit that I would just walk home, as it was not far away. Pho Phranit then decided to join me. As soon as we had left the village itself behind us and walked through the night with nothing but rice fields to our left and right, he took my hand and asked me: “Benny, aren’t you afraid when walking through the night?” I replied, “No, why should I? This is a beautiful night!” Pho Phranit smiled and said “Good!” He squeezed my hand a little harder and told me about the locally specific *phi* that would lurk in the night, adding that solitary wanderers are their preferred prey. We walked hand in hand until we reached his house.

Ghostly classification like those I learned from Pho Phranit during our nightly walk through the rice fields constitute important aspects of sociocultural variability in an overall Thai ‘national habitus’ (Rehbein, 2013: 148–151). In everyday contexts a *phi*’s meaning and its uncanniness thus need no abstract verbal elaboration (M. Jackson, 1989: 132). The ‘conjunctive experience’ of understanding uncanniness¹⁸ without explication unites persons who share a common habitus (Mannheim, 1980: 255–256). The importance of the body for the identification of uncanniness is vernacularly manifested in the reference to or the demonstration of goosebumps (*khon luk*) which many interlocutors develop while talking about *phi* (see figure 6.1.). The importance of goosebumps for the practical meaning of *phi* is also highlighted by Cassaniti and Luhrmann, who state that ‘ghostly energy’ “is often described as a directly experienced feeling, one that is felt either on the skin or in some other sense” (Cassaniti and Luhrmann, 2011: 41).

differs from the Khmer spoken in neighboring Cambodia and is linguistically classified as ‘Northern Khmer’ (Denes, 2012; Smalley, 1994; Vail, 2006, 2007). The anthropological fieldwork and audience perception research in Buriram was part of the research project “The Ritual Reproduction of Khmerness in Thailand”, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

18 In contrast to the common exegesis of Freud’s classic study of ‘*das Unheimliche*’ (Freud, 1982) I treat uncanniness as a culturally contingent phenomenon based on contextualized meanings of ‘*heimlich*’. The importance of identifying what is meant by ‘*heimlich*’ in a given socio-cultural configuration, and the essential ambiguity of the German word ‘*unheimlich*’, are usually lost in psychoanalytic approaches that emphasize the return of the repressed or surpassed as the essential trigger of uncanny feelings (P.A. Jackson, 2008: 168; A.A. Johnson, 2013: 301).



FIGURE 6.1 *Interlocutor in rural Buriram raising his arm to show his goosebumps while talking about Phi Krasue's local manifestation*

Feeling a ghostly presence is thus a fundamental aspect of how *phi* manifest themselves, and one of the 'traces' they leave in 'reality' (Ladwig, 2011: 24; Manasikarn Hengsuwan and Amara Prasithrathsint, 2014: 36). This embodied recognition of uncanniness finds its expression in the common Thai idiom *na khon luk* which is used to describe the situation of sensing a *phi*. Usually translated as meaning 'scary', the idiom refers literally to the development of goosebumps and thus describes a bodily manifestation of the uncanny that is essential for vernacular conceptions of *phi*. Mary Douglas calls this embodied recognition a 'guts reaction' (Douglas, 1972: 29). In a culture that sees every aspect of the social pervaded by *phi* (Manasikarn Hengsuwan and Amara Prasithrathsint, 2014: 30) these conjunctive experiences and their embodied dimension thus critically frame the belonging to sociocultural groups.

One of the fundamental effects of the orchestration of habitus is the production of a commonsense world endowed with the *objectivity* secured by consensus on the meaning (*sens*) of practices and the world, in other words the harmonization of agents' experiences and the continuous reinforcement that each of them receives from the expression, individual or collective (in festivals, for example), improvised or programmed (commonplaces, sayings), of similar or identical experiences.

BOURDIEU, 1977: 80, italics in original

A shared habitus and the shared perceptions of the uncanny this entails thus identifies vernacular conceptions of *phi* as essential contexts for the

reproduction of ‘belongingness’—that is, a sense of belonging to a ‘we-group’ (Elwert, 2002: 40)—in rural Thailand. This sense of belonging then functions as a reference point for the contextualized reproduction of socio-cultural identities.¹⁹ The tacitness of this embodied form of knowing thus critically determines the ‘intertextuality’ of ghostly representations in popular media and vernacular ghostlore (Polanyi, 1966). As such, Phi Krasue’s local ghostly images become foils against which audiences implicitly ‘read’ its cinematic incarnations. An anthropological analysis of cinematic ghostly images therefore requires a dialectic that considers vernacular images and ‘real’ encounters with uncanny beings simultaneously.

German polymath Adolf Bastian is arguably the first Western visitor to Siam to leave a detailed description of how Phi Krasue was imagined in mid-19th century Bangkok. In his account of Siamese ghostlore at the time, Bastian makes various references to an uncanny being known as ‘Phi-Kasü’.²⁰ In his account, Bastian mentions Phi-Kasü’s inclination to enter a victim’s body and feast on its entrails; a witch’s nightly transformation into a flying ball of fire; a flying head and its detachment from the host’s body; the reunion of head and body at dawn; and finally, a woman’s transformation into Phi-Kasü if she eats tabooed foods (Bastian, 1867: 257, 76). All of these remain characteristics of the contemporary image of Phi Krasue (Baumann, 2014: 184). However, when Bastian writes “*Phi Xamop* designate the highest degree of voraciousness, since they even devour faeces” (Bastian, 1867: 280, my translation), it seems as if he attributes Phi Krasue’s most iconic feature in vernacular ghostlore—its association with filth and especially its inclination to feast on human faeces—to another *phi* (Hanks, 1963: 34; Terwiel, 2012: 53; Textor, 1973: 733).

During my anthropological fieldwork in rural Buriram the most commonly described uncanny encounter was with a being local interlocutors identified as ‘Thamop’. Simultaneously they added that Thamop and Phi Krasue are merely terminological variations for a single phenomenon.²¹ Although Cambodian

19 I conceive this sense of we-group membership not as exclusive but as contextual. Ego’s multiple we-group memberships are thus ideologically unproblematic, whereby these groups are usually located on different scales of sociocultural inclusion (Elwert, 2002: 40). However, these groups may overlap, intersect, and contradict. Sociocultural identity therefore represents a language game in Wittgenstein’s sense, a contextualized configuration that unites actors with similar configurations in contextually meaningful we-groups (Rehbein, 2013: 124–126).

20 Writing in German Bastian uses a kind of transliteration that adapts Thai sounds to German phonetics.

21 Phi Krasue and its local analogues seem to be very common phenomena in my fieldwork area. My empirical data indicate that nearly all villages in the district of my research host these *phi*.

anthropologist Ang Chouléan translates the Khmer word *thamop* as meaning ‘male witch’ (Ang, 1986: 46), Rajadhon lists it as a ‘Cambodian *phi*’ resembling Phi Krasue (Rajadhon, 1954: 163). While my empirical data show that Thamop seems to be known primarily in Khmer-speaking villages, a comparison of the semantics structuring its local ghostly images with anthropological accounts of Phi Krasue’s ghostly image in Central Thailand reveals that both are indeed terminological variations of a common theme (Hanks, 1963; Rajadhon, 1954; Stanlaw and Yoddumnern Bencha, 1985; Terwiel, 2012; Textor, 1973).²²

The local ghostly images of Thamop and Phi Krasue are semantically united by their shared symbolism and the cultural logic it manifests. Since villagers in Buriram usually live in multilingual environments and read ghostly images with their entire bodies (Bourdieu, 1977: 89–90), the embodied understanding of the cultural logic structuring a local ghostly image’s meaning appears more important for its classification than its designation or visual features (Cassaniti and Luhrmann, 2011; Douglas, 1972: 41). The practical identification of an uncanny being is thus simultaneously a cognitive and somatic process. Ghostly symbolism seems linked to deeper and more essential habitual structures that determine what is reasonable or unreasonable in a given context (Bourdieu, 1977: 77; Douglas, 1972; Rehbein, 2013: 148). In the case of Phi Krasue/Thamop, local actors explicate this cultural logic through social idioms of ‘filth’ (known as *sok prok* in Thai).²³

Since Thamop and Phi Krasue manifest a single logical principle—the breaking of taboos associated with malevolent forms of magic turns the culprit into an uncanny being that is condemned to subsist on filth—both designations can be used interchangeably. Simultaneously, socio-structural analysis indicates that the predominant ghostly designation mirrors the ethno-linguistic composition of a given locality.²⁴ However, and irrespective of the locally

22 Bastian’s (1867) and Rajadhon’s (1954) accounts of Central Thai ghostlore and their recognition of (*Phi*) Thamop indicate that ghostly imagination in Bangkok was unified and Thai-ized to a lesser degree than it is today. We may furthermore speculate that the absence of ghost films as a part of Thailand’s regime of images is one aspect that explains this greater diversity of ghostly imagination and classification until the mid-20th century (Jackson, 2004).

23 *Sok prok* is the most commonly encountered of various concepts that are used interchangeably to indicate impurity, filthiness or simply “matter out of place” (Douglas, 2002).

24 While Thai-Khorat speakers in Buriram use ‘Phi Krasue’ and Northern Khmer speakers ‘Thamop’ Lao Isan speakers use ‘Phi Pop’ to identify these witch-like *phi* associated with the practicing of malevolent magic.

dominant designation, filthiness structures the semantics of this species of ghostly imagination and represents the key cultural concept to unlock its vernacular symbolism.

The importance of filth for the conceptualization of Phi Krasue's vernacular ghostly images in mid-20th century Central Thailand was indeed so thorough and explicit that it prompted the anthropologist Robert Textor to translate Phi Krasue literally as the 'Filth Ghost' (Textor, 1973: 397). This importance of 'filth' is also evident in rural Buriram, where allusions to *sok prok* commonly feature in every conversation about this uncanny being. Villagers usually emphasize Phi Krasue's voracious appetite for 'filthy' substances that locally qualify as *sok prok* but also identify the entire being as a manifestation of filthiness.

Since Phi Krasue tends to avoid encounters with fellow humans, it usually feasts on faeces (*khi*), carrion and livestock, especially fowl and other small animals like frogs, which it snatches from rice fields or irrigation ditches. The fact that villagers eat most of these animals too indicates the relational character of 'filthiness' in local socio-symbolic configurations. However, chicken and frogs—which together with human faeces are usually mentioned as Phi Krasue's favourite foods—constitute an ambivalent class of edible animals on its own (Trankell, 1995: 99). Although widely consumed by humans, both chickens and frogs are considered filthy and eating them is regarded with ambivalence. The fact that Phi Krasue devours both species raw enhances the filthiness of their consumption. Eating chicken and frogs raw represents a definite break of 'taboo'.²⁵ Thus, it is their ambiguity and filthiness that identifies them as Phi Krasue's appropriate food.

Frogs, *kop*, are special. They are frequently gathered in the fields and appreciated as food, but believed to be the cause of many illnesses. For some people it is *bap*, de-merit, or a loss of possible merit, to consume frogs. Frog's meat is classified as *khong huen*, smelly and causing wounds.

25 Although raw *lap* or *koy*—a Thai-style 'salat' made out of minced meat—is a characteristic dish of the Northeast, chicken is never used for its preparation (Trenk, 2012: 120). Eating raw frog is simply a ridiculous idea as this is the prerogative of field-dwelling *phi*. Nevertheless, grilled chicken is a highly appreciated food in the Northeast and minced frog was frequently served at wedding banquets during my fieldwork. The ambivalence of chicken seems currently expressed in the differentiation between 'filthy' factory chicken and the 'cleaner' *kai ban* chicken that are raised by individual farmers and sold on local markets.

This is something frogs share with other kinds of ambiguous or ‘dirty’ animals such as chicken.

TRANKELL, 1995: 99²⁶

Although the filthiness of matter is a relational and contextual quality (Douglas, 1975: 50–51), the substances classifiable as *sok prok* in local socio-symbolic configurations are all marked by an intrinsic ambiguity.²⁷ This also appears to be true for human faeces (*khi*), although anthropologist Jane Hanks states that in the 1960s Central Thai villagers neither felt revulsion towards human faeces nor considered them to be filthy or contaminating (Hanks, 1963: 34). However, other ethnographic accounts of rural Thai village life from the same period suggest that human faeces were indeed seen as filthy. The devouring of human faeces is, for example, one of the main reasons the dog is regarded as a filthy and ‘tabooed’ animal in rural Northern and Northeastern Thai configurations (Tambiah, 1969: 433; Wijeyewardene Gehan, 1968: 86).

The reason for these seemingly contradictory evaluations of human faeces may be sought in environmental differences rather than the absence of ambivalent feelings towards human faeces in Central Thailand which Hank’s analysis seems to indicate. While the canals that traversed Hank’s field site in the 1960s simply carried human faeces away like “sins at the festival Loy Krataung” and thus out of sight (Hanks, 1963: 34), the villagers of the drier North and Northeast usually squatted in spaces right outside the village boundaries.²⁸ The Thai idioms “going to the rice field”, “going to the forest” and “going to the boat landing” thus not only mean to defecate (Chittawadi Chitrabongs, 2011: 179), but also identify the spaces where to defecate properly. All of these spaces lie right outside the spatial and semantic realm of *ban* that encompasses the fully domesticated socio-symbolic realms of house, home, and village. Their spatio-symbolic liminality between domesticated and undomesticated realms identifies them as proper defecatory spaces and therefore as Phi Krasue’s favourite dwelling places.

It is thus no coincidence that older interlocutors in rural Buriram, where the introduction of bathrooms is a relatively recent phenomenon, not only

26 On my way from Bangkok to Rayong a taxi driver once attributed the blindness of his youngest son to his immense accumulation of de-merit, resulting from killing too many frogs as fishing bait.

27 In Douglas’ theory, ambiguity and filthiness are two sides of the same coin (Douglas, 2002).

28 Although it cannot be elaborated here I would argue that the *khlongs* of central Thailand were also regarded as highly liminal spaces marking the boundaries of fully domesticated space or *ban*.

well remember how they used to grab a hoe before they went to the rice field to defecate, but also recount their uncanny encounters with Phi Krasue while squatting there. With the hoe they would dig a hole before squatting and thus not only remove their faeces from sight, but also prevent Phi Krasue from being attracted by the odour. Despite the sanitary reforms that introduced toilets to the countryside—first in the form of outhouses and later as bathrooms within the house—toilets remain the most common places where Phi Krasue attacks humans and causes human fatalities, while rice fields and the edge of forests are the usual locations where the floating lights are encountered.

The introduction of toilets throughout the country, which domesticated human defecation, is a lasting effect of King Chulalongkorn's sanitary reforms, which were an essential aspect of Siam's self-civilizing project that started in the late 19th century. With the overall aim of turning Siam into a member of the 'Victorian ecumene' (Peleggi, 2002: 15), King Chulalongkorn's sanitary reforms targeted all kinds of public defecation (Chittawadi Chitrabongs, 2011). By relegating defecation to a newly established space marked by its *'Heimlichkeit'*²⁹—in the German sense of 'hidden'—King Chulalongkorn banned human faeces from public sight and thereby framed the private realm of Thai modernity.³⁰ With the help of various state agencies—above all public schools and their curricula that directly targeted pupils' bodies—the modern private/public dichotomy informing this attempt to create an image of Bangkok pleasing to the gaze of Western visitors slowly spread to the

29 I am using the German word *'Heimlichkeit'* here as it is essential for Sigmund Freud's discussion of the uncanny (*'das Unheimliche'*) (Freud, 1982). In Freud's theory the uncanny draws its frightening potential from the semantic ambivalence of the word *'Heimlichkeit'* in German. In German cultural history the word *'Heimlichkeit'* and its meanings are closely connected to the privatization of defecation (Duerr, 2002; Elias, 1990; Laporte, 1993). I argue that this connection is essential to understand the ambivalence of *'heimlich'* and thus *'das Unheimliche'* in Freud. The usual English translation of Freud's concept as 'the uncanny' is not able to transport its implicit link to human defecation.

30 I am not proposing that pre-modern or local symbolic configurations were indifferent to practices of human defecation. An analysis of the traditional Thai house and its spatial symbolism shows, on the contrary, that the areas used to defecate and to wash were located on the physically and symbolically lowest and 'filthiest' levels and thus diametrically opposed to highest and purest levels of the building (Tambiah, 1969: 430; Turton, 1978: 120–121). These opposed levels of the house were furthermore associated with distinctive classes of *phi* (Rhum, 1994: 44). However, these opposition and the proper place to defecate were not identified on the basis of the modern private/public dichotomy (Laporte, 1993: 116).



FIGURE 6.2 Krasue Sao's (dir. S. Naowarat, 1973) iconic ghostly image of Phi Krasue with the drawn-out intestines

countryside (Chittawadi Chitrabongs, 2011: 190). However, King Chulalongkorn's concern was not with his subjects' habits of personal hygiene (Chittawadi Chitrabongs, 2011: 178), but rather with the aim of turning Siam into a member of the 'Victorian ecumene'. His sanitary reforms thus fostered the abjection of human faeces, which then became essential for establishing the official image of the modern Siamese subject and its bounded 'self' (Laporte, 1993: 31). The boundedness of the modern Thai 'self', however, resonates with aspects of local epistemology, where the impermeability of the (male) body is of central importance (Irvine, 1982; Turton 1991) and social space is conceptualized along a human body analogy that emphasizes an inside/outside dichotomy (Formoso, 1990; Rhum, 1994; Tambiah, 1969; Turton, 1978).

Although generally known, the striking visual features characterizing Phi Krasue's cinematic ghostly images are under-emphasized in local contexts. Villagers thus usually outline a rather unspectacular ghostly image, stressing Phi Krasue's nightly manifestation as a flickering light that hovers over the rice fields in close proximity to the village. Villagers compare this light to the glow of fireflies but add that it is much larger, so both lights cannot be confused. If interlocutors are asked to describe the visual features of Phi Krasue in any greater detail then they begin talking about a floating head with drawn-out intestines and, significantly, it is at this moment that explicit references to cinematic ghostly images are usually made. While early anthropological sources mention the detachment of the head in Phi Krasue and so identify it as an established aspect of its vernacular ghostly image (Bastian, 1867: 276; Terwiel, 2012: 53), the drawn-out intestines seem to appear for the first time in the middle of the 20th century (Rajadhon, 1954: 158), and are an essential aspect of Phi Krasue's ghostly image in the 1973 film *Krasue Sao/Ghost of Guts Eater* (dir. S. Naowarat) (see figure 6.2). The film thus plays a central role for Phi Krasue's contemporary ghostly image, as it was the film's artwork and especially illustrator Thawi Witsanukon's imagination that added the drawn-out intestines as an idiosyncratic feature to Phi Krasue's ghostly repertoire.



FIGURE 6.3 Tamnan Krasue's (dir. Bin Banluerit, 2002) final scene, explaining how the formerly unknown 'phi with the drawn-out intestines' became known as Phi Krasue

The drawn-out intestines have, however, become iconic of Phi Krasue's contemporary cinematic ghostly image. The identity of *Tamnan Krasue's* (dir. Bin Banluerit, 2002) uncanny protagonist as Phi Krasue is thus clear, although this is first made explicit in the film's final scene (see figure 6.3). Throughout the film it is referred to as "the *phi* with the drawn-out intestines" (*Phi Lak Sai*), which is itself an idiosyncratic filmic construction. The appropriation of the drawn-out intestines as a seemingly recent feature of pop-cultural imagination in local discourse is thus indicative of the intertextuality that links both vernacular and cinematic contexts of ghostly imagination and blurs their boundaries. Authenticity of ghostly features is thus a negligible factor in the analysis of ghostly images of Phi Krasue as any feature can be appropriated as long as it remains meaningful under the logical premises of *sok prok* (Harrison and Jackson, 2009).

As this discussion indicates, the logic of *sok prok* structures Phi Krasue's semantics and is the main classifier used to comprehend its uncanniness in vernacular ghostlore. *Sok prok* is therefore the cultural principle essential to unlocking and revealing the symbolism of this species of ghostly imagination. *Sok prok* is largely a contextual state that depends on the transgression of symbolic boundaries and thus manifests localized ideas of ambiguity. As such, Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection proves useful to theoretical reflection on the broader meaning of the concept, since various substances, states or even humans may qualify as *sok prok* as soon as they become 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 2002; Kristeva, 1982).

Abjection: Translating the Cultural Logic Structuring Phi Krasue's Symbolism

Here, I argue that Phi Krasue's contextualized ghostly images ontologically manifest the ambiguity of abjection as an abstract principle structuring the drawing of symbolic boundaries, and thus processes of 'self' formation on various levels of social organization in Thailand. With the concept of abjection, Julia Kristeva elaborates Douglas' theory of defilement, which highlights the importance of anomalies and ambiguities for any classification system, since notions of 'filth' or 'matter out of place' make conceptual boundaries (re)cognizable (Douglas, 1972: 2002). In Douglas' model the human body represents the paradigmatic figure of social thought as it "can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious" (Douglas, 2002: 142). Social groups, therefore, tend to draw on the human body as a model for their self-image. Douglas sees this as a universal analogy, in which bodily functions and secretions become central metaphors to imagine social dynamics by marking the boundaries of the social units that are identifies as we-selves.³¹

Kristeva reproduces Douglas' paradigm of contextualized pollution in social reproduction in her structural-psychological theory of subjective identity formation. The human body extricating itself from bodily matter thus becomes the exemplary model for the imaginations of subjective 'selves' and their genesis (Kristeva, 1982). Kristeva's human body/'self' analogy turns all bodily margins into symbolically potent spaces, that are defined by the abject. The abject dwells in these spaces after being banished from the body that is imagined as 'self' (Douglas, 2002: 141–142; Kristeva, 1982: 65–66). Abjection thus becomes the logical prerequisite for the imagination of social bodies, their boundaries and, finally, selves, as the abject constitutes those tabooed and rejected entities that despite their exclusion remain essential for the identity of the body that expels them.

It describes the process of throwing away or casting aside a part of the self through which the self comes into being. It is by ridding oneself of the abject—a something that fails to be entirely named or captured—that one becomes a self in the first place. The abject is therefore not an

31 Various Southeast Asian societies elaborate this human body analogy in the way they imagine their houses as being simultaneously symbolic structures, social units, and social actors. As politico-religious entities houses are prime agents of socialization whose meaning is read with the body (Baumann, 2010; Bourdieu, 1977: 89–90; Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995; Tambiah, 1969; Turton, 1978; Waterson, 1991: 2).

object; rather, it is a something that simultaneously creates the borders of the self as an object and makes possible the self as a subject. Identity begins, in other words, with abjection.

BUBANDT AND OTTO, 2010: 6

Through their constant challenge from the margin, the impossibility of their assimilation and their essential ambiguity, the abject defines the subject by threatening it with meaninglessness. This collapse of meaning lurks in the given incompleteness of all abjection processes. Despite its primal repression, the abject always remains an aspect of the subject that expels it, threatening identity by questioning the possibility of ‘in-dividuality’ as such (Kristeva, 1982: 12). This ambiguity threatens the logical premises of the subject’s meaningful world, but also emphasizes its ‘self’ by locating it in an imagined realm of unambiguous meaning. It is the ambiguous position between ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ that turns the abject into a paradigmatically uncanny ‘non-thing’ or ‘non-selve’ (Kristeva, 1982: 1–2).

Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. [...] Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.

KRISTEVA, 1982: 2, 4

Since abjection is above all ambiguity, the abject is not only generative for the imagination of social bodies and their ‘selves’, but its manifestations become cultural devices to imagine the ambivalences that haunt any identity construction that is predicted on a self/other dichotomy. As a modernist discipline psychoanalysis takes this dichotomy and the presumed in-dividuality of the ‘self’ as the essence and universal feature of subjective identity formation (Kristeva, 1982: 12; Lacan, 2006). Despite this assumed universality, vernacular cultures usually lack a verbal category to explicate abjection as an abstract but generative principle of psycho-social reproduction. Douglas shows that vernacular notions of ‘taboo’ and ‘witchcraft’ fulfil this symbolic task in many non-modern cultures (Douglas, 1970, 1972, 2002). Since both notions are rather unelaborated in the local configurations of Buriram and seem to be so in most vernacular contexts throughout Thailand,³² I propose that Phi Krasue’s ghostly images

32 Northern Thai configurations seem to be an important exception to this general rule of Thai folk epistemology. The symbolic significance of concepts that are usually translated as ‘taboo’ (*khyt, ubat*) (R. Davis, 1974; Wijeyewardene Gehan, 1977) and ‘witch’ (*phi ka*)

fulfil this symbolic function in various contexts. Phi Krasue thus functions as a manifestation of abstract principles that make the ambiguities haunting Thai social bodies and their boundaries cognizable, while social idioms of 'filth' are used to explicate them.³³ These ambiguities arise from the contextual recognition of 'others' within the 'self' as 'non-selves' that is constitutive for Thai subjective identity formation on all levels of social organization (Kristeva, 1991: 183; Tanabe Shigeharu, 2002: 48; Thomson, 2008: 99). This symbolic importance of non-selves for social identity formation persisted despite—or was even enforced by—the modern idea of the bounded and in-dividual 'Thai self', which is based on the modern dichotomy of 'self' and 'other' as the socio-symbolic fundament of Thailand's self-civilizing 'project modernity'.

As abjected non-selves, manifestations of Phi Krasue continuously inhabit ambiguous symbolic spaces located between more clearly defined classificatory realms. Phi Krasue is thus neither dead, deathless nor alive, it is usually encountered on the outskirts of human settlements or in paradigmatically ambiguous spaces (like toilets, rice fields, crossroads and irrigation ditches), its inside is turned out, it enters a victim in a reversed fashion through an excreting orifice, it feasts on faeces, while its hosts are women—usually unmarried or widowed—who live on the fringes of human settlements. Given its overall ambiguity it is thus no coincidence that Phi Krasue is so closely associated with the bodily-derived substances theoretically qualifying as 'the abject' and vernacularly as *sok prok*.

Although all bodily fluids that transgress the human body's borders from inside to outside constitute 'filth' in Douglas' theory (Douglas, 2002: 150), Kristeva identifies excrements and menstrual blood as the two bodily abjections that are essential for subjective identity formation. Both are symbolic of the 'horror within'; those features that lie beneath the body's beautiful surface and beyond the social image—constitutive elements of the 'self' that are usually excluded from sight. Their public recognition as aspects of the 'self' threatens to blur the essential symbolic boundary separating inside from outside and private from public in modern socio-symbolic configurations (Kristeva, 1982: 53–54).³⁴ Phi

(Anan Ganjanapan, 1984) is generally accepted in Northern Thai ethnography. However, these northern Thai notions of 'taboo' and 'witch' are unknown in Buriram.

33 Gananath Obeyesekere reaches a similar conclusion in his analysis of the *pretas* and their symbolism in Sinhalese society (Gananath Obeyesekere, 1981: 116–117).

34 Since Dominique Laporte (1993) identifies the privatization of 'shit' as the essential feature of Western modernity, Kristeva's theory seems especially apt for an analysis of modern societies with their core value of the bounded individual (Dumont, 1991). However, Hans Peter Duerr's encyclopedic study of the private/public dichotomy offers an entire collection of historic and ethnographic examples that indicate the universality of abjecting human 'shit' (Duerr, 2002).

Krasue's ghostly images thus epitomize ambiguities lying beneath the social body's 'beautiful' (sur)face, things which modern Thai society seeks to keep in the '*Heimlichkeit*' of the private realm, so they remain invisible to the public gaze and don't threaten to contradict Thailand's civilized self-image (E. Cohen, 2012: 227; P.A. Jackson, 2004: 186–193).

The Filthiness of *Saiyasat*

Although widely practiced and highly sought after for various reasons by all kinds of social actors in Thailand (Ananda, 2005; Baker and Phongpaichit Pasuk, 2008, 2013; E. Cohen, 2012; Wasana Nanuam, 2008), one rarely encounters interlocutors who admit to practicing, relying upon, or being the customer of a *saiyasat*³⁵ practitioner. The practice of malevolent forms of magic (*saiyasat*) is a particularly significant hidden social element embodied by the abject Phi Krasue, one that is intimately linked to its filth-as-menstrual-blood symbolism. The spiritual potency which folk epistemology attributes to menstrual impurity identifies certain forms of *saiyasat* as dangers issuing from within the social body (Douglas, 1975: 63; Kristeva, 1982: 71).³⁶

While emphasizing its voracious appetite for filth, villagers simultaneously stress that a person becomes a Phi Krasue when a taboo associated with *saiyasat* is broken. The potency of malevolent *saiyasat* results commonly from the mixing of abjected bodily substances, like menstrual blood, excrements and corpse remnants, with sacred knowledge (I.C. Johnson, 1999: 303; Terwiel, 2012: 90). The ambiguous and essentially *sok prok* results are usually made to transgress the victim's bodily borders or hidden in close proximity, which makes the victim's 'self' vulnerable to various external forces (Golomb, 1985: 243).

In terms of ritual materials, creating negative power involves polluted substances. Rusty nails, bodily fluids, human and animal excrement and

35 *Saiyasat* is a Thai cultural concept that tends to be rather poorly subsumed under the Euro-American categories of magic, witchcraft and sorcery (McDaniel, 2011: 111; White, 2005: 71). Simultaneously, *saiyasat* is just one of various cultural concepts that can be used—largely interchangeably—to classify ritual practices as 'magical', 'esoteric' or 'occult'. Just as their Western counterparts, Thai concepts relating to 'magic' are all relational. I chose *saiyasat* here only because it was the most commonly encountered verbal category during my fieldwork.

36 In Buriram 'love magic' (*sane ya faed*) is the most frequently mentioned form of *saiyasat* with the potential to cause a transformation into Phi Krasue (Golomb, 1985: 246).

fluid taken from a human corpse, particularly if the death was sudden or caused by an accident were cited as ingredients.

CONWAY, 2014: 77

The mixing of things that are normally held apart identifies these ritual practices as *sok prok*, while it simultaneously represents the source of their potency (I.C. Johnson, 1999: 302–303; Kapferer, 2002: 22). The malevolence of these rituals remains, however, relational, and their general evaluation ambivalent. Practitioners, clients, and victims of *saiyasat* may thus evaluate a single ritual differently; in the case of love magic a practitioner may stress the beneficial dimension of a ritual for the client, whilst the victim feels attacked. Socially speaking, practitioners and their clients are usually considered guilty of violating the personal freedom of the victim, thereby making their practices morally condemnable (Golomb, 1985: 96). These two ‘filthy’ practices—the devouring of *sok prok* substances and the violation of taboos associated with the ritual handling of polluted materials—are usually emphasized as Phi Krasue’s most distinguishing characteristics. Both are highlighted in vernacular contexts before allusions to the visual features of its ghostly images or their explicit content are made.

Phi Krasue’s filth-as-menstrual-blood symbolism is further reinforced by the ghostly images’ detachable head and the oozing out of bloody entrails. As a grotesque metaphor of menstruation the drawn-out intestines metonymically linked to the impurity of menstruating women and their spiritual potency that threatens male supremacy in folk epistemologies (I.C. Johnson, 1999: 302; Terwiel, 2012: 113; Wijeyewardene Gehan, 1977: 24). Phi Krasue’s cinematic ghostly images and the encounters with the uncanny being in ‘real life’ are thus not only public reminders that powerful ritual practices are frequently performed in the ‘*Heimlichkeit*’ of private realms, beneath the official image of Thailand’s state-sponsored and rationalized Theravada Buddhism, but also of the spiritual potency that folk epistemologies attribute to women and magic.

The motif of the detachable head simultaneously expresses women’s penetrability by verifying the weakness of the female body and its boundaries. It is this permeability that renders a body ‘soft’ in folk epistemology, so characterizing it as female in the first place (Irvine, 1982: 111; Tanabe Shigeharu, 2002: 190). This fluctuation between potency and weakness adds to Phi Krasue’s overall ambiguity while it is dialectically related to its female gender and thereby enforcing its uncanniness as a manifestation of the ‘monstrous feminine’ (Creed, 1986). It also explains why I encountered a diverse range of attitudes towards this uncanny being ranging from pity and sympathy to dread and hostility.



FIGURE 6.4 *Some of Phi Krasue's idiosyncratic ghostly features in Tamnan Krasue (dir. Bin Banluerit, 2002)*

Phi Krasue has to be read as a folk epistemological object, an ambiguous boundary signifier, emphasizing the cultural value of a bounded 'self' in various contexts of signification. As a manifestation of abjection's spiritual potency that threatens social bodies from within as well as from without, Phi Krasue is an ideal and logically coherent metaphor to conceptualize Khmer culture's relation to the boundedness of the modern Thai 'geo-body' and the national imagination of its civilized 'self' (Thongchai Winichakul, 1994).

Tamnan Krasue: Introducing the Khmer Witch as the 'Horror Within'

Tamnan Krasue's (dir. Bin Banluerit, 2002) release with the English subtitle "Demonic Beauty" indicates the international audience also targeted by the film. Looking towards foreign markets was not unusual during the post Asian financial crisis boom of Thai cinema. This awareness of a foreign gaze led to a short-lived trend in Thai film in which directors attempted to reduce the narrative ambiguity of Thai films in order to make their plots more easily digestible by Western audiences (Knee, 2008: 124, 33). This outward oriented trend to reduce ambiguity may explain some of the film's idiosyncrasies, like the portrayal of the Khmer 'witch' that reproduces Western cinematic images of 'the witch' and Phi Krasue's elongated fangs that give her a vampire-like appearance (Baumann, 2014) (see figure 6.4).



FIGURE 6.5 Tamnan Krasue (*dir. Bin Banluerit, 2002*) depicts the Khmer princess as an Apsara

However, most of the film's narrative idiosyncrasies are inward oriented and continue to privilege the knowing Thai spectator. Although they may also function to reduce ambiguities—those threatening the conceptual borders of the national identities 'Thai' and 'Khmer'—the deciphering of this social message still presupposes viewers with a tacit understanding of abjection as the abstract principle manifested by Phi Krasue.

Certainly the most important idiosyncrasy—relying on abjection while simultaneously reinforcing it—is the film's identification of Angkorian Khmer culture as the source from whence Phi Krasue came. Consequently, various narrative elements continue to emphasize and reiterate Phi Krasue's Khmer origin throughout the film. Most significant amongst these are the depiction of the Khmer princess as an 'Apsara',³⁷ the image of the witch who speaks Khmer only,³⁸ Khmer magic as the reason for the princess' ghostly transformation,

37 Trudy Jacobsen describes an 'Apsara' (see figure 6.5) as "a category of female divinity able to change shape at will and move between the celestial and mundane worlds, in Cambodian art and architecture" (Jacobsen, 2008: 45). Apsaras feature prominently in the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat and are an important character in Khmer court dances which have had a large influence on classical dance forms in Thailand. Apsaras are easily recognizable on the basis of their elaborated headdresses and have therefore become icons of Khmer culture in the popular Thai imagination (Denes, 2006: 343–346; Kukrit Pramot, 2001: 18–20, 51–60).

38 Local interlocutors (themselves Khmer-speakers) identified the Khmer witch's language as Northern/Thai Khmer and not Cambodian Khmer.

and the *unalom*³⁹ appearing on the hosts' forehead (see figure 6.4). All of these explicit links to contemporary emblems of Khmer culture in Thailand's public sphere are completely alien to older cinematic depictions of Phi Krasue. *Tamnan Krasue/Demonic Beauty* (2002) is thus the first film to explicitly link Phi Krasue's cinematic ghostly image to Khmer magic, thus portraying it as an emblem of Angkorian Khmer culture. As previous studies of Thai ghostlore make no mention of this link before the film's release, the question I would like to discuss here is why local interlocutors in Buriram—who are often Khmer-speakers themselves—accept this idiosyncrasy, regard it as logically coherent, incorporate it into their local language games and thus reproduce it?

The most commonly encountered explanation attributes the authenticity of the Khmer origin myth to the simple fact that 'the Khmer'⁴⁰ are known for practicing 'black magic' (Denes, 2006: 56; Golomb, 1985: 209). Since Phi Krasue is an unintended result of these ritual practices, it is just logical to locate its origin in Khmer culture. It is thus not the existence of Thamop and its association with the category Khmer in Buriram's local socio-cultural configuration that makes *Tamnan Krasue's* (2002) origin myth plausible for local interlocutors, but the simple fact that it reproduces the abstract logic this *phi* embodies vernacularly: Phi Krasue is doomed to leave its body and eat filth as a punishment for practicing malevolent forms of magic and breaking an associated 'taboo'.

Buriram Khmer-speakers' reinforcement of the socio-cultural stereotypes associating the category Khmer with magical skills and their particular

39 "The *unalom* is a conically shaped figure often placed above or around a design in order to draw attention to its importance" (Rajadhon, 1964: 185; Terwiel, 2012: 83). An *unalom* usually accompanies magical drawings (*yant*) and spells (*khatha*) in Pali which are frequently written in *Khom* script (Rajadhon, 1964: 178). The cabalistic writing in *Khom* is said to enhance their potency. Most Thais are unaware of the fact that *Khom* is simply a script used to write Pali and Thai (Terwiel, 2012: 55–56, 77–78).

40 Regarding the category 'Khmer' in contemporary Thailand, one has to keep in mind that it is a relational expression (Elwert, 1994: 12) that can be used, amongst other things, to refer to the native Northern Khmer speakers of Thailand, the founders of Angkor, the people of Cambodia, as well the nation state itself. Furthermore, Khmer-speakers in Buriram use the category to identify the population of the neighboring province of Surin, which is home to the majority of Thailand's Northern Khmer speakers. Elwert (1994) uses the term 'relational expression' (*relationale Ausdrücke*) to capture the contextuality of cultural concepts that change their meaning in accordance to the relation between speaker and listener. The relationality of the category 'Khmer' is thus further enhanced by its context-bound polysemy and its dialectical relationship to the category '*Khom*'. Whether a local Khmer speaker will thus use Khmer or identify as 'Khmer' depends on the social context, or as the Thai idiom *kalathesa* indicates, the right space and time (Chalermchai Wongrak, 2014: 123).



FIGURE 6.6A,B *Enforcement of the Khmer-Magic-link in the Thai film P (dir. Paul Spurrier, 2005) with original English subtitles*

inclination to practice 'black magic' arts is, however, not really a negative self-stereotype. The relationality of the category 'Khmer' in local language games allows Thailand's Khmer-speakers to always identify another social group as being contextually 'more' Khmer and therefore not only as the true bearers of Khmer (black) magical knowledge but also as subjects of their own subjective Thai 'selves'.

The contextual significance of this relationality in contemporary language games is evident in the multiple references made to the metaphoric Khmer-magic link in Thai popular culture. Although Jintawee's novel indicates that the link was an established aspect of Bangkok-centric discourses, it grew in visibility as a socio-cultural stereotype during Thailand's boom-years and became an omnipresent aspect of socio-cultural classification after the Asian financial crisis. Since the 1990s the metaphoric link between the categories Khmer

and magic can be found in all kinds of popular media, from English and Thai language newspapers to internet blogs, movies, television soap operas and even popular religious literature. However, since the Asian financial crisis the quality of this link seems to have changed towards a metonymic chain rather than metaphoric association. In contemporary popular cultural discourses both categories seem to reinforce each other up to a point, where they can be used interchangeably and where the prefix 'Khmer' merely qualifies magical practices as aggressive and thus immoral (Baker and Phongpaichit Pasuk, 2008: 10; McDaniel, 2011: 35).

Douglas' structural-functionalist witchcraft-paradigm explains the attribution of magical knowledge to particular out-groups with the reproduction of social boundaries and in-group solidarity in times of crisis (Douglas, 1970) (see figure 6.6 A,B). *Tamnan Krasue's* (2002) central metaphor thus rests on the premise of witchcraft attack, as Douglas outlines it: the body of the victim symbolizes the betrayed community whose internal strength is sucked out or poisoned by someone who can enter into close contact (Douglas, 1970: xxvii). In the film the betrayed community takes the form of an innocent Siamese village girl's body, which has become possessed by the witch-like *phi* through Khmer magic. The village girl thus not only represents the Thai geo-body but—through the fact that she and the princess look identical—also manifests the similarity of Thai and Khmer culture in general.

Among the neighbouring countries of Southeast Asia, none seems more similar to Thailand than Cambodia ... Both nations share similar customs, traditions, beliefs, and ways of life. This is especially true of royal customs, language, writing systems, vocabulary, literature, and the dramatic arts.

CHARNVIT KASETSIRI, 2003

This similarity that is usually concealed in the public sphere allows the Khmer witch to enter into close proximity and even to transgress the social body's boundaries by living within a Siamese girl and among Siamese villagers without being recognized. The Khmer witch's invisibility in *Tamnan Krasue* (2002) thus parallels the official invisibility of Thailand's indigenous Khmer-speaking population (Vail, 2007).

By (re-)imagining the Siamese nation's 'moment of birth' and the violence of 'primal repression' (Kristeva, 1982: 12) that was necessary to draw the symbolic boundary separating the socio-cultures of 'Khmer' and 'Thai', *Tamnan Krasue/Demonic Beauty* (2002) acknowledges the foundational place of Khmer culture for Thailand's conceptual order and modern sense of 'self'. Simultaneously,

by linking Phi Krasue to the socio-cultural category Khmer, the film identifies 'Khmer'—with its potential to blur the boundaries between inside and outside from its ambiguous place of banishment (Kapferer, 2002: 15)—as the abject which haunts the modern 'Thai-self'. The film's final scene thus acknowledges Khmer culture's continuing presence within the body politic, which in turn is proven by any publicly recognized encounter with Phi Krasue in 'real life' (see figure 6.3).

The embodied knowledge of Phi Krasue's symbolism of abjection as an aspect of a national Thai habitus thus allows audiences to identify Khmer culture not only as the docile 'other within' (Thongchai Winichakul, 2000: 48–50) but as an abject and thus symbolic of the 'horror within', continuously haunting the social body of 'Thainess' with its ambiguity and loss of identity (Denes, 2006: 148–149; Kristeva, 1982: 53; Lewis, 2003: 104).

The reasons for the special horror of the abject within are twofold. One is that the abject within is less viewable and so less easy to cope with. The other is the threatening possibility that one's sense of identity will be lost.

GOODNOW, 2010: 34

While Douglas' witchcraft-paradigm and Kristeva's theory of abjection help to explain why 'Khmer' constitutes "the most commonly mentioned source of mysterious magical power among Buddhist Thais" (Golomb, 1985: 209) and not an alternative socio-cultural category like Lao, the question remains why Phi Krasue's idiosyncratic origin myth appeared for the first time after the Asian financial crisis?

Demonization: Redrawing Socio-Cultural Boundaries through Inversion in Times of Crisis

Beyond its economic impacts the Asian financial crisis had even more profound ideological dimensions. Submission to IMF conditions required the Thai government to further open its economy to foreign capital. Fueled by feelings of vulnerability, an interest in cultivating a strong 'Thai self' grew as an attempt to withstand the impact of impeding foreign domination (Connors, 2005: 535). Localist politics moved to the mainstream and the economic crisis "provoked a revival of interest in local culture as a reaction against everything modern and global" (Amporn Jirattikorn, 2003: 298). As a consequence, state-led nationalist movements seeking to revitalize local cultural heritage and localism blossomed (Denes, 2006, 2012; Hewison, 1999, 2000). A central feature of these

localist trends was a conception of the crisis as an externally rooted threat to ‘Thainess’ which evoked in response a popular sense of nostalgia and longing for a golden age of antiquity (Amporn Jirattikorn, 2003: 299–301). This longing for a ‘paradise lost’ explains the national success of heritage films like *Bang Rajan* (dir. Tanit Jitnukul, 2000) and *Suriyothai/The Legend of Suriyothai* (dir. Yukol Chatrichalerm, 2001), which both revolve around Siamese struggles to ward off Burmese troops. Heritage films thus became hyper-real arenas to reconstruct and defend the boundaries of ‘Thainess’ in relation to an imagined world of powerful external others of which ‘the Burmese’ became the most potent (Amporn Jirattikorn, 2003: 299; Hamilton, 2002: 153).

While Burma was a true historical entity, it is at the same time an allegory of colonial power in modern Thai historiography. The entire narrative of Thai wars against Burma is allegorical. A huge proportion of historical enterprise in Thailand is an investment in this historiographic allegory.

THONGCHAI WINICHAKUL, 2011: 38

Despite this emphasis of external danger, David Streckfuss (2012) observes that the conceived threat to the boundaries of ‘Thainess’ was also internally rooted and linked to the growing awareness of the geo-body’s multi-ethnic composition as an unintended outcome of state-led localism. This revitalization of local cultural heritage furthermore facilitated a growing visibility of ‘Khmerness’ at the heart of Thailand’s own ‘self’ (Denes, 2006: 142; 2012). This public recognition of the non-self in the form of suppressed Khmer culture challenged the modern ideal of the in-dividual national ‘self’, and further strengthened the abject character of the socio-cultural category Khmer. In the public sphere ‘Khmerness’ became symbolic of the ‘horror within’, thereby drawing ‘Thainess’ to a place where the collapse of meaning is a constant danger. The surfacing of a contested, national Khmer/*Khom* past after the economic crisis contributes essentially to the ongoing ‘crisis of Thai identity’ (Streckfuss, 2012: 315–316).

In times of social crisis, which was, and continues to be the case in Thailand since the Asian economic crisis in 1997, when national identities and geo-political space are threatened, there is an immediate concern (indeed anxiety) with maintaining existing bodily boundaries and the purity of bodies.

TAYLOR, 2001: 13

Aleida Assmann (2010) identifies ‘demonization’ as a discursive strategy of popular culture encountered in times of crisis when symbolic boundaries

have to be redrawn. Demonization enshrines hierarchical social relations within cultural memory and works by 'normative inversion', which turns suppressed cultural elements—society's non-selves—into threatening and dangerous 'others'. This inversion not only reduces ambiguity through the clear re-definition of 'self' and 'other', but also allows for the official recognition of suppressed cultural elements in popular discourses by relegating them to inferior positions within the national value configuration. Usually these suppressed cultural elements root in different socio-cultures and thus contradict official imaginations of an in-dividual and homogenous national 'self'. The inversive logic of demonization thus turns the sacred of one culture into the horror of another and thereby defines the hierarchy between both cultures (Assmann, 2010: 167, 77).

Assmann's theory of discursive demonization in modernity allows us to identify the film *Tamnan Krasue/Demonic Beauty* (2002) as a cinematic project of demonization, which turns the holy Khmer Apsara into Thailand's uncanny Phi Krasue. The inversive logic of *Tamnan Krasue* explicitly demonizes the Khmer by 'khmerizing' a well-known Thai *phi*. It is this inversion which turns the ambiguous *phi* of vernacular ghostlore into an officially recognized 'demon'.⁴¹ The film's narrative aims at redrawing the symbolic boundary between both socio-cultural categories thereby strengthening the in-dividual and bounded Thai 'self'. *Tamnan Krasue* identifies Thai culture not only as morally superior, but also attributes to Khmer culture all those filthy qualities vernacularly embodied by Phi Krasue. However, by choosing Phi Krasue as its uncanny protagonist, the film unintentionally acknowledges 'Khmerness' as the 'non-self' of 'Thainess', which will continue to haunt the national 'self' from its ambiguous place of banishment.

Conclusion: Demonizing the Khmer by Khmerizing a Demon

(...) [T]he purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (...).

LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1963: 229

In this paper I have argued that the structural logic Kristeva calls abjection is a key to unlock Phi Krasue's vernacular symbolism, and that actors' embodied recognition of this logical principle is more important for vernacular classifications of uncanny beings than the usually explicit content of ghostly images.

41 In a structural sense then, being a demon is not an intrinsic quality as such but rather a relational state, linked to conceptions of the sacred and structured by an inversive logic.

Since the elements of myth usually function to make abstract socio-symbolic logics graspable, their embodiment is essential for the formation of meaningful social identities (Lévi-Strauss, 1980: 11).

Bruce Kapferer (2012) stresses the relevance of incorporated cultural logics for shaping actors' responses to the idiosyncrasies of nationalist iconography. He emphasizes that nationalist ideology and their myths draw their persuasive power not so much from their content but rather from their confirmation of previously embodied logical principles. This tacit knowledge of a cultural logic's generative principles allows actors to relate idiosyncratic elements of newly created nationalist myths in a meaningful way and thus to make sense of the contingencies of their historical worlds.

Comparing nationalist beliefs in Sri Lanka and Australia, he [Kapferer 1988] observes that "these ideologies contain logical elements relevant to the way human beings within their historical worlds are existentially constituted" (p. 19). In this view, instantiations of idiosyncratic variation, the ultimate source of cultural change, are reflexively linked to underlying structural paradigms: "no tradition is constructed or invented and discontinuous with history... [they] are chosen because of what they distill ontologically; that is, they make sense and condense a logic of ideas which may also be integrated to the people who make the selection although hidden from their reflective consciousness" (p. 211).

FISCHER, 1999: 479

A contextual analysis of Thai *phi* thus has to look beyond surface representations to uncover the cultural logic (the generative patterns of relations) realized in and transformed through their contextual ghostly images (Fischer, 1999: 478). Interpretations that target the implicit logic structuring Phi Krasue's ghostly images' symbolism allow us to account for the variability of its features. These may vary not only between vernacular and cinematic contexts of ghostly imaginations, but also according to the practical requirements of contextualized speech events and their prevalent 'regime of images' (P.A. Jackson, 2004).

Thus, it is the identification of demonization as a structural analogue of abjection that explains the linking of Phi Krasue's ghostly image to 13th century Angkorian Khmer culture in *Tamnan Krasue/Demonic Beauty* (2002) and its plausibility for Thai audiences, despite its factual idiosyncrasy. This plausibility draws its persuasiveness from the metaphoric Khmer-magic link in Thai popular culture that grew in visibility as a socio-cultural stereotype during the Cold War and Thailand's boom-years, becoming an omnipresent aspect of socio-cultural classification after the Asian financial crisis. Since the Khmer-magic link is generative of the same logical principle that underlies abjection

and functions to imagine the superiority of the category Thai vis-à-vis the category Khmer in contemporary Thai popular culture, Phi Krasue's origin myth is simply the link's metonymic transformation that presents a proper past, rendering visible the officially recognized nation and its geo-body (Viernes, 2013: 239). Linked under the premises of demonization and communicated via social idioms of filth, the symbolism of the abject in Phi Krasue and Khmer in the film *Tamnan Krasue* is thus not only complementary, but also mutually reinforcing. The film's khmerization of an uncanny being renders 'the Khmer' uncanny and strengthens the self-evidence of this association through the transformation of metaphor to metonymy (Douglas, 1972: 28–29).

With Lévi-Strauss we may finally say that *Tamnan Krasue* (2002) provides a logical model for overcoming contradictions haunting post-crisis Thai identity. These contradictions arise from the growing visibility of 'Khmerness' within the 'Thai-self', and its irreconcilability with the modern ideal of the individual national 'self'. Just as the 'Myth of Asdiwal' analyzed by Lévi-Strauss functions to reconcile the contradictions inherent in matrilineal descent combined with patrilocal residence (R. Davis, 1974: 8; Lévi-Strauss, 1967), *Tamnan Krasue* offers a spectral explanation why, despite its foundational role as part of the Thai-self, the socio-cultural category Khmer remains socially stigmatized, Thailand's indigenous Khmer-speakers invisible, and relationships with neighboring Cambodia tense.

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Stepping Out from the Silver Screen and into the Shadows

The Fearsome, Ephemeral Ninjas of Timor-Leste

Henri Myrntinen

My first 'encounter' with East Timorese ninjas was sometime in late 2004, when rumors of these shadowy warriors kept people off the streets at night and compelled the security forces to set up checkpoints. The scare lasted for several days and then disappeared, as suddenly as it had appeared. The experience was as nebulous and intangible as most encounters with this phantom menace tend to be: one finds oneself enveloped by an atmosphere of rumor, very real fear and apprehension, of disbelief and titillation and often a highly militarized, securitized, visible response by the security forces ... but in the end no-one ever actually is able to present physical evidence of a 'ninja'.

In contrast to many of the other chapters of this book, I will not be examining Southeast Asian ghosts who move from 'reality' or myth on to the screen. Rather, I will examine something related but opposite: film characters entering the reality of social and political life as a threat that is very much feared but, at least as far as I can tell, currently not physically present, at least not in the way it is imagined. In many ways, the repeated ninja scares in Timor-Leste can be seen as real-life version of what one might expect from a B-movie on the topic: shadowy warriors with magical powers, tales gruesome murders and mysterious disappearances, terrorized communities, innocent victims, bungling and inept officials, as well as a strong-arm crackdown by hypermasculine elite forces kitted out with more hi-tech weaponry and gadgets than either the task at hand or budget requirements could realistically justify.

Before I continue, however, I want to emphatically state that while I will attempt to critically examine the ninja scares in Timor-Leste, I in no way want to exoticize the phenomenon, ridicule the very real fear caused by the scares or diminish in any way the brutal history of violence and military occupation that serves as a sub-text to the phenomenon. Instead, I attempt to take these issues, often regarded as 'irrational' and 'exotic' in many western mainstream discourses on Southeast Asia or Oceania, seriously and at face value within their context, in as much as that is possible for me as an outsider who does not fully grasp the socio-cultural context.

This chapter is based on observations and discussions which I have collected over the course of around fifteen years of engaging with Timor-Leste, including numerous sojourns in the country, as well as insights gathered from having had the privilege of working in various parts of Indonesia during the same time period. The major part of the data relevant to this research, however, comes from between 2007–2010, when I was conducting my Ph.D. research in Timor-Leste as well as working for various NGOs in and on the country.

The Fear

Returning back to my initial encounter with the ninja-phenomenon in 2004, what had happened, as far as I was able to reconstruct it, was that local inhabitants in a village on the southeast coast, a day's drive over the central mountain range away from the capital city Dili, had seen several men clad in black entering a house. What might have been a very mundane occurrence, for reasons unknown at least to myself, suddenly took on a different meaning that at least I had not expected.

News of the sighting, which had in the meantime been 'confirmed' as a 'ninja' sighting, quickly spread to Dili by text messaging and by word-of-mouth. The tension was palpable: shops were shuttered early, streets were empty after dark, the UN peacekeepers were forced to do extra night-time patrolling and set up checkpoints. President Xanana Gusmão, himself by popular belief no stranger to supernatural powers, went on air to decry the destabilizing impact of the ninjas and to point some finger at disgruntled veterans, rogue security force members or others with a sinister hidden agenda as being behind the phenomenon (*Lusa*, 2004).¹ As soon as it had emerged, however, the intense fear that had gripped the city subsided again, as if nothing had happened.

Three years later, I encountered the ninja phenomenon again. This time, I had been travelling around the countryside with my East Timorese colleagues for about a week, again in the southeast corner of the country. I asked my colleagues to drop me off in the charming mountain town of Same, at which at the time also served as the headquarters of the mutinying Major Alfredo Reinado, himself also not a stranger to supernatural powers. The late Maj. Reinado played a key role in the often violent political events between the outbreak of

1 One of the rumors which I heard several times was that during the resistance struggle, Gusmão, then a guerrilla commander, had turned himself into a dog to escape past the Indonesian troops who had surrounded him.

the crisis 2006 and the shooting of President José Ramos-Horta on February 10, 2008 when Reinado himself was shot dead.² He famously claimed to have escaped capture by Australian Special Forces around Same in 2007 by summoning the spirit of the hero of the 1912 uprising against the Portuguese, Dom Boaventura. The spirit had allowed him to turn invisible and walk unharmed past the Australian forces (*Agence France Presse*, 2007; Nygaard-Christensen, 2011).

In 2007, however, Reinado was still alive and active, and I was hoping to interview him for my research. After dropping me off in Same, my colleagues were planning to drive over the central mountain range and get back to Dili by nightfall. However, when I met them a few days later back in the capital, they related to me that they had instead remained for the night in the city as local villagers had warned them of bands of ninjas roaming around in the hills at night. Apart from the rumors however, no-one had actually come across ninjas.

Further ninja incidents followed at least in 2006, 2007 and 2008 (Kingsbury, 2007; *Suara Timor Lorosae*, 2006 and 2008; Kar Yen Long, 2009). The largest ninja scare occurred in 2009–2010, around the town of Zumalai in the south of the country. The scare was triggered by rumors of several murders and disappearances, possibly also rapes. While subsequent police investigations solved the cases (in the end it was a murder of a fifteen year old girl by her uncle and the disappearance and accident-related death of a one year old boy), the public mind and the national media were quick to point the finger at ninjas.

The government, with elections looming, was keen to show strength and resolve, and sent out 140 heavily armed members of its otherwise under-utilized paramilitary units, the Public Order Battalion (BOP—*Batalhão de Ordem Pública*) and Special Operations Company (COE—*Companhia de Operações Especiais*) under the personal leadership of the national police commander Longuinhos Monteiro to hunt for the ninjas, which, *nota bene*, no-one had actually encountered. Instead of rounding up a single ninja, the heavy-handed, militarized approach of the BOP and COE instead ended up producing a raft of human rights abuse allegations from the local population (*Asosiasaun HAK*, 2010a and 2010b; Keta Haluha, 2010; Myrntinen, 2010b; Myrntinen, 2013). Nor did the operation put an end to the phenomenon: further ninja scares have followed, making it up all the way to concerned debates in national parliament (*Suara Timor Lorosae*, 2011).

2 Ramos-Horta survived, thanks, in his own words, in no small part to God himself who had told him in those twilight moments that he still needed Ramos-Horta for tasks among the living.

Who, Then, are the Ephemeral Ninjas?

Who, then, are the ephemeral ninjas? To date, as far as I know, no ninjas have actually been physically apprehended, and, apart from rumors, there have been no confirmed sightings. Nonetheless, there is general agreement about their appearance: young men with a military demeanor, faces covered, mostly dressed in black, moving around especially at night. Endowed with magical powers, they can appear and disappear, fly through the air and change shape into animals. In the absence of evidence of 'real' ninjas, the clues of what to look out for draw on rumor, augmented with elements from cinematic representations, local folklore and memories of violent conflict.

The elusiveness of the ninjas does not diminish their fearsome image; rather, it seems to augment it. Who 'actually' the ninjas are, is equally hazy: at times, individual, possibly wayward former members of the Falintil guerrillas, former pro-Indonesian militias, current or former East Timorese or Indonesian security forces (especially the special forces *Komando Paskuan Khusus*—Kopassus) or members of martial arts groups have been suspected.³

Like the ninjas, all of these organizations are pre-dominantly male, often projecting a hypermasculine, militarized and martial self-image. Furthermore, members of all groups are commonly regarded as having, to differing degrees, access to spiritual and magic powers. Another important common element of the various groups is their suspected links to the shadowy, sinister sides of state power. Before analyzing the phenomenon, however, it is necessary to place the ninjas in a historical context.

A Brief History of the Ninjas of Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste, a nation of around one million inhabitants located at the south-eastern end of the Indonesian archipelago, gained its independence in 2002, following around four centuries of Portuguese colonial rule, both Australian and Japanese invasion during the Second World War, and Indonesian military occupation 1975–1999, followed by a two-and-a-half year United Nations administration. In numerous ways, it was the period of Indonesian occupation and the resistance struggle against it which has most defined East Timorese

3 The Falintil (*Forças Armadas de Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste*) was the armed wing of the independence movement which fought against the Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste 1975–1999.

society. While the fight for independence defined and solidified notions of East Timorese nationhood, it also left in its wake the scars and dark memories of a brutal counter-insurgency war. Indonesian rule however also brought with it both a common language and a common religion to the East Timorese, along with an access to modernity that the Portuguese colonial presence had neglected to provide.

The ninja phenomenon of Timor-Leste has a three-fold history, all three strands of which are interlinked. First, there is the cinematographic history of the phenomenon. Second, the phenomenon needs to be seen in the context of the Indonesian military occupation. Third, the scares themselves have historical parallels in the region.

I have not been able to trace the cinematographic history or etymology of how the term *ninja* came to Timor-Leste with certainty, as it is related to a genre of films rather than a particular film or films. Similarly, the Shaolin and *kung fu* imagery used by the ubiquitous martial arts groups is of diffuse cinematographic origin while references to movie characters such as John Rambo or a particular actor, such as Jean-Claude van Damme (both of whom served as inspiration for the *noms de guerre* of the two of the best-known gang leaders in the country—Lito Rambo and Ameu Van Damme) or Bruce Lee can be pin-pointed more accurately.

According to Annalee Newitz (2013) ninjas first entered the western cinematographic imaginary with the James Bond movie *You Only Live Twice* (dir. Lewis Gilbert, 1967). The real boom however came in the late 1970s and 1980s, with a slew of B-action movies and series such as *American Ninja* (dir. Sam Firstenberg, 1985) or *Bloodsport* (dir. Newt Arnold, 1988). By the 1990s, the term *ninja* was common enough to be used in the children's (semi-parodic) cartoon series *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (dir. Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, 1987–1996) or in the American cartoon series *G.I. Joe* (dir. Ron Friedman, 1985–1986).

My suspicion is that the idea of the *ninja* was introduced to Indonesia through imported American and East Asian action B-movies of the 1980s. The concept of the mysterious shadowy warrior endowed with magic powers fell on fertile ground in Suharto-era Indonesia. Although the official public discourse of the era was one of rationality and development, behind this façade, belief especially in traditional Javanese mysticism was very much a part of his New Order (*Orde Baru*) rule (see for example Pemberton, 1994; and Siegel, 2006).⁴

4 According to the Javanese researcher MT Arifin, quoted in *The Jakarta Post* (31.01.2008), Suharto himself had 233 magic charms.

Across many parts of Indonesia, local concepts of mysterious, martial, hypermasculine characters shrouded in mystical powers, such as the Javanese *jago* had existed throughout Indonesian history and formed a mainstay of popular lore. The *jago* (literally (fighting) cock) was a male leader of a gang operating on the fringes of society, traditionally dressed in black, endowed with martial arts skills and magic powers (Cribb, 1991: 19–20). Often cast in folklore and movies as a Robin Hood-like character, Henk Schulte Nordholt (2002: 39–40) defined the *jagos* of old less romantically as ‘entrepreneurs of violence’, often putting their skills and manpower to use on behalf of the rural and Dutch colonial elite. It is, however, the romanticized image of the *jago* is still upheld, be it for example among the gangs of Jakarta (Wilson, 2012) or the gangs, ritual and martial arts groups of Timor-Leste (Myrntinen, 2012). In both cases, the possession of supernatural powers is often regarded an integral part of being a real *jago*.

These folkloristic characters were given a re-working by the newly emergent Indonesian television and film industry in the Suharto years. At the same time, the regime also actively encouraged young men, and to a lesser degree, women, to take part in martial arts courses in order to instill ‘*semangat*’ (fighting spirit) in the youth, much like the Japanese occupation army had done for nationalist Indonesian youth (including Suharto himself) during the Second World War (Anderson, 2006: 30–36). These martial arts groups were also introduced in Indonesian-occupied Timor-Leste, and have become major social and political players in the post-independence period, alongside gangs and ritual arts groups, including in perpetrating violence and instability (Myrntinen, 2010a; Scambary et al., 2006).⁵

During the Suharto years, the Indonesian armed forces, which played a central role in the economic, social and political life of the era, also had its own ‘shadow warriors’ in the shape of the Kopassus Special Forces who actively encouraged popular belief in their supernatural powers. It was thus into an environment already well acquainted with the concept of militarized, martial arts-performing, mysterious, and magically powerful masculinities that the imported American and East Asian movies brought the concept of the ninja.

While the idea of the ninja thus took root in the Indonesian imaginary through a mixing of traditional masculine tropes and imported movie images,

5 While the categorizations the groups use for themselves change over time and are overlapping, the main difference would be that martial arts groups define themselves primarily through the practice of a particular, imported martial art (e.g. *kung fu*, *pencak silat*) while ritual arts groups draw mainly on East Timorese tradition for their identity and gangs identify themselves through their geographical location and/or loyalty to a key figure.

it took on a very real form in Timor-Leste by way of the Indonesian military occupation. Aditjondro (2000) traces the first use of the term *ninja* in the occupied territory to death squads set up by the above-mentioned Kopassus forces. Dressed in black, the death squads would target suspected independence supporters at night, killing or 'disappearing' them. The 'ninja' term suited their appearance, their stealthy *modus operandi*, and also alluded to the presumed supernatural forces of the Kopassus troops.

During the occupation, the ninjas were thus real-life killers who sowed terror, but after independence, the ninjas became less corporeal as a threat—to the point of possibly not existing physically at all. Nonetheless, the concept of the ninja remained a 'real' threat in people's minds, spreading its terror through rumors of ninja sightings and their links to various rogue entrepreneurs of violence. The ninjas can be seen as an amalgamation of different kinds of threats: memories of state terror past; traditional tropes of powerful, shadowy men; global media icons and very real, potentially violent men in the present.

A similar 'ninja scare' to the post-occupation ones in Timor-Leste occurred in the turbulent years of Suharto's downfall in and around Banyuwangi, in East Java in 1998. The case has been extensively analyzed by Cribb (2000), Herriman (2006, 2010), Retsikas (2006), Sidel (2006: 150–152), Siegel (2006) and Thufail (2005), amongst others. The East Java ninja scare began as a witch hunt, as villagers first began killing suspected sorcerers (*dukun santet*). After rumors spread that 'ninjas' rather than villagers were behind the killings of local religious leaders under the guise of killing sorcerers, villagers began hunting and killing suspected ninjas instead. In spite of police actions and vigilantism, only a few suspected ninjas were caught alive, and the vast majority of those investigated were in fact mentally ill vagrants (Retiskas, 2006; Herriman, 2010).

Although 1998 sightings of ninjas abounded and descriptions were similar (black-clad men in military-style uniform, with magical powers such as that of flight and invisibility), no 'actual' ninjas were caught. As in Timor-Leste, the rumor mill tended to point towards individuals associated with security groups, so-called *oknum*,⁶ who might be police, military or members of the Indonesian Kopassus special forces crossing the border, with their sinister powers and brutal masculine mystique, acting as part of a sinister plan.

6 *Oknum* refers to rogue members of certain groups, often insinuated as being members of the security forces or other state officials (such as bureaucrats), acting beyond their official mandate or manipulating others to act on their behalf—though possibly under an unofficial mandate and as part of a 'hidden agenda'.

Reading the Ninjas

In her profound study on rumors of vampires in colonial East and Central Africa, Luise White (2000) approaches the rich genre of stories of colonial-era abductions and blood-sucking as a series of lenses through which she examines different aspects of societies in the midst of profound change. Similarly, the 'genre', to take a cue from White, of ninja rumors in Indonesia and Timor-Leste allows for a range of readings through which processes of societal upheaval can be examined.⁷

The 1998 East Java ninja killings have been mostly examined and interpreted through the lens of societal upheaval that followed the collapse of the *Orde Baru* system, be it through looking at the role of *oknum* and suspected *agents provocateurs* (Cribb, 2000), the spread of mob violence (Sidel, 2006) or complex processes of re-establishing social control (Siegel, 2006). Similarly, but with a slightly different angle, Thufail (2005: 166) interprets the violence as a way of "mediating anxieties about political transformation" and re-negotiating state-citizen relations in post-Suharto Indonesia. Retsikas (2006) also reminds the reader of the violent history of the *Orde Baru* in the area, such as the anti-communist massacres of 1965–66 and Petrus killings of the 1980s, and the re-assessment of the violence after the collapse of the regime.⁸ Herriman (2006), Retsikas and Siegel also examine how the ninja killings played into local level political struggles, uses of local symbolism and the roles of rumor, gossip and, in Herriman (2010) of the media in amplifying these into 'moral panics'.

The Timor-Leste ninja scares have, to date, not engendered studies of similar richness and depth of analysis. A common western reaction to the East Timorese incidents, both by *malaes* (foreigners) in the country and outside media has been a mixture of bewilderment and bemusement. At times, the

7 White (2000: 6–9) refers to the vampire stories as constituting a genre as, in spite of geographical and temporal difference, they contain formulaic elements, "a specific set of plots and details [...] the pattern of the tale [...] that makes a story recognizable as belonging to a genre."

8 The rise of Suharto to power following the alleged communist attempt at a *coup d'état* in 1965 was accompanied by mass killings of real and alleged members of the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*—PKI) in which an estimated 500 000 or more were killed, many of them in East Java. The Petrus killings (acronym derived from *Penambakan misterius*, mysterious shootings) were a series of extrajudicial killings in which several thousand alleged criminals were killed by members of the security forces in the mid-1980s and their bodies were left in public places. See also Roosa (2006) for the PKI massacres and Cribb (2000) and Siegel (1998) for the Petrus killings.

phenomenon has been ‘diagnosed’ as a symptom of collective post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Timor-Leste society (e.g. Tharoor, 2010). While the former reaction is understandable given how exotic and outlandish the issue may seem at first sight to outside observers, it does not take into account the very real fear caused by the phenomenon and the complexities lurking beneath the surface. The latter, pathologizing approach is in my mind also highly problematic, as there can be no on-the-spot, communal diagnosis of a nation, especially when the deeper context of the phenomenon is explored. Apart from forsaking a deeper analysis, both approaches also risk exoticizing and belittling salient aspects of Timor-Leste society, history and politics, and most of all the East Timorese themselves.

Ninjas and Masculinity

The on-going fascination with ninjas and the danger, power and ‘coolness’ they embody is not limited to Timor-Leste and Indonesia. One can find countless ninja movies, comics, computer games, toys, action figures, costumes and paraphernalia, such as *shuriken* (‘ninja’ throwing stars). There are shops, restaurants and companies called Sushi Ninjas or Bicycle Ninjas, motorcycles called Ninja, a skype emoticon of a disappearing ninja—the list is as diverse as it is endless. While the ninja imagery is increasingly becoming a ‘cute’, ironic and self-reflexive part of popular culture in the metropole, I would however argue that it retains ‘harder’, more masculine-coded and more complex meanings in the global post-colony.

For many young men, both real-life and imaginary global media icons, such as Bob Marley, Bruce Lee, Che Guevara, Rambo, Tupac Shakur, football players, hip hop stars but also nameless ninjas and kung fu fighters of action and martial arts movies are ambiguous sources of identification, infused with power, longing, and locally-generated meaning. Balandier’s respondents (1985: 258) in Congo-Brazzaville, for example, refer to them as symbols of power and courage. In the context of Sierra Leone, Danny Hoffman (2011: 67) links the identification of young men with these icons with “the potential of male youth to seize power when the existing order denies them recognized forms of authority”. In my own research in Timor-Leste (Myrntinen, 2010a and 2012), I have tentatively explored how this imported iconology is amalgamated with local tradition—or newly invented ‘tradition’, to allow young men to accommodate conflicting and unattainable expectations of manhood.

Though not as ubiquitous in as for example ‘Rambo’ in terms of a nickname used in conflict zones and by urban gangs, the term ‘ninja’ has travelled to

Angola to be used as the name of a special forces unit (Aditjondro, 2000) or as the name of a politically active gang in Congo-Brazzaville, which has recently turned to born-again Pentecostalism (Bazenguissa-Ganga, 1999: 350; Boisbouvier, 2014: 26–27). While often (but not always) on opposite sides of street fights, both young male gang members and young male police officers watch the same action movies and draw on similar tropes of masculinity. Given the martial and masculine connotations of the term *ninja*, its appeal to groups seeking to underline their skill, speed and professional prowess in projecting power violently as well as their air of mystique is apparent—be those groups police forces, gangs or martial arts groups. As such, the suspected ninjas of Zumalai also become a perfect foil for special police units such as the East Timorese BOP and COE to underline their militarized masculinity by taking the mystical shadow warriors head on and ‘for real’ (Myrntinen, 2013; see also Bevan, 2011).

The way the 2009–2010 Zumalai *ninja* scare and subsequent police deployment played out, however, was less of a *ninja* masculinity vs. police masculinity contest (as the ninjas were nowhere to be found), but rather turned into an attempt by the police to bring ‘deviant’ masculinities ‘back in line.’ According to the human rights organization Asosiasuan HAK (2010a and 2010b), the anti-*ninja* operation was characterized by frequent harassment of young men deemed to be not to be performing to normative masculine ideals (e.g. forced cutting of long hair by police officers) or suspected of being in martial arts groups—whose delving in these arts could be seen as being close to what ninjas are imagined to be doing. As such, the crackdown on performances of non-traditional masculinities by the young men targeted can be seen in the context of a kind of ‘moral panic’ in post-conflict Timor-Leste society, where in the wake of massive social upheavals ‘the youth problem’ (read: young men in violent gangs and martial arts groups) has become a very real law enforcement issue⁹ but is also seen in alarmist speeches of politicians and in sensationalist media reports as a sign of deteriorating societal norms amongst the youth (Myrntinen, 2013).¹⁰

As mentioned in the introduction, the real-life *ninja* incidents do have a certain titillating cinematographic aspect to them, with performances of the

9 This is complicated by the fact that active-duty police officers are also members of these groups (see Myrntinen, 2010 and Wilson, 2010).

10 Similar kinds of crackdowns on ‘deviant’ masculinities among youth have occurred repeatedly in another post-conflict society in the region, Aceh, where the target have been loosely defined punks (Balowski, 2012).

various actors, especially the security forces, also being informed by what they have seen in films and television. The excitement, the fear, the rumors, the media spectacle and attendant politics of spectacle turn the events into something like real-life horror movies—though unlike in the movies, actual people are actually being harmed. Nonetheless, the theatrics of it can prove irresistible, for example to politicians and security chiefs seeking to publicly underline their ‘iron fist’ approach and, on the side, improve their political credentials, as was the case with the East Timorese police commander Longuinhos Monteiro and the parliamentary speaker Fernando ‘Lasama’ de Araújo in the Zumalai case (Keta Haluha, 2010; Myrntinen, 2013).

Ninjas, Politics, Rumor

The post-Suharto ninja and witch killings in East Java in the late 1990s and in the ninja scares in post-independence Timor-Leste are also revealing of State-citizen relations. In all of these cases, there is a suspicion among the population that the murderous ninjas are somehow linked to dark, (mostly state) security-institution related forces, that there is something else, something sinister going on behind the scenes, that all is not as it is officially presented to be. The motivations of the possible actors are, however different. In the East Java case, in 1998, the rumored ‘hidden agendas’ included deliberate killings of Muslim clergy or rogue military members bent on reversing the fall of the Suharto regime; in Timor-Leste it has been linked to destabilizing forces, disgruntled veterans, criminal agendas or, more cynically, to security forces seeking to justify their expenditures.¹¹

As Perice (1997) points out for the case of Haiti and White (2000) for colonial East and Central Africa, rumors are not, however merely misconstrued facts. In the word of Perice (1997: 2–3), they are “responses to the social and political milieu in which they are transmitted [...] Rumors are not the result of confusion between reality and truth, but of beliefs about such things”. As in post-Duvalier Haiti or in colonial Africa, the rumors in Indonesia and Timor-Leste around violence, mystical powers and sinister forces

11 During field research in conflict-affected Jayapura, Papua, in 2011 I also came across ninja-style rumors of mysterious ‘men in black’ committing acts of violence, with local suspicions falling on Indonesian security forces or their affiliates seeking to ramp up tensions (see also *West Papua Media Alerts*, 2011).

aligned with the state are a commentary on how citizens see this as being conceivably true.¹²

In Indonesia and Timor-Leste where rumors are a common source of information (Gonzalez Devant, 2008), memories of violence are fresh and belief in the supernatural wide-spread, ninja rumors fit in well into conspiracy theories and double-guessing of the motives of political actors. As Nils Bubandt (2008: 809–810, citing Lindsey, 2001: 292) reminds us, the ‘paranoia’ inherent in rumors and conspiracy theories can thus be a sensible paranoia: in both Indonesia and Timor-Leste, state actors *have* repeatedly used informal connections to shady underworld groups for their own personal benefit, and many of the members of these groups as well as their powerful backers more or less openly flaunt their supposed magical powers.¹³

Conclusion

The East Timorese (and East Javanese) ninja scares provide a fascinating case of cultural amalgamation, where cinematographic imagery, which itself is based on a mix of historical reality and folklore (in this case Japanese) is repackaged and exported via global (read: mostly western) media to another location, where, finding a suitably fertile environment, it becomes imbued with multiple local meanings and enters reality. The ninjas became real both in the form of death squads or as a threat perceived to be real enough to trigger pogroms in East Java and security force crackdowns in Timor-Leste. This is thus a reverse process from most ghost movies discussed here, where the ‘real’ stories of Southeast Asian ghosts move from the folklore and rumor onto the silver

12 Coincidentally, both the blood-sucking vampires studied by White and the Duvalier regime’s infusion of mystical horror into its violence, e.g. through alleged links of the *Ton Ton Macoutes* to controlling zombies (see for example Davis (1985)) link, like the ninjas, with horror genres extremely popular in western cinema. The Haitian zombies, however, were not imported as a concept with the aid of cinema, and although White uses the term ‘vampire’, the indigenous words and concepts used by her informants differ greatly from western popular media vampires.

13 One the links between state and underworld in Indonesia, see for example Ryter (2014); Siegel (1998), and Wilson (2012) and for the complex interaction between Timor-Leste’s political and state actors and gangs, martial arts and ritual arts groups, Myrntinen (2010a), Scambary et al., (2006) and Wilson (2010). On references to use of mystical powers in the political sphere in Indonesia, see for example Bubandt (2009), Pemberton (1994) and Siegel (2006); for Timor-Leste, see Kammen (2009) and Nygaard-Christensen (2011).

screen. In a kind of feedback loop, however, the reactions of Timor-Leste politicians, state security agents, media and society to the recurrent ninja scares are themselves reminiscent of action movies: mysterious threats are countered by media-savvy politicians making martial pronouncements and leading hyper-masculine security forces into action.

In addition to providing an intriguing example of the globalized interactions between movies, the reality they depict and how reality is shaped by these depictions, the ninja scares and attendant rumors also open up numerous avenues for examining processes of profound societal change. I have mainly raised two avenues of exploration—that of using the ninjas to define different, competing masculinities, and the ways in which ninja rumors reveal deeply-held suspicions among citizens about what the machinations of their political elites and security sector institutions.

In the rapidly changing, globalizing, post-conflict society of Timor-Leste, the ninja panics reveal elements of the old and of the new. On the ‘old’ side are traditional beliefs in mystical powers and tropes of male warriors (be it *jagos*, anti-colonial heroes or guerrilla commanders) using these; but also the old ways of doing politics that rely on intransparent politics of patronage and fear, hidden agendas and use of shadowy entrepreneurs of violence. On the ‘new’ side of the ledger are globalized media icons which celebrate youth and individuality, but also violent masculinity; politics of spectacle and also the mixing of different cultural influences. The reactions to the ninja scares, the moral panics caused and the crackdowns on ‘deviant masculinity’, are also indicative of how salient the tensions between what is perceived as old and as new, between what is perceived as socially acceptable and unacceptable are in Timor-Leste society.

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PART 3
Audiences



The Supernatural and Post-war Thai Film

*Traditional Monsters and Social Mobility*¹

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Since the birth of the big budget New Thai cinema industry in 1997, Thai film has grown in international prominence and now commands a space in the majority of DVD stores and film festivals around the world. Indeed, for the first time in its history, Thai film has for the last decade been accessible to non-Thai and specifically Euro-American viewers, critics and academics. Prominent film magazines and websites from around the world now discuss and review Thai films alongside other national cinemas from around the globe.

Such an emphasis upon the post-97 New Thai industry, however, is in danger of eclipsing the rich and varied history of Thai film prior to this recent growth.² While articles and reviews may appear frequently and in various mediums, they tend to be limited to this New Thai industry and largely ignore the development of Thai film across the twentieth century, specifically its highly significant post-War incarnation in the 1950s and 60s. This is a period in which Thai film was consumed largely by rural and lower-class Thais. Productions were shaped by the specific folklore and belief systems of this environment as well as the major social upheaval throughout Thailand due to the huge influx of American culture after World War Two. Such productions notably remain largely outside of non-Thai consumption due to both the lack of translation and documentation available.

In light of this, this article will explore the '16mm era' of 1950s and 60s Thailand, a series of mass-produced live-dubbed 16mm films that drew heavily upon the supernatural animist belief systems that organized Thai rural village life. It will argue that these now-neglected films and specifically their mythological supernatural subject matter illustrate how post-war Thai cinema engaged with and negotiated the experiences of lower-class Thais, a position in stark contrast to the big budget New Thai industry and its urban multiplexes today. This chapter will demonstrate how films such as *Mae-Nak-Prakanong*

1 A previous version of this chapter has been published in *Horror Studies* 5.2, 1 October 2014, pp. 157–169.

2 This term is somewhat misleading however. Anchalee Chaiworaporn and Knee note that despite the enormous boom in filmmaking, “this is not to claim that there was suddenly a clear-cut “new Thai cinema” movement at that moment” (2006: 60).

(dir. Rangsir Tasanapayak, 1959), *Nguu-Phii* (dir. Saet-Thaa-Phak-Dee, 1966), *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* (dir. Pan-Kam, 1969) and *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* (dir. Nakarin, 1967) deploy Thai myths and supernatural folklore as a means to mediate a traumatic wider context of social upheaval and the changes enacted upon rural lower-class viewers during this era, ones specifically connected to the post-war influx of American culture into Thailand. It will illustrate how such productions can be understood as a reactionary response to increased female autonomy during this period of social change through their depiction of myths and characters that construct women as particularly susceptible to supernatural influences.

The Post-war '16mm Era' of Thai Film

The years immediately preceding World War Two brought about a significant period in the history of Thai film, specifically one that orientated Thai film to rural (and suburban) lower-class Thais and created what Thai historian and archivist Chalida Uabumrungjit labels as the '16mm era' (2003: 57). This film form continued from around the mid-1950s until the early 1970s, and was almost entirely in 16mm film with non-synchronized sound that was often live-dubbed in cinemas.³ Thai analysts single out this period for its lasting repercussions as the most influential and famous era of Thai film history and the one that has shaped Thai film right up to the contemporary industry. Indeed all academic writing concerned with Thai cinema history contains lengthy reference to this period and its very specific development and significant influence upon Thai film.

This era was the result of a number of factors. In its beginnings, cinema in Thailand had followed a similar path in keeping with the history of film worldwide and was not yet distinguishable as a film form and industry. Ironically, it was the enormous popularity of foreign films (mostly American), which poured into Siam⁴ through Singapore, Hong Kong and direct from the colonial countries themselves, that was significant in creating this new era of Thai film after World War Two. Theatres became heavily dependent upon the American productions supplied, furthering the availability and influence of Hollywood at the expense of local production. As in the rest of the world, Hollywood became

3 In 1962 *Movie Marketing* magazine reports "Siamese pictures with a few exceptions are all shot in 16mm and colour without sound. This limits earning potential as no export is possible" (Madar, 1962: 49).

4 The name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand in 1939.

the dominant model of film for this region and the shadow in which all indigenous filmmaking took place. This influx of a sophisticated foreign model that Thai film could not hope to emulate ensured that the exhibition sector received heavy early investment from Thai businesses and entrepreneurs as it became the key to financial success in Thai cinema. The sector was therefore able to support the surge in indigenous filmmaking that occurred during and after the demand for entertainment created by the effects of World War Two when the majority of film imports, upon which the exhibition industry relied, were halted. During this period indigenous Thai entertainment enjoyed an upsurge as it had to fill this exhibition space when the regular supply of Hollywood productions was interrupted. After 1952, when stage performance decreased in the face of renewed filmic competition “several founders of drama troupes turned to producing films” (Parichat Phromyothi, 2000: 21). Thanks to the interruption of World War Two a link back to pre-war entertainment was enforced, and a connection to traditional Thai performance entertainment such as *Likay* theatre and the communal social space it occupied was, to a certain extent, re-established. This connection, which could have been lost due to the previous influx of Hollywood and the growth of the indigenous productions under this foreign model (and indeed was in other national industries such as Japan, where indigenous elements such as the *Benshi* or the dressing of male performers as females was phased out very early), was instead solidified, further specifying and uniquely shaping the form of Thai cinema.

The outbreak of World War Two and the specific situation enacted upon Thailand and Thai filmmaking therefore sparked the creation of the 16mm era and its distinctive format. 16mm was the primary filmstock used as the few indigenous Thai production companies that had switched to making 35mm sound productions before the war had been forced to close due to the halted supply of imported filmstock (Dome Sukwong, 2001: 12) and the chemical solutions needed to produce film (Udomdet Manop, 1990: 57).⁵ After the war these few Thai sound studios “were unable to recover” (Dome Sukwong, 2001: 12) and were forced to close. Crucially however, the smaller film companies that had not been able to afford the technology involved in the switch to sound, and independent producers who had continued to use live dubbers, were able to survive through using the cheap 16mm filmstock available during and immediately following World War Two (Dome Sukwong, 2001: 12). 16mm film had been introduced into Thailand by M.C. Sukornwannadit Diskun at the Thai Royal

5 The first sound studio in Thailand was built by the Sri-Krung Sound Film Company and the first Thai ‘talkie’ *Long Thang/Going Astray* (dir. Wasuwat Brothers, 1932) had appeared in 1932.

Railway Public Relations Film Division but it was after World War Two that it became popular due to its low cost and easy processing which did not require the heavy equipment or sound facilities of synchronized 35mm (Udomdet Manop, 1990: 57). In 1949 the film *Supab Burut Suatai/Thai Gentleman Bandit* (dir. M.C. Sukrawandit Ditsakul and Tae Prakartwutisan, 1949) was filmed on 16mm silent filmstock and released to huge success, inspiring other entertainment entrepreneurs and businessmen (who had previously been unable to break into the entertainment market due to the expensive facilities needed when processing 35mm) to instead finance cheap 16mm live-dubbed color productions of popular cinema. Film production therefore grew from 10 per year in the immediate aftermath of World War Two to around 50 in 1956 (Udomdet Manop, 1990: 57).

The Supernatural in the '16mm Era' Productions

The 16mm era film form, predicated upon an entirely different set of characteristics to the global Hollywood model, came about in the immediate post-war era. The low-cost of production, due to cheap filmstock and lack of recorded sound, enabled a record number of films to be churned out en masse. Post-war Thai cinema reached an astounding level of production for such a small and unfunded 'cottage' industry and was to influence Thai film, textually and industrially, for the rest of the century. This model of filmmaking deviated markedly from the popular Hollywood model and solidified itself as a successful industry predicated upon an alternative style of filmmaking to that of Hollywood. In particular filmmakers targeted the lower-class rural Thai audience, viewers who still consumed traditional Thai entertainment in provincial villages. This is most evident through close examination of the films, which indicates that they employ a presentational style similar to an aware stage performance, are live-dubbed by a narrator in a similar way to traditional Thai theatre and are primarily situated in a rural setting. However, possibly the most significant element to connect them to this upcountry rural audience and environment is the widespread insertion of supernatural elements into the productions, elements that also become extremely significant given the upheaval experienced by lower-class provincial Thailand during the post-war period.

The liberal insertion of supernatural elements in this Thai entertainment can be attributed to the position of the supernatural within the specific rural Thai environment. This belief system was particularly prevalent within the rural village environment and notably all the 16mm era Thai films seem to take place largely within or originate from the confines of the rural village.

Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul notes how Thai elites have historically associated spirits and superstition with the rural village and its occupants, who are referred to as *chaobannok*. The *chaobannock's* physical distance from the location of political and religious authority—the centre of *dhamma*—and existence outside the ‘umbrella of merit’ places them alongside the *Pa* (“the domain beyond normal social and political power” [Thongchai Winichakul, 2000: 537]) which “was inhabited by wild animals and spirits” (2000: 537). The rural village therefore “was remote from the spiritual centre and adjacent to the *Pa*” (2000: 537) situating it alongside the dangerous realm of the spirits known as *phii*. *Phii* are defined as ‘invisible supernatural beings’ (Pattana Kitiarsa, 1989: 56) and can be ghosts of the dead, spirits of the living, free-floating spirits or spirits of sacred objects (Sangun Suwanlert, 1979). They can be benevolent, malevolent or simply indifferent, and many require offerings in order to pacify them or elicit protection and good fortune. The distance of the rural village from the centre of *dhamma* lessened the spiritual quality of people, making them more susceptible to the interference of *phii* and indeed medical anthropologist Suwanlert notes that *phii* possessed hosts are not only village dwelling but “are characteristically of low educational and socio-economic status” (1976: 120). Suwanlert connects these spirit beliefs and possessions to rural areas and even when writing in 2006 when urban spirit cults had long been established, ethnographic studies such as that by Burnard, Naiyapattana and Lloyd still indicate that their participants link such beliefs with those in rural areas (2006: 745). This connection indicates the extent to which 16mm era productions were influenced by this particular lower-class social group, one very much outside of globalized modernity experienced by urban areas in the post-war years.

The presence of such elements within the 16mm era productions illustrates how these films used this belief system as a means to engage with and address such viewers. This depiction is very different to the violation of ‘Natural Law’ by the post-Enlightenment monsters of Europe and America. Rather than such a violation, beliefs in the supernatural realm and spirits are instead a very natural and physical part of rural Thai life to the extent that they significantly influence social organization and personal well-being, even on an official level.⁶ Rather than violations, the supernatural in the 16mm productions appears to have much in common with pre-eighteenth century archaic horror. These fables, fairy tales and myths functioned as a means to explain and organize the ambiguity of the wider world, in a similar way to that exercised by spirits

6 Even in the modern urban context many political decisions, urban planning and business mergers are all decided around and in accordance with pleasing and pacifying the spirits.

in rural Thai society. While the change enacted by the eighteenth-century 'Age of Reason' involves "a growing disbelief in things that could not be observed" (Tamborini and Weaver, 1996: 6) and a skepticism and rationalism which ensured that the fantastic must now be explained empirically or curbed, this historical division does not appear so clear-cut in rural Thailand, with the spirit world still continuing to occupy the social position and function that Tamborini and Weaver afford to archaic horror. This accepted existence originates from the pre-Buddhist indigenous animist discourse that exists alongside and has merged with official Theravada Buddhism. In this belief system the person is constituted as made up of the physical body and the *khwan*. The *khwan* is literally the essence of the living, a person's soul or even the 'symbol of life' (Pattana Kitiarsa, 1999: 53) and Kitiarsa corresponds this concept to the mind and body duality in 'Western thought'. The Animistic Beings known as *phii* (Tanabe Shigeharu, 2002: 44) can interfere with and disrupt the dual relationship between these two aspects of the person and cause mental or physical illnesses, most commonly through possession. *Phii* can therefore influence society and social organization to the extent that buildings, businesses and many aspects of human behavior are conducted in accordance with their existence and preferences. This very concrete presence of *phii* is one which clearly indicates the existence and influence of a supernatural 'reality' alongside that of the real, notably one that is not perceived as unnatural or has to be constructed as a concept. It simply exists.

The 16mm era productions therefore insert supernatural occurrences and attributes liberally within films. Ghosts and spirits appear among characters and village life as often merely an addition to, not the subject of, the narrative and can be inserted alongside other genre numbers quite comfortably. The supernatural can interject into 16mm era productions quite legitimately and become a part of the diegesis without violating 'Natural Law' or stretching credibility or even necessitating the creation of a separate and distinct supernatural diegesis. Although characters within the films do express great fear at the actions and existence of malevolent spirits they do not appear to exhibit surprise regarding their actual existence. Time is not spent constructing a 'world' or reality in which the spirits exist and often no attempt is made to explain them as entities. The blending of supernatural 'numbers' comfortably alongside other genre 'numbers' also ensures they are not necessarily the focus of attention or emotional stimulation.

This can be seen in *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* (dir. Nakarin, 1967) which tells the story of the sky spirit 'Taa-Nii's fall from the sky and her adoption by a childless older village couple. Notably after such an event there appears to be no need to construct a world or existence behind the strange event of a young

women falling from a light in the sky; instead the film launches straight into the story of her escapades within the village. Likewise the film *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* (dir. Pan-Kam, 1969) depicts an evil second wife trying to kill her husband's daughter from a previous marriage to make the handsome hero marry her own daughter. Throughout this the heroine's dead mother tries to protect her from the murder attempts, an action that is not depicted as unusual. The film even begins with two bumbling comical characters in a graveyard discussing their fear of ghosts before a phantom suddenly appears and scares them. There is no explanation or further reference to this ghost, so illustrating the presence and acceptance of this element within everyday society. This can also be applied to the orphaned snake child of *Nguu-Phii* (dir. Saet-Thaa-Phak-Dee, 1966) who the audience must merely accept is the child of a snake spirit that was killed. Similarly *Mae-Nak-Prakanong* (dir. Rangsir Tasanapayak, 1959) follows the well-known and endlessly remade Thai ghost story of Mae Nak. This is the story of Nak who is a village woman who died in childbirth yet refused to leave her still-living husband Mak. Notably while the ghostly Nak is certainly horrific in her corpse-like appearance she does not appear to violate any natural codes or laws and her actions, while wrong, are depicted as logical and even understandable.

Non-malevolent entities are also even accepted without any significant fear or surprise: in *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* (dir. Pan-Kam, 1969) the hero does not appear to express any fear at the heroine's voice contacting him from beyond the grave after she has been killed by her father's second wife, only grief at her new predicament and motivation to help her. In the same film, the sudden appearance of the heroine's dead mother as a ghost in the final showdown scene is also not cause for fear: even when she strangles the evil stepmother in front of everybody this is instead regarded as a moral (even happy) conclusion to the episode. The existence of the spirit itself is not an event that requires an extended reaction and this supernatural number sits right next to and does not interfere with the final marriage of the leading couple Kangwan and Karaket. Indeed the evil stepmother's own daughter Eau (Karaket's stepsister) even falls in love with another male character immediately after witnessing her mother's extraordinary and brutal death. All of these elements illustrate a very different relationship of the productions to the supernatural world and demonstrate how Thai film targeted a rural audience outside of the domain of Hollywood productions. Indeed it is only when spirits are depicted as being deliberately disgusting (as in the rotten corpse of Nak in *Mae-Nak-Prakanong*) or commit malevolent acts (as in Taa-Nii's bloody and violent revenge upon the men who killed her adoptive parents in the film *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii*) that their presence and actions are challenged at all, both

aspects that are not necessarily connected to a violation of 'Natural Law' through their supernatural status.

Negotiating the Wider Context

The presence of such supernatural elements indicates how the 16mm era productions targeted a very different audience to that of Hollywood productions and their advanced 1000-seat cinemas in the city. A closer examination of these supernatural themes and discourses in 16mm era productions then begins to illustrate how this engagement with the supernatural also reflects the wider discourses and upheaval present in this particular environment. One common motif involves a continued recurrence of subject matters and discourses that depict women as monstrous, fearful and having a distinctly unsavory connection to the supernatural. This connection between the supernatural and the female is evident in just about all texts that engage with the supernatural and the monstrous. In *Nguu-Phii* (dir. Saet-Thaa-Phak-Dee, 1966) the terrifying and seductive snake spirit is female, in *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* (dir. Nakarin, 1967) the sky spirit Taa-Nii is female and in *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* (dir. Pan-Kam, 1969) it is the young woman Karaket who is taken into the afterlife and her mother who exists as a spirit and controls minions. Finally in *Mae-Nak-Prakanong* (dir. Rangsir Tasanapayak, 1959) it is the wife and mother Nak who becomes a terrifying ghost (and rotten disgusting corpse) and refuses to pass along to the afterlife.

This connection between the feminine and the monstrous is very evident in Thai society. Female sexuality in Thailand is specifically linked with the supernatural as a means of promoting social control over this potentially radical suppressed element. When researching spirit cults and spirit mediums, virtually all scholars seem to note the distinct attachment of this frightening and ancient animist realm to the female sex (as opposed to the official Buddhist order, which is coded as male and patriarchal). Kitiarsa even states that "the main difference between Buddhist monks and spirit-mediums is that the mediums are predominantly women" (Pattana Kitiarsa, 1999: 2). The notion of supernatural destruction and power is connected specifically with the female as "the power of female sexuality to harm the spiritual potency and physical well-being of men is a feature of cultural beliefs in many parts of Thailand" (Mills, 1995: 255). When researching northern Thai spirit cults, Tanabe notes how it is the patriarchal positioning of women as weak and having an unstable and inferior *khwan* to that of men that allows these lower-class women to interact with various *phii* and so acquire a certain "power and authority" (Tanabe Shigeharu,

2002: 54) that enables them to become spirit mediums, so demonstrating this distinct connection between the female and the supernatural.

This attaching of monstrous and supernatural elements to dangerous and uncontrolled females implies and asserts a patriarchal need to exercise dominance and control over women. This can be attributed to the wider patriarchal context of lower-class Thailand and illustrates the imposition on the female of a predetermined social role by the surrounding patriarchal system. For instance female characters in 16mm era productions become monstrous when they exhibit characteristics that are undesirable to patriarchal constructions of femininity in Thailand and are repressed in women. These include independent mobility, desire, sexual agency and a position outside of the family. In particular this concerns the physical mobility of women and their connection to the family and home, both aspects designed to maintain control over women in a patriarchal system.

16mm era productions place great emphasis upon the feminine connection with the home and, in contrast, depict the masculine as mobile. This is portrayed as a happy and desirable status-quo. For example in *Yort-Gaen* (dir. Annuai Kalatnimi, 1968) the heroine is a tear-away tomboy who first views the hero from the top of a tree. She meets him when he arrives into her environment in a shiny modern car. The Pygmalion-esque story follows that of the hero trying to teach and tame the wayward young woman with whom he eventually falls in love, lessons that primarily seem to involve decreasing her free-spirited mobility by taking her out of the tree and into the home.

However when the 16mm era productions depict women as mobile and lacking a family environment, it is as a monstrous, negative and/or threatening force associated with the supernatural and a terrifying gruesome abject. This promotes control or outright destruction of elements designated undesirable in the female by patriarchal ideology. It suggests that uncontrolled femininity could otherwise become dangerous and destructive to social wellbeing.

This can be seen in the evil snake woman from *Nguu-Phii* (dir. Saet-Thaa-Phak-Dee, 1966), the murdering sky spirit Taa-Nii in *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* (dir. Nakarin, 1967) and possibly the most famous ghost in Thailand 'Mae Nak'. All are first harmless when integrated into the family environment (the snake-woman and Taa-Nii are adopted into local families while Nak is a loving wife) but then become powerful, destructive and monstrous and take upon dangerous and/or disgusting supernatural characteristics when they exist outside of this. When Nak dies she exists outside of the family, and becomes a monstrous and powerful abject, evident when her husband runs in fear from her animated corpse. In *Nguu-Phii*, the evil and monstrous femininity of the snake-women is positioned deep in the forest outside of the family and home. Initially harmless

when adopted into a local family, the snake-woman's full monstrosity becomes apparent when she exercises sexual desire and agency by bewitching and seducing the hero and imprisoning him in a cave far away from any familial or village influences. Her deviant femininity tempts men when she appears as a beautiful half-naked young woman, however she then changes into a horrific gruesome monster—again a repulsive abject—and kills them. Her ability to exercise such mobility and desire is depicted as destructive and terrifying in its control and manipulation of men. Similarly in *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* (dir. Nakarin, 1967) the otherwise potentially threatening uncontrolled Taa-Nii, a spirit who falls from the sky, is rendered immediately harmless when she is adopted into a local family. The full extent of her monstrous capacity becomes apparent when she later finds her adopted parents murdered and she is therefore detached from the family-sphere. It is this destruction of her family surroundings that sets off the narrative train of events in which she wreaks her bloody revenge. Taa-Nii embarks on a monstrous supernatural killing rampage of revenge in which she mercilessly pursues the men responsible and murders them horribly, chasing them and appearing suddenly in front of them.

This demonization of such undesirable characteristics in women is further underlined by the depiction of the male hero in the 16mm era productions, being one who is extremely mobile and able to travel widely. Rather than through the archaic supernatural, male characters achieve mobility through modernity and technology while also existing very much outside of the home. Rather than monstrous this independence is evidence of his virility and attractiveness, illustrating the different patriarchal construction of the sexes in Thailand. The hero often arrives into the village environment as an outsider from the city: he can travel both into and outside the community while the heroine most often originates from within it and remains there. In the films *Nguu-Phii* (dir. Saet-Thaa-Phak-Dee, 1966), *Praai-Phitsawat* and *Jaawm-Khon* the hero's first introductory shot depicts him as moving. In *Jaawm-Khon* he rides into the town as a cowboy on a horse, in *Nguu-Phii* he arrives in the village on the back of an ox-cart and in *Praai-Phitsawat* he is driving a car filled with nubile attractive women. In *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* he even makes a trip to India and becomes the very personification of a jazzy new urban lifestyle, symbolized by his shiny tight suit, sunglasses and briefcase.

This travelling is of course unthinkable for the virginal heroine, whose purity would be compromised by such a solo trip. If the heroine must travel, then it appears to be achieved through supernatural means. For instance in *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* (dir. Nakarin, 1967), Taa-Nii falls from the sky, an ancient supernatural means to enter the village rather than a modern means. In *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* (dir. Pan-Kam, 1969) the hero journeys to India using technology, yet the heroine uses supernatural means to reach him in her time of need. When

she is bitten by a poisonous snake put into her room by her evil stepmother, she appeals to the hero for help as a voice from beyond the grave as he wanders around the streets of India. Rather than modernity it is the supernatural that provides her with the means: she is only able to acquire mobility and autonomy through the supernatural and so becomes monstrous and frightening in the process (a status which the hero must help bring her back from).

The Wider Context of Social Upheaval

Likewise, the 16mm era productions not only reinforce patriarchal ideology (men as mobile and women as family situated) but do so at a time when these values are being threatened and challenged. The promotion of patriarchal control of the female through such monstrous portrayals exists at a time when gender roles and their corresponding social positions were becoming unstable, particularly in lower-class rural areas. Post-war Thailand was undergoing radical changes that impacted upon social organization and in particular on the construction of gender.

After World War Two, Thailand had sided strongly with South Vietnam and America as it feared outside aggression from China and Hanoi. Thailand was also ideal as a 'base' for America due to its close proximity to the communist-influenced countries of Laos and Vietnam. The close proximity of Thai and American government interests led to their continued close cooperation against the communist threat in Southeast Asia, and indeed Thai government actions within Thailand reveal this as a common goal.⁷ Richard A. Ruth even labels the 1960s as the 'American era' due to the vast influx of American culture (Ruth, 2011). The United States financially supported the deployment of Thai troops in its war against communist forces and tens of thousands of US military were stationed throughout the country.⁸ This stationing of around 45,000 American troops in Thailand transformed Thai society and in particular did so for rural people (Ruth, 2011: 31).

American money contributed to rural development in building roads, machinery and other infrastructure that Ruth states transformed both the "physical landscape and social and economic systems" of rural Thailand in the 1950s and 60s along with its people (Ruth, 2011:5). This changed the relationship

7 Actions such as forming the Queen's Cobra regiment of Thai volunteer soldiers to fight in Vietnam.

8 While this aspect was resented by ordinary Thai people, Thailand's participation in the fight against communism was widely revered with its troops depicted as brave idealized heroes (Ruth, 2011: 3).

between rural and urban Thailand forever as it made the transition between the two spheres much easier. The need for workers in urban areas also resulted in a flood of migrant workers into cities so constructing an “exchange between two formerly antithetical geographical cultures” (Ruth, 2011: 6). This not only altered the make-up of urban Bangkok (previously an almost exclusive haunt for richer citizens) but impacted upon rural areas. The improved infrastructure and movement of workers to and from urban areas introduced new possibilities into rural and lower-class consciousness for the first time, ones that were intricately linked to the American influence that had caused them. As Ruth states:

The newly mobile brought back the ambitions, ideas and perspectives of the capital city. These men and women became a migratory population whose outlook was simultaneously rural and urban, traditional and modern, settled and restless.

RUTH, 2011: 6

The increased mobility of women in society seems to have become a significant issue connected to the encroachment of modernity in rural Thailand. Amara Pongsapich notes how during this time Thailand shifted from a largely subsistence economy to that of market capitalism, with the first five year development plan implemented after 1961 (1997: 25). Pongsapich notes the changes brought about in family and community settings by industrialization: at first, it was only men who migrated in search of work, while the domestic domain of children and the home was left to women; however, with the development of a full cash economy, women also had to leave home in search of work to substitute this income (Amara Pongsapich, 1997: 26).

This new ability of the female threatened to undermine masculine prowess and patriarchy, particularly in light of its traditionally inferior designation to the masculine by the religious order. In the light of this new changing situation, the depiction of the mobile female outside of the family sphere as monstrous marks the supernatural in these films as potentially an extremely reactionary response to social developments that could potentially be progressive in the new opportunities and possibilities presented to women.

If the association of women and the supernatural in 16mm era film reflects how Thai patriarchy makes natural feminine subordination (as it makes natural the presence of the supernatural realm and its unquiet *phii*), then the productions therefore also allow a working through of the horrors of female empowerment in an era of rapid social change. The supernatural in these films

can therefore be interpreted as what Blake titles as a 'cultural attempt' to "bind those wounds in the interests of dominant ideologies of identity" (2008: 2) 'wounds' being the trauma inflicted upon Thai patriarchy by the wider social upheaval of increased female autonomy and mobility. The evil snake woman, the reanimated corpse of Nak and the murdering sky-spirit Taa-Nii all perform this social function, they are interpretations of cultural beliefs that are mobilized to seal the wound that has been ripped open during this turmoil and must be addressed. This attention then becomes a conservative reaffirmation of gender relations, illustrating that the reactionary classification of 16mm era horror films is deeply entwined with the function of these films as mass entertainment at a time when the stability of social norms was challenged by uncontrollable and unaccountable outside influences.

This depiction is also reactionary given the potential for the supernatural to provide a somewhat unofficial means of empowerment for disenfranchised women under the patriarchal system. As Thai anthropologists understand, the connection between the female and the supernatural discourse can be subverted by women to provide a means of empowerment in a staunchly patriarchal society that denies them agency. As a social discourse the supernatural is able to give the feminine a degree of autonomy and empowerment due to the distinct connection forged between the female's weak *khwan* and the *phii*. In 1971 Sangun Suwalert documented the *Moh Lum Phii Pha*, a traditional healing method from the Northeast conducted by a special ceremonial shamanistic team. It involved the possession of the leader (the *Kog*) by the benevolent 'Phii Pha' sky spirit who must then remove the spirit or ghost that is causing the illness in the client (Sangun Suwanlert and Yupha Visuthikosol, 1980). Notably, the *Kog* can only be a woman, because it is only the female qualities of being "warm, gentle and empathetic" (Sangun Suwanlert and Yupha Visuthikosol, 1980: 237) that can engender the folk songs and 'welcome atmosphere' that will reassure and persuade the patient to name the spirit or ghost that is possessing them. The spirit medium can communicate between "the human world and the spirit world or between the living and the dead" (Pattana Kitiarsa, 1999: 53) and therefore carries a significant amount of authority in society. Their weaker *khwan* also allows them to identify, interact and even become voluntarily possessed by the offending spirit, so removing it from the affected patient who has approached them for assistance. Tanabe Shigeharu identifies this as a dialectical process, in which the inferiority of the female under the patriarchal Buddhist order is subverted to become a source of power and authority through the older pre-Buddhist animist beliefs. Although dealing mostly with the transference of this phenomenon in the modern contemporary context, Tanabe

still states that “even before the 1970s-80s, this dialectical transformation was a general condition underlying spirit mediumship during the sporadic emergence of semi-professional mediums in village settings” (2002: 54).

Virtually all of the possessed participants in Sangun Suwanlert’s research into spirit possession in the 1970s are also village women, indicating not only their perceived susceptibility to this condition but also how it provides a means of negotiating the difficulties of living under such an extreme patriarchal social organization. The possession was often preceded by a disruptive or abusive incident and its cure required a degree of attention and respect not previously awarded to the subject. For lower-class Thai women, it appears that the supernatural provided a means not only of empowerment in the position of spirit mediums, but also a degree of social recognition for their inferior and increasingly difficult status. Incidents such as the infamous ‘widow ghost phenomena’ documented and analyzed by Mary Beth Mills, provide an illustration of how the supernatural constitutes “an alternative, largely counterhegemonic discourse on modernity” (Mills, 1995: 244) within sections of Thai society in which the experience of rapid modernity and rural migration had merely produced a new form of oppression and control. This source of power and legitimating of female authority with its ‘alternative’ discourse to that of the state sanctioned authoritative religion is regarded with disapproval and suspicion by authorities (Pattana Kitiarsa, 1999: 1).

16mm era Thai films therefore mediate the trauma of wider social change in lower-class society by demonizing both the new found ability of women in the modern age and the means by which women deal with this subordination (the dialectical empowerment offered by the supernatural in rural Thailand). It is therefore a reactionary and conservative model of film, as it responds to anxiety around social advances and developments that are potentially challenging gender norms with depictions that confirm the inferiority of and so the need for control over the female. Significantly throughout this, it remains a lower-class rural entertainment in that it functions within the lower-class context, responds to it, addresses lower-class viewers and negotiates it for them.

Contemporary Thai Cinema

The 16mm era eventually came to an end for a number of reasons. Chalida Uabumrungjit singles out the success of the films *Monrak Luktung* (dir. Rang-sir Tasanapayak, 1970) and *Tone* (dir. Piak Poster, 1970) as contributing towards standardizing the use of 35mm filmstock with synchronized sound in Thailand. Both were extremely successful and lie at the transitional point in

which Thai film begins to develop from the 16mm era 'cottage industry' into something much bigger. Productions were also usurped by the new and attractive American cultural influences that were bombarding Thailand at this time. Such influence shifted the thematic, ideological and formal parameters of Thai film away from the 16mm era. Thai film began to reject the village scenario and 16mm era film style in favor of American cultural conventions, suggesting that inherent within the championing of elite-sponsored American capitalism was a rejection of the 'inferior' rural lower-class Thai film style and point-of-view.

With the launch of the big budget new Thai industry in the late 1990s it appears that the lower-class perspective and situation that was primarily addressed and articulated by earlier eras of cinema has now been replaced. Nevertheless, new Thai films still engage heavily with supernatural themes and discourses, indicating the continued presence of this belief system within contemporary urban Thailand. This can be seen in successful films such as *Nang Nak* (dir. Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999), *Buppha Rahtree/Rahtree Flower of the Night* (dir. Yuthlert Sippapak, 2003), *Shutter* (dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, 2004), *See Prang/4bia* (dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun et al., 2008), *Baan Phii Sing/The House* (dir. Monthon Arayangkoon, 2007), *Krasue Valentine/Ghost of Valentine* (dir. Yuthlert Sippapak, 2006), *Baan Phii Pop* (dir. Bunharn Taitanabul, 2008), *Long Khong/Art of the Devil 2* (dir. The Ronin Team, 2005), *Ben Choo Gap Phii/The Unseeable* (dir. Wisit Sasanatieng, 2006) and many more. The supernatural myths and belief systems still function to negotiate a wider traumatic context, though many of these contemporary Thai ghost films hold very different relationships to wider political and social discourses. In the contemporary era this former audience is now marginalized by this elitist blockbuster industry and what scholar May Abadol Ingawanij calls its 'Heritage' productions. Films such as *Nang Nak* (dir. Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999) and *Bang Rajan* (dir. Tanit Jitnukul, 2000) still depict the rural lower-class village yet do so in a highly romanticized and nostalgic way that functions to construct a unifying nationalistic image of Thailand.

Significantly however, the presence of such discourses indicates that a belief system heavily associated with the marginalized rural lower-classes still continues to permeate Thai society. Wider research illustrates how this belief in the supernatural and the presence of spirits continues to contribute towards social organization even in the modern post-97 context and has remained a particularly important (and quite acceptable) means for Thai citizens to negotiate and respond to wider events in the contemporary age. Examples all indicate that the supernatural still exists as a prominent social discourse through which Thai citizens can negotiate their wider frustrations and anxieties.

Conclusion

The supernatural therefore has a long history of association with Thai film and continues to maintain this. Notably this relationship is one in which it continues to function as a means to negotiate the wider context for viewers, a function that was particularly relevant in the earlier lower-class 16mm era productions yet remains a crucial part of Thai film in the contemporary blockbuster New Thai industry. This discourse can therefore essentially enable a critical engagement with the relationship Thai cinema holds to Thai society and particularly with the socially repressed at a specific point in time.

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Globalized Haunting

The Transnational Spectral in Apichatpong's Syndromes and a Century and its Reception

Natalie Boehler

Introduction

Ghosts, spirits, and haunting pervade the cinematic universe of Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul. While much has been written on the cultural, spiritual, anthropological and atmospheric aspects of the spectral in his work,¹ questions concerning audience are equally interesting. Being a transnational filmmaker, his films reach all kinds of viewers, ranging from those with specific genre tastes including fantasy, docu-fiction and experimental to festival audiences interested in arthouse and auteur, Asian, and/or queer cinema. Since receiving prestigious awards, especially the 2010 Cannes Palme d'Or for *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives/Loong Boonmee raluek chat* (dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010), Apichatpong has become significantly more well-known and is now a household name among cinephiles. He is widely acclaimed internationally, and new films are awaited with anticipation. He has become a constant among contemporary world cinema auteurs and has served as a jury member at festivals such as at the "Festival Internazionale del Film di Locarno" in 2012.

Born in 1970 and raised in Khon Kaen, a town in the Thai Northeast, Apichatpong studied architecture before heading to Chicago to study film.² He began making film and video shorts in 1993, his early work clearly influenced by structural film. In 1999 he completed his feature-length debut, *Mysterious Object at Noon/Dokfa nai meu marn* (2000), a documentary on storytelling that traces the development of a storyline by inhabitants across various regions of Thailand. At the same time, he co-founded "Kick the Machine", an independent production company which produces his work as well as that of other independent Thai filmmakers. The company allows him to work outside the confines of the Thai studio system and its largely conservative political and aesthetic attitudes. His films have become increasingly well-known and

1 See for example the collection of essays in Quandt, 2009.

2 For an overview of Apichatpong's biography see Quandt, 2009.

successful, winning awards at numerous festivals in Asia and beyond. They recurrently feature nature, dreams, the supernatural, sexuality, local storytelling traditions, as well as Western perceptions of Thailand. They also frequently employ the use of unconventional and experimental narrative structures, such as split or multiple storylines.

Along with his films, Apichatpong is known for his artworks and installations which have featured in many international exhibitions. His first solo exhibition, "Primitive", was held in Munich in 2009. His artwork has also won prizes, most recently the Sharjah Biennial Prize and the Fukuoka Prize, both in 2013. Aside from his independent work, he has produced commissioned pieces for festivals and companies, such as the online film *Cactus River/Khong lang nam* (2012a) for the Walker Art Center in Minnesota, and the short film *My Mother's Garden* (2007a) for Dior. Apichatpong, who has made several features and numerous shorts, now lives and works in Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand. His latest feature film is the 2015 *Cemetery of Splendour/Rak ti Khon Kaen*.

From the beginning of his career, Apichatpong has been contextualized from a double perspective. On the one hand, he has been firmly and unambiguously declared Thai. Biographical notes and introductions usually mention his childhood and upbringing in Khon Kaen, his roots in the region, and his return to Thailand after his education in the USA. Critics as well as scholars frequently expand on the indebtedness of his cinematic expression to a Thai cultural context, tradition of narration, setting, and mindset. However, there is often no explanation of what these consist of or how they are to be understood. Beyond these (sometimes latently essentialist) attributions, there is a tendency among Western critics to ascribe the opaqueness in his work—of which there is a fair amount, due to its nonlinear narratives and non-logical plotlines—to his foreignness.

At the same time, he is clearly oriented towards other countries. This is commonly ascribed to Apichatpong's film education in the United States, and exposure to the 1960s American current of structural experimental film and accompanying European auteurs. When asked about the episodic narrative structure of his debut *Mysterious Object at Noon/Dokfa nai meu marn* (2000), a documentary on the creation of fiction, he mentioned André Breton's surrealist technique of the '*cadavre exquis*', where a story or drawing is collectively assembled piece by piece (Stephens, 2001). Biographical facts aside, the transnational orientation of his work has been crucial to its visibility and exposure. Since his debut, Apichatpong's work has been screened at countless festivals abroad, where it has won various awards. Since then, his films are mostly co-productions. His features are produced by his own company in collaboration with European production houses, and are co-funded by European cultural

institutions such as the French Ministry of Culture or the Hubert Bals Fund.³ This has allowed his films and art pieces to be accessed by a worldwide audience, making not only Apichatpong's modes of production, but also the reception of his work, highly transnational.

The double alignment—with Thailand on the one hand, and the global film and art world on the other—positions Apichatpong, and his work, in multiple and complex ways that sometimes leads to paradoxical readings, and creates the public image of a body of work that strongly oscillates between local and post-national or global culture. The oscillating nature of his status often leads to questions of nationhood, and of the status of his work as national cinema: is this a 'Thai' filmmaker or not, and who decrees him as such?

In this chapter, I discuss how the various ways in which Apichatpong's work is positioned come into existence through a multivocality inherent in the work itself, one that echoes various discourses and displays multiple transcultural trajectories. It is this multivocality that allows for an openness that makes the work accessible to various, and sometimes very distinct, audiences. The oscillating self-positioning of Apichatpong's films thus results from transnationalism not only in terms of production, circulation, and exhibition, but also in terms of style, aesthetics, and narration.

In order to discuss this ambiguous, oscillating identity, few loci seem more suitable than that of ghosts and haunting. As omnipresent as the spectral is in Apichatpong's work, the meanings and discourses it encompasses seem to be of a shifting, fluid, and not clearly localizable nature. While being accessible to various audiences—by reach of its circulation as well as by the complex levels of its meanings and contexts—the films remain mysterious. To show this, this chapter focuses on the aspect of spectrality in an Apichatpong film, the transnational sources that feed it, and the discrepancy between Thai and foreign responses it calls forth.

Ghosts and supernatural beings appear time and again in nearly all of Apichatpong's films. In *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives/Loong Boonmee raluek chat* (2010), a dying man is accompanied in his final days by the ghosts of his wife and son, by his former existences as a princess and a water buffalo, as well as by a group of monkey ghosts dwelling in the forest near his house. *Tropical Malady/Sut Pralat!* (2004) tells the story of a young soldier wandering into the dark depths of the jungle, looking for his lover who might have transformed into a mythic tiger-spirit being. The installation piece *Morakot/Emerald* (2007c) features disembodied voices that haunt an old hotel room

3 For an overview of Apichatpong's work, see: <http://www.tintup.com/kickthemachine-1369467041>.

in a derelict, abandoned building soon to be torn down, and reminisce about their long gone, youthful pasts. Connecting the themes of memory, history, and disappearance, Apichatpong's ghost stories also touch upon the subject of Thai national identity constructions and their political reach.

In this paper, I examine the spectral in Apichatpong's feature film *Syndromes and a Century/Saeng Sattawat* (2007b) and discuss how its narrative and visual openness allow for different readings by multiple audiences. To do so, I look at both Thai and Western discourses on the film. After that, I analyze a sequence from the film and examine the manifold discursive layers it is made up of. I argue that the haunting in the film, similar to the persona of Apichatpong and his work in general, signifies vastly different things to different people. Due to its hybrid nature, the film cannot be unambiguously localized, thereby confusing our sense of spatial belonging and thus eliciting strongly varying reactions. Among the strongest ones are the contestation over the filmmaker's belonging and the censorship case that the film gave rise to in Thailand.

Apichatpong as a Thai and/or Transnational Figure

The parallel lines of Apichatpong's national and transnational receptions became strongly apparent after the 2007 release of *Syndromes and a Century*. The film premiered at the Venice film festival in 2006. After successfully touring festivals, it was set to open in Thailand in April 2007. However, Apichatpong cancelled the film's local release after the Board of Censors insisted several scenes be cut (Rithdee, 2007). These scenes showed monks and doctors spending their free time engaging in various leisure activities, such as drinking or playing with a remote-control toy. According to the censors, this portrayal of doctors and monks—figures of respect—cast them in a bad light. Spearheaded by Apichatpong in the wake of this case, Thai filmmakers and activists formed the Free Thai Cinema Movement to protest against censorship (Ingawanij, 2008). The film was later shown in Bangkok cinemas as a short-time release reedited by the director. Apichatpong had replaced the banned scenes by pieces of black film with the same duration, taking heed of the censors' verdict and at the same time calling attention to the impact of their ban, as well as to the suggestive power of the black image. Nevertheless, *Syndromes and a Century* remained far more visible abroad than at home country.

For Western critics, to a great extent the film's appeal seemingly lies in its foreignness and its mysterious opaqueness. Reviews stressed the film's fantastic and enigmatic qualities, wondering whether its incomprehensibility could possibly be due to its embeddedness in a foreign culture (Bradshaw, 2007; Lim Li Min, 2006; Reichert, 2007). Some spoke of a cinema of re-enchantment and

emotional purity, employing tropes of primitivism and exoticism (Hilo, 2013). Several critics, among them A.O. Scott, mentioned the censorship case, and expressed puzzlement about it:

Syndromes and a Century, like its curious title, has the logic of a dream [...] it takes place just on the other side of conscious apprehension. This makes the recent demand for cuts by Thai censors seem especially odd, since, at least to an outsider, there seems to be nothing politically or sexually provocative in the film.

SCOTT, 2007

In Thailand, there is an ongoing debate about Apichatpong in relation to Thai nationhood. As critic Kong Rithdee writes:

When Apichatpong broke through [...] in 2009, a small clique of Thai critics announced the arrival of an exceptional talent. When *Blissfully Yours* went to Cannes in 2002, some of us were certain that we were witnessing one of the most unique filmmakers in the history of Thai cinema. But as his reputation grew internationally he remained an obscure figure in Bangkok at best, while detractors, either out of ignorance or ultra-conservatism, began the campaign of simplistic accusation that Apichatpong only made snooty arthouse films mainly for foreign audiences.

RITHDEE, 2007: 120

As Apichatpong became part of global cinema, conservative Thai critics accused him of selling out and losing his 'authenticity'. In the wake of his growing international success, however, he has been (re-)claimed as 'Thai'. Indeed, his prominent position in a global frame makes him an ideal representative of 'Thainess'—an imagined, idealized and undefined national identity.

Scholar Thongchai Winichakul describes 'Thainess' as follows:

In Thailand today there is a widespread assumption that there is such a thing as a common Thai nature or identity: *khwampenthai* (Thainess). It is believed to have existed for a long time, and all Thai are supposed to be well aware of its virtue. The essence of Thainess has been well preserved up to the present time despite the fact that Siam has been transformed greatly toward modernization in the past hundred years. Like other nationalist discourse, it presumes that the great leaders (in this case monarchs) selectively adopted only good things from the West for the country while preserving the traditional values at their best.

THONGCHAI WINICHAKUL, 1994:3

Although the discourse of ‘Thainess’ has a long history, there has hardly ever been a single, clear definition of what ‘Thainess’ consists of. It has been discursively claimed and instrumentalized by various ideological camps, and described by varying definitions, characteristics and manifestations, the major ones being the education system, the Thai language, the monarchy, and Buddhism. Its official, state-coined version has always been a key rhetoric employed by state powers to instill a sense of national belonging, distinctiveness from other nationalities, state unity, and civil obedience. Thai scholar Kasian Tejapira objects to this construction of ‘Thainess’ as a pillar of nationhood:

Try as the state may, Thai national identity never settles into a homogenous and unproblematic whole for the average people. In practice, what is regarded as Thai identity is more likely to be a ghostly mesmerizing by one or more of these characteristics.

KASIAN TEJAPIRA, 2001: 156

Meanwhile, criticism of official ‘Thainess’ is not well received by authorities. An extensive rhetoric of national identity and strict media censorship are among the most obvious measures employed by the state to control and manage public discourse about ‘Thainess’.

Opinions on how Apichatpong’s work relates to this imagined identity sometimes vary considerably. Thai critic Kong Rithdee declares his films as obviously and essentially Thai:

It’s both poignant and peculiar when we spot ourselves—our ancestors, our ways, remembered or forgotten—in movies that seem to be concerned with totally different subjects. We get that feeling a lot in Apichatpong’s films.

RITHDEE, 2007: 118

Meanwhile, Ladda Tangsupachai, director of the Ministry of Culture’s Cultural Surveillance Department, is famously quoted as saying, in the context of the ban of *Syndromes and a Century* (2007b), “Nobody goes to see films by Apichatpong. Thai people want to see comedy. We like a laugh” (Montlake, 2007).

Interestingly, both of these stances are to some extent essentialist. They appear to depart from the idea that there is such a thing as a national character, as well as a need to declare it. At this point, it becomes obvious that the Thai debate on Apichatpong’s work points to larger underlying debates: namely, those of Thai nationhood and its representation. It seems that Apichatpong’s status as ‘Thai’ is most clear and unquestioned when declared in foreign

surroundings and by foreign voices; in his homeland, this categorization seems to be more slippery and politically fraught. The following analysis of *Syndromes and a Century* (2007b) illustrates how the film prompts such divergent readings and positions.

The Spectral in *Syndromes and a Century*

Ghosts and spirits inhabit a prominent place in Thai popular culture due to its roots in local natural religions. They are also recurring elements in Apichatpong's films. The question of how the spirit world in his films relates to traditional popular Thai ghost lore might, then, be indicative of the way in which he is positioned relates to the discourse on 'Thainess'.

Syndromes and a Century (2007b) is not a ghost or horror film, either in any of the classical Western understandings of these genres, or in the sense of the Thai *Nang Phii* genre. The *Nang Phii* genre combines ghost tales, horror shock effects, humor, moral teachings, and elements of melodrama. It has been popular since the 1950s and 1960s, the classic age of Thai cinema. Well-known recent examples of the genre include *Buppha Rahtree/Rahtree Flower of the Night* (dir. Yuthlert Sippapak, 2003) and *Pee Mak Phrakanonong* (dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun, 2013).

Instead, *Syndromes and a Century* (2007b) might be characterized as an experimental feature with a split narrative. It is set in a provincial hospital and loosely follows a group of doctors, nurses, and patients through various nonlinear episodes. It is structured by a narrative split by a gap in time. The first half of the film is set in a not-too-distant past reminiscent of 1970s Thailand, while the second takes place in the present day, or possibly the near future. While the first half nostalgically features Thai idiosyncrasies, warm encounters, quirky humor, a budding love story, outdoor settings, nature shots and a lot of green hues, the second emanates a cold, sterile atmosphere. Its gleaming white and metal tones set the scene for tales of disconnection and alienation, while the modern hospital's hi-tech furnishings call to mind science fiction scenes. The sweet, shy love story that unfolds in the first part is replaced by a relationship that looks like it is heading towards separation.

While actual ghosts do not figure, there is talk in the film's first half of nature spirits, of "something that always watches us". Two women discuss this while resting in a lush, verdant garden when a solar eclipse occurs above them, seemingly confirming the mysterious supernatural forces they speak of. In the second part, this holistic, harmonious connectedness to nature abruptly changes into a more sinister and gloomy haunting. Spookily empty hallways

lit by fluorescent lighting, artificial limbs, and eerie half-animate machinery conjure the atmosphere of a dystopic, sci-fi end time. The stark contrast between the two parts seems to illustrate the disenchantment of the age of modernity, where an existence in balance with nature and its spirits gives way to technological angst.

Haunting as a Critique of Modernity

In some branches of current postmodern and postcolonial theory, ghosts have figuratively come to express a critique of modernity, its ideals of progress and its teleological worldview. The trope of haunting is characteristic of the postmodern age, as it reflects its discontent with the notion of a linear history, as well as its proclamations of the end of history (Derrida, 1994). In postcolonial cultures, ghosts often appear as the haunting memory of the colonial era and of the colonized, carrying this memory onward into the present day. Benedict Anderson calls this haunting memory a 'specter', based on Filipino writer José Rizal's description of the *'demonio de las comparaciones'*, resulting from the effect of seeing one's own culture as mirrored in another. Here, one simultaneously views from up close and from a distance, giving rise to an experience that thoroughly and irrevocably changes one's understanding of one's culture of origin. He illustrates this with the tale of his experience of hearing a speech by the then president of Indonesia, Sukarno, who applauded Hitler:

For myself, I felt a kind of vertigo. For the first time in my young life, I had been invited to see my own Europe as through an inverted telescope. [...] It was going to be difficult from now on to think of 'my' Hitler in the old way.

ANDERSON, 1998: 2

In the postcolonial context, the spectral is frequently employed as a symbol to express the voice of the subaltern, enabling it to be heard, even to take revenge, and thus to restore justice. As Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar write in relation to the ghost film and the postcolonial:

There can be a special relationship between the time of the ghost film and the postcolonial condition. The return of the dead suggests trauma, violence and the unfinished business produced out of colonial violence and cultural disjuncture. Furthermore, the disruption of linear progress by

the ghost's appearance from the past into the present can also constitute a refusal of the sequential logic of modern 'progress' and an assertion of coevalness.

BERRY AND FARQUHAR, 2006: 38

In cinema, too, ghosts increasingly appear not merely as beings; they function figuratively, embodying traumatic memories, the return of the suppressed and the voice of the marginalized. Berry and Farquhar describe Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) as a haunted film that reflects upon the distinct identity of Hong Kong, its special status as a non-nation, and its (re-)incorporation into the People's Republic of China in 1997 (Berry and Farquhar, 2006: 39). Similarly, Stanley Kwan's *Rouge/Yan zhi kou* (1987) has been analyzed in relation to Hong Kong's postcolonial culture (Bliss Cua Lim, 2009: 150). The Pang Brother's *The Eye/Gin gwai* (2002) contrasts a female ghost from rural Thailand, which is cast as the subaltern, primitive other, with the female protagonist from a modern, progressive Hong Kong.

As beings that visit the present day from a past age, ghosts disrupt the linearity of time, and in so doing, also call into question the future. Through these destabilizations, they confuse our sense of temporal orientation, creating what Berry and Farquhar have called 'haunted time' (2006: 39). Haunted space, then, is the location that houses haunted time. Moreover, it is a space ingrained with the confounding of memory: sensory perception is destabilized, and temporal and spatial experience becomes incoherent and unreliable. As space is not an empty void, but a surrounding experienced qualitatively by embodied beings, haunted space becomes an irrational, incomprehensible environment that challenges bodily existence itself (Curtis, 2008).

Seen in this light, the haunted hospital in the second half of *Syndromes and a Century* (2007b) becomes a metaphor for the dark underbelly of modernity—quite literally, as a part of it takes place in the building's basement. In the following analysis, I explore a specific sequence in detail, suggesting that the critique implied by haunting points to a Thai context in particular.

Multivocal Haunting: Sequence Analysis

The sequence in question is towards the end of the film and closes its second part. It begins outside the hospital, with the camera slowly circling a statue of a past king and his family. This image refers to the Thai practice of employing public imagery of the monarchy as a performative assertion of state power and national unity. Remarkably, the camera perspective in this shot is angled

steeply from below, unlike the frontal perspective usually employed in depictions of monuments and memorials.

The sequence then moves into the hospital basement. The camera glides through long, dimly lit hallways, accompanied by construction noises and a strange, droning ambient sound which has no identifiable source. We recognize the old-style corridors from the first half of the film. Turning a corner, we see a group of builders welding and realize that this is, in fact, the same hospital as in the first half, now in the process of reconstruction. The next takes are long, disconnected glimpses: an older female doctor waking from a nap in a desolate room filled with sundry bits of hospital equipment and false limbs; a couple furtively slipping out of a room and disappearing out of sight; a woman with a leg prosthesis limping down the hall; a young doctor at her desk, gazing into space. The characters appear isolated, lost in the vast white hallways and the fragmented narrative, their appearance lacking logical context.

The camera is either static or moves along in a slowly gliding, non-anthropomorphic manner suggesting the gaze of a dehumanized, ghostly entity, while the ambient sound continues throughout the entire sequence, intensifying towards the end. The final take moves along the tubing of a ceiling, through a smoke-filled room housing discarded technological equipment, and ends in front of a ventilation duct. For a long moment, we watch the smoke being sucked into the duct's void.

The dark round shape of the ventilation tube echoes that of the bright solar eclipse earlier in the first half, presenting its negative: the natural spectacle is replaced by eerie technology. This corresponds to the way in which the whole second half is modeled, as a dark modern-day mirroring of the first. This disenchantment is transported by the oppressive, haunted atmosphere of the sequence, and is composed of multiple sources and discourses. The ghostly, dehumanized gaze and long tracking shots along empty hallways remind us of Stanley Kubrick's work, especially the long hotel corridors in *The Shining* (1980) or the stark white interiors of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Meanwhile, the use of neon-lit, monochrome empty spaces and richly textured, droning ambient sound also refers to the style of popular Japanese horror movies.

In another discursive vein, gothic elements pervade the sequence: the old, haunted house modernized by naïve new tenants, the demonic basement that houses monsters, and the motif of the ghost in the machine—technology that comes to function independently of humankind and becomes destructive. Another classic gothic narrative element is the uncannily denaturalized human body; this element additionally hints at the science-fiction genre's taste for artificial beings. All in all, the spectral elements in this narrative are based

on sources and discourses belonging to the globalized uncanny—Kubrick's work, classic gothic tales, pan-Asian horror films, and science fiction dystopias. Just as the nostalgically Thai-style interiors and idiosyncrasies of the first part are replaced by modern aesthetics, its locally based animist features give way to horror and gothic story elements pertaining to a more globalized cultural repertoire.

However, the establishing shot of the statue of the royal family at the onset of the sequence lends a distinctly local context, suggesting a connection between local power and the haunted hospital basement. As the haunted space implies the dark underbelly of an institution—the hospital that is, in fact, itself sick—so the statue points to a higher institution, namely, that of the modern-day Thai state.

By addressing the state of the nation, *Syndromes and a Century* (2007b) follows a tradition of ghost stories as morality tales, where the haunting points toward shortcomings, injustices and unredeemed sufferings. Indeed, there is an underlying moral theme to the film. Whereas its first half features neighborly friendliness and intact social etiquette, the second part sees behavior that is deemed unruly: doctors on break take swigs of whisky and furtively kiss in their offices. These loose mores point toward an inadequacy often associated with modernity.

Since the haunting in *Syndromes and a Century* does not refer solely to pre-modern, vernacular belief systems, but includes postmodern narrative elements, the spectral here becomes multivocal and cannot be unambiguously located in time and space. This makes it accessible to multiple, disparate audiences, although in different readings and contexts, as the varying receptions of the film make clear. As the political critique in the film remains subtle and figurative, it escapes viewers unaware of Thai discourses on state power. To the Thai Board of Censors, however, it seems alarming, even though obviously difficult to pinpoint, as the censors' verdict shows.

Conclusion: The Ghost of the National

As the analyzed sequence introduces a modernist and transnational mode of haunting into the film and contrasts it with the Thai idiosyncrasies of the film's first half, *Syndromes and a Century* (2007b) adapts a multivocality that echoes the unplaceable, oscillating identity of Apichatpong's persona as a transnational filmmaker. Both he and his work are understood by his audiences as at once rooted in their country of origin and as part of a transnational mediascape, and thus not fixable to one specific place of belonging.

This characteristic of being unlocalizable adds to the haunting quality of the sequence. It cuts loose the film, which was previously clearly anchored in one geopolitical place, and sets it adrift in space. Just as the haunted space of the hospital destabilizes the viewer's perception and spatial orientation, the shift in setting and time from a provincial Thailand of the past to a modern-day, hi-tech, more anonymous and ambiguous setting is disorienting in terms of where the story is actually taking place and which systems of reference it adheres to. The haunted basement suggests a crisis of modernity and modern subjectivity. In connection with the image of the royal statue, this crisis also becomes pressing in terms of modern nationhood. Thus, the haunting in the film allows the political to be voiced, thereby expanding the storyline into a critique of the modern Thai state by introducing questions about, and destabilizing conceptions of, national identity.

This finding resounds with other works by Apichatpong in which ghosts appear as the voices from repressed, subaltern branches of history. Their haunting (re-)appearance calls attention to past and present injustices and grievances, and thus has a political reach.⁴ *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives/Loong Boonmee raluek chat* (2010) is set in the Thai northeast near the Lao border, a region with a long, troubled history of marginalization by the central Thai government. The film invokes the bloody prosecution of communists by government forces that took place there during the cold war era: its dialogues allude to past violence in the region, while the ghost characters refer to the silenced, traumatic history of the subaltern that never figured in official accounts of the state.

Ghosts linked with a critique of the state powers also surface in *Mekong Hotel* (2012b). In the film, a mother-ghost living near the Mekong tells the story of the region's past. Again, the setting is close to the Lao border, along the banks of the border/river which has seen much unrest since colonial times. *Mekong Hotel* broaches the issue of water and border politics in various ways: it mentions the state-enforced training of the local population to shoot enemy troops during border conflicts and the flow of refugees from Laos during the cold war era. It also touches contemporary issues such as the collaboration between the Thai and Chinese states to build dams on the Mekong. These giant projects form a serious threat to the region's environment and its inhabitants, and the film links these problems to the severe floods which ravaged Thailand while the film was being shot in 2010 (Boehler, 2014).

4 Spectres that refer to socio-political and historical traumas in a similar way are the topic of Henri Myrtiliens article in this volume.

In 2012, Apichatpong collaborated with fellow artist Chaisiri Jiwangsan at the “documenta 13” in Kassel in Germany, creating a sculpture called “The Importance of Telepathy”. The sculpture features a tall, veiled ghost figure set in a park, surrounded by hammocks and wind chimes. In Apichatpong’s words, the sculpture is reminiscent of ‘Phi Boon’, a Thai ghost who uplifts people from their suffering with poems and songs. Phi Boon also became a figuration for the rural revolts against the central government which continued until the 1950s, when government forces executed the revolutionaries (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2014).

Cinema that invokes silenced memories prevents them from being forgotten or concealed and is thus a political act. When asked in an interview about his view on political cinema, Apichatpong answered:

The political in my work is something that is hidden, but you slowly become aware of what happened historically in the particular place. For me, that’s a strong way to send a message. [...] When you undertake artistic activities you give importance to the people who survive, or who really bear the history on their shoulders. This fact is already political, and an artist cannot avoid it.

KIM JI HOON, 2009: 50

Nationhood and national belonging seem to be the actual specters that haunt the debate about Apichatpong and the question of his status as a Thai filmmaker. As Apichatpong and his work oscillate between being perceived as ‘Thai’ and as foreign-oriented, localization is eschewed, and the attribute ‘Thai’ itself becomes more difficult to define and essentialize. If a Thai filmmaker is well-received abroad as ‘Thai’, but works in an unconventional way, speaking of uncomfortable aspects of his country, how is he to fit into state-approved concepts of nationhood? The extent to which Apichatpong is a difficult figure for conservative understandings of ‘Thainess’ leads to the assumption that, in the wake of transnational film culture and industry, the idea of nationhood seems to be at stake, persisting as an urgent, yet contestable, figure of reference. Indeed, it appears to be the conservative concept of ‘Thainess’ itself that is becoming increasingly unclear and hard to localize.

Outlook: Transnational Audiences

While the multivocality and openness of meanings communicated by *Syndromes and a Century* (2007b) might be an effect of transnational filmmaking,

the film's multiple audiences are a result of its transnational circulation. As meanings come into existence only through audiences, transnational careers enable filmmakers to be seen and heard not only in various places, but also in various cultural and sociopolitical contexts, as well as at various levels of meaning, depending on the contexts in which audiences are rooted. Who sees what in *Syndromes and a Century*? What appears to some as mysticism, orientalist spirituality, or obscurity, is to others obviously embedded in local context, an allusion to a present time that is out of joint, and even an overt criticism of state authorities. By way of its unfixity, the film oscillates between various levels of meaning and remains elusive in terms of clear-cut, explicit statements. It is in reactions to the film that its multivocality and political dimensions appear.

As haunting breaks up the coherence and linearity of time and space, it creates a kind of non-localizable space. Seen from this viewpoint, the transnational appears to be an adequate place for films that feature haunting, since transnational films are not localizable in terms of belonging to a national cinema, but instead open up new possibilities of identity and belonging for filmmakers as well as audiences through their unfixity in space and geographical place.

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Pencak Silat, Ghosts, and (Inner) Power

Reception of Martial Arts Movies and Television Series amongst Young Pencak Silat Practitioners in Indonesia

Patrick Keilbart

In this chapter, I employ an anthropological approach to media, cultural mediation and circulation, and focus on the perspective of a particular audience, namely young *Pencak Silat* practitioners. Following Patrick Eisenlohr's (2011) 'dialectics of mediation and immediacy' I examine the relationship between different dimensions of mediation and the dynamics of spirituality. My initial starting point is the representation of the mystical and supernatural in Indonesian television, a broad genre Mark Hobart (2006) refers to as *mistik* which has emerged in the post Suharto era of media liberalization. As *Pencak Silat*, the Indonesian martial art, is intrinsically tied to the practice of supernatural powers and mysticism, young practitioners represent a key target group for *mistik* television programs. I argue that due to current changes in *Pencak Silat* education and in dealing with mysticism in general, students are particularly attracted by media that make the spiritual appear more immediate and real. In a subsequent case study, I introduce a prominent *Pencak Silat* school, examining how it is embedded in the context of circulating media imagery and public discourse on spirits and related human mediation. To conclude, I will explain why young members of the school are a promising interpretative community. In line with Foucault's theory of self-modernization, they experience value orientation and cultural mediation, encountering media as "shaping and sometimes even overriding human agency" (Eisenlohr, 2011: 1).

Television Mysticism, Infotainment Horror, and Martial Arts Movies

In Indonesia, as in other Southeast Asian countries, ghost movies and 'television mysticism' have become popular forms of entertainment. Scholars' attention to the social impact of such forms of entertainment indicates the need for research on media as a means of reshaping popular culture and the relationship between media audiences, producers, and content (Hobart, 2006; Bubandt, 2012; Arps and Van Heeren, 2006).

Indonesian horror movies featuring ghosts are a particular growth industry. Interestingly, recent ghost movies have been primarily set in urban areas, and have often featured a female avenging ghost, such as the *pontianak* or *kuntilanak* (Bubandt, 2012: 11–12).¹ Placing the Indonesian turn to ghost movies within the global marketing of the mystical and a new psychologized understanding of ghosts, Nils Bubandt describes the relationship between media and the belief in spirits as mutually reinforcing:

The commercial logic of global media responds to a perceived increase in the belief in spirits, while at the same time promoting the very same beliefs. [...] The globalization of the psychological notions of the self through scientific discourses facilitates the reinvention of spirits in several ways.

BUBANDT, 2012: 18

After the end of former President Suharto's New Order (1998), the scaling down of state surveillance and censorship of the mass media allowed for the introduction of new genres and television formats. The category *mistik* (television mysticism; see Hobart, 2006) comprises various sub-genres and different representations of the supernatural, from the purely fictional (such as ghost and horror movies) to, most remarkably, supernatural reality show formats.

After media liberalisation, commercial stations started to broadcast low budget stories about the supernatural for evening viewing. By 2002, almost every channel had slots devoted to *mistik*. [...] Indonesian television channels have turned the supernatural into a distinctive mode of reality show.

HOBART, 2006: 399

What *mistik* programs, according to Hobart, have in common is the threat they pose to social and political order, presenting another order that is different from both formal religion and rational modernity.

One of the new Indonesian television phenomena illustrates how the subsequent altered relationship between discourse and media is a factor in recent cultural change. The newly formed (local) genre 'infotainment horror' addresses mystical and supernatural issues in a reality show format

1 The *pontianak* or *kuntilanak* is a vampire ghost in Indonesian and Malay mythology and folklore. It is typically conceived of the spirit of a woman who died during pregnancy.

concentrating on authenticity, interactivity, and public interaction. In their case study on the Indonesian reality television program “*Pemburu Hantu*” (Ghost Hunters), Bernhard Arps and Katinka van Heeren indicate a shift in representation of the supernatural. The team of “*Pemburu Hantu*” is engaged by ‘victims’ who report disturbances in an office building in central Jakarta. The team of ghost hunters includes supernatural experts, *Dukun Kejawan* (Javanese magic specialist) and *Ustaz* (Islamic authority figures). They use prayers and mantras in order to be protected by supernatural energy and perform *Pencak Silat* moves to drag ghosts into empty glass bottles, to capture them. Before the ghost hunt begins, viewers at home are asked to participate in *doa interaktif* (interactive prayers) for God’s support. At the end of the show, all participants—including skeptical bystanders—comment on the ‘proven’ existence of supernatural beings who, as underlined, are also acknowledged by the Qur’an. Arps and van Heeren conclude that representation of the supernatural highlights its integration within daily life in modern Post-Suharto Indonesia, maintaining references to elements of old Indonesian and Javanese culture (2006: 289–304).

Southeast Asian martial arts films like *Ong-Bak* (dir. Prachya Pinkaew, 2003) from Thailand or *Merantau* (dir. Gareth Evans, 2009) from Indonesia similarly refer to local cultures and were therefore commercially successful on a local and international level. These films are distinguished from other Asian or American productions by their traditional, culturally charged background stories and emphasis on specific (martial) artwork. The crucial characteristic held in common by all martial arts action films is the spectacular staging of combat sequences, realistic or aestheticized martial arts choreographies. The mental, spiritual, or ethical dimension of the martial arts is also an inherent (although marginal) part of the story line in these films. On the contrary, the ‘supernatural’ referring to ghosts or spirits is rare in so-called Asian martial-arts action cinema today.² In contrast, in Indonesian film and television, supernatural martial arts characters enjoy a strong presence.

During my eight month stay in Bandung in 2009, I frequently watched evening television programs with the two teenage sons of the host family. In this chapter, I will use one of their favorite series *Wiro Sableng* (dir. Herry Topan, 1996) as a case study: The main character and hero of the series is Pendekar Wiro Sableng 212, a young, good-natured *Pencak Silat* fighter who has to prove

2 Exceptions such as the US-American production *The Last Airbender* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 2010) or the Chinese production *The Sorcerer and the White Snake* (dir. Ching Siu-Tung, 2011) are to be classified as fantasy adventure movies, taking place in a fictional setting and with fictional characters.

himself over the course of many adventures. His main weapon is a double-headed battle axe with a carved snake head as its handle, which can shoot magical poisoned darts, but only through the application of inner powers. Wiro Sableng has a wide range of supernatural abilities (*kesaktian*), including *Pukulan Sinar Matahari* (strike of sunbeam), *Pukulan Angin Es* (strike of ice wind), *Pukulan Harimau Dewa* (strike of the tiger god) or *Ilmu Silat Orang Gila* (lore of the crazy fighter). In his adventurous travels, the young hero is guided and supported by his old and wise master Sinto Gendeng, who educates him spiritually and in the control of his supernatural powers. Despite the exaggerated representation of the supernatural, the series makes clear references to its origin in Indonesian and Javanese martial arts, and their embedded codes of conduct.

In mainstream Indonesian film and television productions aimed at the local market (such as *Wiro Sableng*), martial arts are reconnected with the supernatural and magic, protective spells, objects charged with energy, human, nature or animal spirits. In ghost films as in infotainment horror like "*Pemburu Hantu*", (primarily female) ghosts are contacted or exorcised by (male) supernatural experts. *Pencak Silat* is exercised in order to invoke supernatural powers for protection, to restrain bad or traumatized spirits. This medial trend runs counter to both religious doctrinal purification processes in general, and to a 'sportification' of the martial arts in particular, both advanced by governmental and non-governmental actors. Important figures at the helm of the Indonesian *Pencak Silat* Federation (*Ikatan Pencak Silat Indonesia*, IPSI), certain Muslim groups, and members of parliament have long jointly pushed a shift in the socio-cultural and political climate. From the 1980s onwards, the government policy on belief systems was gradually revised and mysticism strictly separated from religion. At the same time, IPSI underwent a drastic shift in attitude by disregarding the mystical elements that, until then, had been acknowledged as an integral element of *Pencak Silat* (Maryono, 2002: 232–235). Since the establishment of New Order Indonesia in the 1960s and continuing with the reform expectations (*reformasi*) of the Post-Suharto Era (after 1998), the state has propagated progress, development, and modernization. In short, state-ideology incorporated modernization theories, particularly in relation to matters of religion and beliefs; spirits and ghosts were rendered synonymous with irrationality and pre-modernity, and therefore in opposition to modernity and modernization. New Order meta-narratives of national unity, progress, and development were also incorporated into the Indonesian *Pencak Silat* Federation IPSI. Subsequently, esoteric aspects of the art were suppressed, while sporting competition and nationalist imaginaries of a common cultural heritage were cultivated. The impact of these changes can be felt in many areas today.

Martial Arts, Agency and (Inner) Power

To clarify the role of *Pencak Silat* in Indonesian society, I will briefly delineate its development, changes of meaning and use of the martial arts, and the character of the *pesilat* (*Pencak Silat* practitioner). All of the advanced *pesilat* I met in Indonesia proudly stressed the important role of the martial arts in the formation of Indonesian culture or culture per se, most of them associating it with the historical significance of both regional and national culture. Legends and myths about the origins of *Pencak Silat* have one thing in common: a natural phenomenon or animal's behavior acts as creative impetus for the martial arts. In West Java, for example a pair of monkeys fighting with wooden sticks is said to have inspired observers to invent self-defense techniques. Similar stories can be found in Sumatra, where a fight between a large bird and a tiger spirit is called upon (Draeger and Smith, 1969: 177–178; Cordes, 1992: 206–208; Maryono, 2002: 34). Another interesting aspect of *Pencak Silat* mythology is the gender reversal that occurs: whilst in the real world *Pencak Silat* is mostly dominated by men, and female masters are generally exceptions, in mythology women are often pioneers of martial arts. Many legends portray women as observers and therefore originators of self-defense. Unanimously, the origin of *Pencak Silat* is self-defense, involving the adjustment of the human being to environment, and including protection against threats from nature and fellow humans. In the era of Hindu-Buddhist empires, the practice developed in two contrary ways, elitist military and spiritual education dominated by the courts, on the one hand, and a form of self-defense and *Penca* dance of the common people, on the other.³ In the course of Islamisation, martial arts education mixed with accordant religious teachings and spread throughout all layers of society. In the colonial period, Islamic ethics and Javanese ethical philosophy were forwarded by *Pencak Silat* masters. Yet, the two opposed ways of development mentioned above, continued in the shape of the *perguruan*, the institutionalized form of *Pencak Silat* education emerging at that time. Derived from the word *guru* (teacher), a *perguruan* comprised a master and his group of students, often living with their teacher at his home and assisting him in his daily work. A master designed his school either on the basis of secrecy and privilege, or affording exchange and acculturation of their knowledge (of *Pencak Silat*). Most Sumatran schools kept exclusive to family

3 Martial arts techniques and theory including spiritual knowledge had an elitist character and were kept secret within the *keraton* (royal palace). Among the common people, basic self-defense techniques and entertaining *Penca* dance were frequently exchanged (Kulke, 1999: 99; Maryono, 2002: 45).

members (*kekeluargaan*), preserving their culture and knowledge, while in many Javanese schools, based on a more loose fraternity principle (*persaudaraan*), acculturation among different styles and *perguruan* was common.

Evolving resistance against the Dutch divided Indonesian society in two and created new roles for *pesilat*, like the *jago* (fighter). These martial arts experts were said to use magical powers (gained through Qur'an studies) in their fight against the oppression of the Dutch. *Jago* were admired "heroes of the oppressed people"—Javanese 'Robin Hood's' who fought for social justice by stealing from the rich Dutch to support their poor fellow men. At the same time some of them did not just steal from the Dutch but from other villages as well. Some *jago* did not fight the colonial apparatus, but supported the Dutch as watchmen or supervising workers. This meant that the *jago* were "simultaneously protectors and oppressors of the people. [...] This economic structure employed *Pencak Silat* as an instrument of social control to govern coolies and rural communities" (Maryono, 2002: 59, 66).

Subsequently, during the Japanese interregnum, *Pencak Silat* underwent a process of militarisation, but only in the struggle for independence was it linked to the propagation of national identity. This association was cultivated in the process of standardization and nationalisation pushed for by Suharto's New Order regime. The consequences of this development were diverse. National identity was indeed attained amongst young *pesilat* and those masters who adjusted their *perguruan* to IPSI parameters, namely government requirements, while the identities of other *pesilat* developed in conjunction with regional, cultural, or mystical-spiritual criteria, contrary to standardization efforts and government (*Pancasila*) ideology.⁴

The Indonesian state's policy on religion, i.e. the tension between doctrinal religion and alternative belief systems, becomes apparent in the correlation between *Pencak Silat*, mysticism, and the concept of Inner Power. In Indonesia and especially in Java, *Pencak Silat* and *ilmu batin* (inner knowledge) are commonly used to connect with powerful, protective spirits and *alam ghaib* (the unseen world). As Lee Wilson explains, *Pencak Silat* training involves physical aspects of the practitioner's body, and the inner, spiritual aspects. Through the practice of *ilmu batin* one may become *sakti*—i.e. possessing supernatural abilities. A *Pencak Silat guru* in Jakarta demonstrates *kesaktian* (being *sakti*) by protecting his students while they chew on pieces of broken glass. The *guru* ascribes his capacity as protector to God's strength (*kekuatan*), and the

4 From 1978 on, all political parties and mass organizations had to set the government's *Pancasila* ideology as *azas tunggal* (ultimate principle) to foster national identity (Dahm and Ptak, 1999: 244).

invulnerability of his students to his spiritual potency as a ‘transmitter’ (medium) of this strength. The conventional explanation of abilities such as invulnerability is not control. Rather, according to Wilson, agency is deferred to a higher, spiritual authority (Wilson, 2011: 64–67).

Reconciling this conception of ‘deferred’ agency and *kesaktian* with current dynamics in, and scientific theories about Indonesian beliefs, the concept of Inner Power needs to be reconsidered. Benedict Anderson’s dominant paradigm of *kesaktian* as spiritual energy concentrated in a person, and of power as concrete, finite, and embodied, has been challenged (not least by Anderson himself).⁵ Still, for Anderson, the central problem raised by the Javanese conception of power is not its exercise, but its accumulation, concentration and preservation. Through yogaistic practices, meditation, and asceticism, a person might focus or concentrate power within himself. Signs of this (not the demonstration of its use) can be found both in the person and in his environment, in society (Anderson, 1972: 28). Taking into account the relational aspects of concepts of power in Indonesia, Hildred Geertz emphasizes the interpersonal aspects of transactions between social agents that are *sakti*. Geertz describes these transactions as the “most intense form of intercourse that mortals can have with intangible, unseen beings and powers”. Moreover, she understands conflict as an important aspect of the system of ideas of *sakti*: “for only in fighting others can one’s *sakti* be tested” (Geertz, 1994: 85). The importance of the maintenance of interpersonal relations (“between efficacious beings, both visible and non-visible”) is refined by Niels Mulder’s explanation of *kebatinan* (mystical power teachings), as documented in his study on Javanese mysticism:

The individual attracts them [the electrons], and if the voltage, the charge is high, it means that you have a good contact with God. [...] He [Ki Darmomartopo] emphasises that *kebatinan* as metaphysics, with its logic of positive and negative electrons, is a natural science. It is the science of God; it reveals what you are looking for and what you’ll find.

MULDER, 2006: 55

5 In his classic paper on “The idea of power in Javanese culture” (1972, 1990), Anderson argues that power is not an abstract aspect of a relationship, but a concrete ‘existential reality’ (1990: 22). In his later article “Further adventures of charisma” (1990) as in the works of Koentjaraningrat (1980) and Adrian Vickers (2012), this concept has been criticized and modified. Despite the differences between the theses, power is consistently identified as tied to conceptions of refinement, mental strength, self-composition, and serenity.

The description of *kebatinan* as a science (of God) illustrates the ‘scientification’ of mystical belief in reaction to modernization ideology. In the context of *Pencak Silat* and *kebatinan*, power relations and agency become subject to transformation processes, even as *kesaktian* maintains a centre of reference for political and societal influence.

Changes in dealing with mysticism and transformations in *Pencak Silat* education have evolved in parallel and are linked with each other. As mentioned above, a *perguruan* involved a very personal relationship wherein a master shared his knowledge not only of self-defense but also his spiritual wisdom.⁶ This intimate relationship has largely been displaced by less personal group trainers (*pelatih*) and affiliation with the *perguruan* as a national institution (Cordes, 1992: 263; Wilson, 2011: 70). The connection made by *kebatinan* practitioners between ‘supernatural powers’ and a higher authority is redefined by IPSI, such that manifestations are rendered as scientifically explainable phenomena attributable to the ‘mental-spiritual’. IPSI has successfully enforced a rationalistic approach to Inner Power practices.⁷ In introducing categories like metaphysics, *tenaga dalam* (Inner Power), and the ‘mental-spiritual’, large-scale *perguruan* in IPSI have distinguished their concepts and practices from *kesaktian* and *kebatinan*. In contrast to mystical discourses, *tenaga dalam*—Inner Power—is explained as a reservoir of power existing within each individual, that is grounded in certain metabolic processes, and that can be activated and controlled systematically. As in Mulder’s explanation above, and verified by my own findings, this rationalist approach is combined with reference to a personal relation with God. Subsequently, the individual is accredited with agency, while social cohesion is strengthened within the *perguruan*. Particularly large schools cultivate an (inter)national image and collective identity referring to the Javanese fraternity principle of *persaudaraan* (see above). Students are thus united and find strength in feelings of mutual respect (Maryono, 2002: 53).

Due to these changes in *Pencak Silat* education and the new approach to mysticism, students have become notably attracted to media formats that make the spiritual appear more immediate and real. But before exploring the role and function of media in the shifting understanding of Inner Power,

6 *Pencak Silat* students commonly assisted their guru in house and fieldwork. Training sessions took place in the evening, including mystical-spiritual education. Young men were often sent to a *guru* in a distant village by their father to learn *Pencak Silat* as rite of passage to adulthood (Draeger and Smith, 1969: 179, 180; Maryono, 2002: 49, 53; Wilson, 2011: 68).

7 Lee Wilson (2011) entitles that shift in interpretation “From the mystical to the molecular”.

a short side note on how *kesaktian* maintains a centre of reference for political and societal influence is necessary.

Excursus: Mbah Marijan and *Merpati Putih*

The prominent *Pencak Silat* school *Merpati Putih* (MP) and, more generally, the public reception of supernatural powers in central Java illustrate social patterns and cultural discourses. The *perguruan* is popular for its inner power practices, and is favored by IPSI for promoting the ‘mental-spiritual’ whilst rejecting mystical assertions. Maintaining imaginaries of cultural heritage, MP “traces its origin to a system of self-defence and spiritual development taught in the royal palace of Amangkurat II, sultan of Mataram, in the 17th century” (Wilson, 2011: 71). The sultanate and the ‘special region’ (*daerah istimewa*) Yogyakarta are, to the present day, seen as connected to and protected by the forces of the cosmos and nature. The *Merpati Putih* annual meeting “*tradisi tahunan*” takes place at Parangkusumo, a beach and village area about 30 km south of the city of Yogyakarta, where the goddess ‘Ratu Kidul’ is said to reside. Here, ritual cleansing is performed by the MP leadership and all participants of the *tradisi tahunan* perform ascetic practices and meditation. The goddess of the southern sea, Ratu Kidul, allies with the sultan in a spiritual union and offers protection for Yogyakarta and the sultan’s palace (*keraton*). This connection extends to the volcano Merapi as well, whose male spirits are connected with the spiritual beings of the sea. In the traditional Javanese world-view, the individual, society, nature, and the cosmos are inseparably linked. Political leaders are dependent on nature and the cosmos for spiritual legitimization. Therefore, a natural disaster—like the eruption of Merapi in 2006—has implications for the political ruler and may be interpreted by the people as a loss of power and failure in mediating with the spirit world (Schlehe, 2006: 225). While the role and position of *Merpati Putih* on the situation remains undisclosed, the local people considered the sultan’s legitimation (as successor of Mataram) to be undermined; the loss of *kesaktian* led to a loss of political and societal influence. In contrast to the sultan, Mbah Marijan, the *juru kunci* (‘key guardian’ of the volcano) at that time, was still considered as *sakti* and was venerated by the local population. The *juru kunci* is responsible for interaction with the spirit world, and for related ceremonies protecting the region of Yogyakarta from destruction by the volcano. His popularity, his role as representative of the spiritual, mystical dimension of Java—and his elevation as opponent of the sultan—were all substantially influenced by the media (Schlehe, 2006: 228). Prominent *Pencak Silat* masters as well as lore appear to be somewhat

contentious issues for the public and in the media. Social and cultural constructions may remain hegemonic, like *kesaktian* remains a centre of reference for political and societal influence, but they may also become contentious and contested. Television provides and reflects circulating media images and public discourse on spirits and their mediation through humans. In the following, I will argue that representation of the mystical in fictional and non-fictional media, and what Eisenlohr (2011) calls the ‘dialectics of mediation and immediacy’ may best be analyzed from the perspective of the audience, precisely of young *pesilat*.

Young *Pesilat*, Inner Power and Medial Agency

Both Mbah Marijan and *Merpati Putih* are good examples of how media shapes and even overrides human agency. Mbah Marijan did not regard himself as an opponent of the sultan. However, this media-created image of him was further reinforced after the *juru kunci*'s death during the eruption of Merapi in 2010.⁸ This example demonstrates how the promotion of the rationalized ‘mental-spiritual’ and the rejection of mystical assertions by IPSI and *Merpati Putih* are contested by circulating media images of the supernatural powers of *Pencak Silat*. Such contestations are further reinforced by *mistik* television programs like “*Pemburu Hantu*”. In the field setting of Indonesian martial arts, different dimensions of mediation relate to each other, and situated uses of media technology become observable.

The question “What is a medium?” has occupied scholars from various disciplines. Media may be defined as agents of transmission, in the centre of a multilateral communication process. For media researcher Stefan Münker a medium includes not only communication, information or entertainment media, but also, taking up his example, a psychic medium in a spiritualistic *séance* (Münker, 2009: 39). In essence, a medium is constituted by the distance between (or alterity of) two poles differing in function, like sender and recipient, computer memory and screen, producer and audience (2009: 40). In accordance with Bruno Latour, all objects must be treated as part of social networks; therefore, non-human media (technologies) are also capable of acting or

8 See for example the BBC news online article from 27 October 2010 referring to the *juru kunci* who stressed his duty to the sultan, and quoting a Javanese farmer “To us, Maridjan is as important as Merapi. Now that he’s no longer around, who’s going to look after Merapi?”

participating in networks.⁹ Combined with Patrick Eisenlohr's anthropological approach to media, the key question becomes: how do media circulate images and discourse, not as autonomous, but as generative and creative forces, providing more immediate forms of interaction? "[R]eligious practitioners often recast older claims for a more direct or 'immediate' access to supernatural forces through their deployment of contemporary media technologies" (Eisenlohr, 2009: 11). They authenticate religious experience and authority through new, audio-visual media. Different dimensions of mediation and the more immediate connections new media technologies provide imply the dialectics of mediation and immediacy (Eisenlohr, 2011: 2). In the case of *Pencak Silat* and *mistik* television, these dialectics of mediation and immediacy become manifest in dealing with ghosts and supernatural powers as portrayed on television. With Patrick Murphy, I argue that ethnography is the method of choice to analyze processes and relations because "it facilitates the researcher's ability to examine most fully the way media are read in conjunction with situational and interactional relations" (Murphy, 1999: 481).¹⁰ Audience ethnography, to this end, should adopt participant observation to study media audiences, and the role of their values and world views (plus acknowledging the influence of the ethnographer on participants).

Based on existing contacts with branches in Java,¹¹ young members of *Merpati Putih* serve as the interpretative community for my audience ethnography. Some research has already been done on *Pencak Silat*, Inner Power practices, and schools like *Merpati Putih*.¹² However, I focus on a phenomenon that is rather new to the field: for young *pesilat* trained in the use of Inner Power, mediation and immediacy determine self-perception and social agency, their habitus. As outlined above, a *Pencak Silat guru* no longer mediates between his students and a higher power (God) in a close personal relationship. Rather, since the nationalization of large scale *perguruan*, standardized training is delegated to *pelatih*, who mediate between students and the *guru*. Within a standardized training and graduation system, students are arranged into skill

9 Referring to the constructivist approach of Latour and the Actor-Network-Theory, I approve the inclusion of media (technologies) in the actor-network that produces and circulates culture—in the form of images and discourse.

10 Murphy himself refers to Ang (1996) and Press (1996).

11 Since 2008/2009 I have maintained contact with young members of *Merpati Putih* in Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta.

12 For example Donn F. Draeger (1970), Jean-Marc de Grave (2001), Ian Douglas Wilson (2002), Lee Wilson (2011).

levels, where they learn and exchange experiences together. Further, in the school's self-distinction from mysticism and *kesaktian*, students are taught to believe in self-reliant Inner Power and/or an immediate personal relationship with God. In short, agency is accredited to the individual while at the same time social cohesion is strengthened within the *perguruan*.

These dynamics are picked up, reflected and reinforced by the media. In fictional television formats ghosts, spirits and supernatural (human) beings become publicly obtainable; they are "examples of the ways in which phenomena derided as 'irrational' or 'superstitious' attain new reality and believability" (Bubandt, 2012:18). This may also apply to the supernatural abilities of the young Wiro Sableng and his old and wise spiritual master, and the (somewhat romanticized) picture of their close personal relationship. Infotainment horror such as the reality show "*Pemburu Hantu*" advances the (visual) routinization of dealing with ghosts and the supernatural. The involvement of bystanders or 'normal people' and the performance of *Pencak Silat* in ghost hunts represent 'immediate' encounters with *alam ghaib* as part of daily life in Post-Suharto Indonesia. Counter-examples, such as the television documentary *Pendekar Trans 7* (dir. Atiek Nur Wahyuni, 2011) (and related internet video clips)¹³ on *Merpati Putih* and other schools, mediate between a *Pencak Silat guru* and students (or the public), and illustrate the expression of Inner Power as immediate, individual, and rational, in accordance to IPSI's self-distinction from mysticism.

The idea that both mediated rationalistic Inner Power and *mistik* (television mysticism) may have a significant effect on the self-perception of Indonesian youths has been demonstrated in the news media such as a *Jakarta Post* article entitled: "TV mysticism blamed for increase at asylums" (Susanto, 2005). In the article, an Indonesian doctor claims there is a direct link between supernatural television shows and the apparent rise in cases of mental illness among youths who have a deep belief in mysticism. As cited in the article, a common explanation given by diagnosed youths is that they want to compare their own powers with those of the people shown on television.

Of course, the direct connection between *mistik* television and mental illness can be doubted. Yet, according to my hypothesis, young *pesilat* are torn between trust and mistrust of media images. In line with Foucault's concept

13 *Pendekar Trans 7* (dir. Atiek Nur Wahyuni, 2011) is a television documentary in which *Pencak Silat* masters and schools are portrayed. Inner power and art (*seni*) schools are exclusively represented. The mystical aspects of *Pencak Silat*, supernatural powers or connections to the spirit world are excluded.

of self-optimization and self-modernization through spiritualization,¹⁴ students aspiring to achieve *tenaga dalam* (Inner Power) are notably attracted by media that make the spiritual appear more immediate and real. If the official distinction between rationalized Inner Power and (obsolete) mysticism is not fully accepted by young *pesilat*, medial representation of the supernatural may produce confusion—as described in the *Jakarta Post*. In any case, the media reflect the dialectics of immediacy and mediation apparent in *Pencak Silat* education; they appear as generative powers that “remake human subjectivities and socio-cultural worlds” (Eisenlohr, 2011: 2). What remains questionable is the extent to which national modernization and the strategies used by the societal agents described above succeed in ‘modernizing’ youths and their habitus. How are potentially popular and rationalized forms of spirituality constructed and implemented? Which media content and themes are picked up or consumed by young Indonesian *pesilat*? Based on my hypothesis, one must ask which interests and psychical needs are satisfied by the described film and television formats, and what potential changes in the value orientation of Indonesian youths (through the adoption of medial discourses) can be observed.

Mediation and Modernization

In 12 months of fieldwork (2014–2015), I conducted participant observation and audience ethnography in *Merpati Putih* branches in Yogyakarta and other cities in Java. The structure of the school, which has become a national and international institution, is characterized by a strict hierarchy and also by constant change, concerning both its organization and the canon of knowledge. In 1977 the administrative centre of the *perguruan* was established in Jakarta, while Yogyakarta retained its status as ‘knowledge centre’ (*pusat keilmuan*). National expansion through the establishment of branches throughout Indonesia, as well as the opening of *cabang MP* in the U.S. (1999) and Europe, have been reshaping the self-conception and spiritual education of the school. Most recently, the death of grand master (*guru besar*) and founding father Saring Hadi Poernomo, or Mas Poeng, in 2013 caused a power vacuum has not yet

14 Michel Foucault defined ‘techniques of the self’ as “those reflective and voluntary practices by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make of their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (Foucault, 1992: 10–11).

been filled by the present leadership.¹⁵ Two effects are particularly relevant here: First, continuous sportification and rationalization of *Merpati Putih*, for example the introduction of sport competitions for Inner Power and ‘Vibra Vision’¹⁶ in 2014, are partially met with skepticism or rejection. Some of the young participants expressed dissatisfaction with their limited success in the competitions, which they explained by the competitive atmosphere, and implied the incompatibility of Inner Power and competitive sport. One of the contestants noted: “It’s impossible, [the control of] Inner Power needs time, calmness. I cannot concentrate like this”.¹⁷ Second, the coordinators and *pelatih* in every *cabang* may not have had such a close personal relationship like that of *guru* and student in former times, but—especially since the death of Mas Poeng—matters of Inner Power or supernatural phenomena have become the responsibility of trainers and teachers at the students’ ‘home *cabang*’. According to my observations, students today turn to their immediate educators whenever they have related questions or concerns, and *pelatih* are usually proud and honored to assist them with their proficiency.

Against this background, it is possible to analyze media content and themes that are picked up or consumed by young *pesilat*, and the ways they deal with those contents. Young *pesilat* consume representations of *Pencak Silat* and martial arts in general, of supernatural powers, mystical-spiritual practices and themes on television on a regular basis, both in private and collectively (e.g. in the MP student office at the campus). Apparently all television representations, from documentaries, news coverage, reality television shows to fictional films and cartoon series, are of equally great interest for young *pesilat* in MP. Comparisons and discussions about content, techniques, extraordinary feats

15 While Mas Poeng was venerated as *guru besar* or grand master, and represented the primary authority of the school, the leading committee *dewan guru* (Mas Yadi, Mas Nardjo, Mas Mul, and Mas Poer) and also the *pewaris* (heir) of Mas Poeng, his son Mas Hemi, cannot claim or embody such authority. Despite its strict hierarchical organization, the death of Mas Poeng has led to more differentiated power structures and power struggles within the *perguruan*.

16 For competitions in ‘Vibra Vision’, participants are blindfolded and then have to navigate through an obstacle course, in which different colored cloths are located at different places. In a certain time they have to find and name the color of the various cloths, without touching the obstacles. Establishing a system of sporting competition for ‘Vibra Vision’, formerly mystical practices and supernatural abilities are being integrated into the state and religious system.

17 Taken from interviews with contestants at one of the first Inner Power sport competitions at the “MP IPB Open” in Bogor, on 15 November 2014. Translation from Bahasa Indonesia by the author. The contestant wished to remain anonymous.

and occurrences, amongst each other and with *pelatih*, are par for the course. The common question amongst *pesilat* is: “Is this real (what we see on television)?” These representations of supernatural powers are most controversially discussed, and the final authority on questions of authenticity or legitimacy is the *pelatih* or educator, who assesses questionable content either proactively or when asked on the subject. Indeed, my enquiries indicate that young *pesilat* are quite well able to distinguish between staged, exaggerated, fictional representations of supernatural powers and realistic, potentially ‘real’ content, and that they commonly approach the former with subtle humor. That particular kind of humour or irony is also expressed in comments about fellow MP students’ success or failure in competitions or demonstrations of Inner Power. These ideas are expressed by ‘*sudah sakti*’, that is, to be in personal possession of spiritual energy, or ‘*belum sakti*’, to not yet be in possession of spiritual power. By using humor, they dissociate themselves and MP Inner Power practices from mysticism and outdated concepts like *kesaktian*; and they consult their educators for advice, when they encounter debatable representations on television. Discussing media images, Inner Power practices, *mistik* television, and potential confusion (of real and unreal), young MP members and *pelatih* alike absolutely negate such experiences or cases in MP. According to them, it is not members of *Merpati Putih* who are torn between trust and mistrust of media images, but young *pesilat* who still believe in mysticism, who do not have educators guiding them in their interpretation, or most likely people who are not taught *Pencak Silat* Inner Power at all. The *pelatih* Mas Andi told me:

Well, if young people do not have the right guidance and education, if trainers or teachers don’t guide them in [the practice of] Inner Power or the mystic, the spiritual, yes, that is dangerous, because then they cannot know what is real and what is not.¹⁸

This leads back to Hobart’s notion, stated in the beginning of this article, that *mistik* (reality) television programs potentially pose a threat to social and political order, because they present another order that is different from both formal religion and rational modernity. As Hobart concludes, the hierarchy of society is ultimately not seriously threatened, because traditionally recognized experts are portrayed as restoring order; they “comprise a conservative response to uncertainty” (Hobart, 2006: 402). The case study on *Merpati Putih* and young MP members’ dealing with television content presents a more

18 Interview with Mas Andi, *pelatih* of MP *cabang* Cirebon (Parangkusumo, 23 November 2014). Translation from Bahasa Indonesia by the author.

differentiated picture. In *Merpati Putih*, students are being educated to regard Inner Power as an immediate, individual, rational and modern practice, in sharp distinction from mysticism. Still, *pelatih*, who mediate between *guru* (or the leading committee) and students, emerge as a new authority and determining agent in the mediation of mystic-spiritual phenomena via television. Thus, *mistik* television does not seriously threaten the social order, for the reason that new concepts and new experts are being established to prevent confusion and uncertainty. Young *pesilat* in MP adopt and shape medial discourses, they dissociate themselves from mystical practices shown on television, and related beliefs. This suggests that popular and rationalized forms of spirituality are implemented successfully, displacing the routinized picture of the supernatural reflected on television; they are indeed modernizing youths and their habitus. However, it remains questionable whether the described trends fully account for changes in the value orientations of young *pesilat*. Considering the cult of the past¹⁹ maintained in *Merpati Putih*—again, especially since the death of Mas Poeng—and the subtle mood of nostalgia often expressed by seniors in MP, allows different considerations of students' behavior and their reception of *mistik* television programs. Discontent with Inner Power sporting competitions, the intensive consumption and discussion of *mistik* television programs, and the—even though ironic—references to old concepts like *kesaktian* might also be interpreted as not openly expressed nostalgia for past times, when *Pencak Silat* and Inner Power were not yet rationalized, demystified, disenchanted. In this sense, *mistik* television programs, martial arts films and series, and the visual routinization of the supernatural, sustain ideas and practices of a past, into which certain values (like a close, personal, and immediate relationship to a *Pencak Silat guru*) can be projected. The question of psychological needs that might be satisfied by the television formats described above can only be partially answered here. To obtain a more complete picture, other channels for young MP members and *pesilat* need to be analyzed. These channels need to be both more interactive and anonymous, enabling them to express thoughts, ideas, and experiences not in line with state ideology and the guidelines of their *perguruan*. What *mistik* television and the reception of young *pesilat* clearly show is the contradiction between high audience appeal of those contents on one side, which can be ascribed to a certain nostalgia for past beliefs and values, and explicit rejection of past beliefs and practices on the other, that

19 Although modernization is a very important policy at *Merpati Putih*, a connection and reference to the past, the school's link with the *keraton* of Yogyakarta and its genealogy (which is traced back to Amangkurat in the 18th century) is equally important. This cult of the past includes a personality cult of the now deceased Mas Poeng.

indicates drive for modernization and the successful implementation of state ideology. Dissociating themselves and MP Inner Power practices from mysticism and traditional concepts, while avidly consuming and discussing related television programs, young *pesilat* develop a specific mode of spectatorship. This mode of spectatorship, wavering between fascination and ironic distance, reflects the dialectics of mediation and immediacy young *Pencak Silat* practitioners experience in their spiritual education, and especially in dealing with *mistik* television.

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Ghost Movies, the Makers, and their Audiences

Andrea Lauser in Conversation with the Filmmakers Katarzyna Ancuta and Solarsin Ngoenwicht from Thailand and Mattie Do from Laos¹

Andrea Lauser

Introduction

In the DORISEA research project “Spirits in and of Modernity” (Peter J. Bräunlein and Andrea Lauser), communication with ghosts is a central theme. Typically, academics focus on communication with spirits in trance, possession cults, and through spirit-mediums. However, communication with spirits also plays a central role in many ghost movies. This applies both to the film characters who encounter ghosts, and to the audience which visit dark cinemas and voluntarily expose themselves to an encounter with ghosts. However, ghost movies are more typically associated with popular culture and entertainment than with religion or ritual. Nevertheless, Southeast Asian ghost movies often deal directly with culturally rooted beliefs in the afterlife, concepts of good and evil, and the idea of *karma*. These are eminently religious themes. And yet, few if any fans would connect their passion for ghost movies with religion as such. As researchers, we are interested in precisely this interface between popular culture and what is commonly referred to as religion. Popular ghost movies both reaffirm and draw on religious worldviews. Indeed, their popularity can only be understood through the way they draw on established, religiously structured, worldviews. In the cinema of ghosts, religion, entertainment and modernity merge in surprising and remarkable ways.

The audience reception of ghost movies is particularly interesting, with audience research posing particular methodological challenges. Kasia Ancuta and Solarsin Ngoenwicht in Thailand, and Mattie Do in Laos are involved in different aspects of film production, and especially ghost films. In this interview these producers, directors and scriptwriters each offer unique understandings of ghost movies audiences, their expectations and cultural background.

1 The interview was conducted in the context of a joint workshop by the research network DORISEA (Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia) and VICAS (Vietnamese Institute of Culture and Arts Studies) 2013 in Hanoi. See *DORISEA Working Paper 17* (2015) on <http://www.dorisea.de/de/node/1733>.

The Interviewees

Mattie Do is a Lao film director born in Los Angeles, California. She originally trained as a make-up artist and worked on film productions in Europe and the United States before moving to the capital of Laos, Vientiane, in 2010. Since then, she has been working as a consultant to the film company Lao Art Media. In Spring 2013, Mattie, her husband and Lao Art Media wrote, created, produced and released Lao's first horror film, *Chanthalay*. Mattie Do is currently working on her second feature film *Dearest Sister* (Lao: ມັ່ງຮັກ), which was selected to be screened at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival as part of the “La Fabrique des Cinémas du Monde” program.

Katarzyna ‘Kasia’ Ancuta is a Gothic/Horror scholar devoted to the search for Asian Gothic. Her current academic research and publications focus mainly on Southeast Asian ghost and horror films. Her academic portfolio can be accessed through her website (www.asiangothic.houseoftoyols.com) and you can also follow her facebook page dedicated to Asian Gothic (www.facebook.com/bangkokgothic). Aside from that, she occasionally works as a scriptwriter on film projects, often together with her husband, Solarsin Ngoenwichit. Born in Poland, she has been living in Bangkok for nine years.

Solarsin Ngoenwichit is a Thai artist and filmmaker. His involvement with film started in 2005 in the US, where he worked as art director on *Journey from the Fall* (dir. Ham Tran, 2006). Since his return to Bangkok he has worked on more than a dozen Thai and foreign film productions in the region, most often as a set designer/decorator. He currently has two projects in development—*Panang*, a ghost/monster movie and *City of Ice*, a drug-related action drama set in Bangkok. His directorial debut, *Panang*, was selected as part of the NAFF Project Spotlight 2014 at PIFAN (“Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival”).

Andrea: *When designing a film script or working as a director, I imagine you keep the future audience—or an imagined viewer—in mind. This is likely a crucial aspect in creating ghost movies, which rely on captivating the audience by playing on their apparent desire for fear. In any case, people who enjoy watching ghost movies expect to be confronted with this style of fear. This is the case for the ghost movie genre around the world. What types or aspects of fear that are or have been used in films are specific to Thai/Lao ghost movies? Or, put another way, which shock or horror effects work well, or are conventions, in the Thai/Lao ghost films?*

Would you say that there are special or specific challenges to making a Lao or Thai ghost movie? How do you imagine your audiences? Do you create your film for an imagined viewer or an imagined audience?

Kasia: Ghost films represent the essence of horror in Thai cinema. By definition, Thai horror movies are almost predominantly ghost movies (*nang phi*), with a touch of black magic on the side, which still matches the supernatural theme. The non-supernatural horror films, known as *nang sayong khwan* are very rare, and currently marketed rather as thriller than horror, for instance Kongkiat Khomsiri's *Cheun/Slice* (dir. Kongkiat Khomsiri, 2009) or Nonzee Nimibutr's *Khon Lokh Jit/Distortion* (dir. Nonzee Nimibutr, 2012). The label *nang sayong khwan* seems to me more like a theoretical possibility than the legitimate category. I have never actually heard any of the Thai directors using it to describe their or anyone else's films.

Post-1999 Thai ghost films have changed from the original genre productions, which were characterized by plots revolving around traditional folkloric and animistic spirits with a focus on the portrayals of rural life. Contemporary Thai ghost films tend to favour the spirits of those who suffered violent deaths (*phi tai hong*) and urban settings, and generally owe a lot to the pan-Asian ghost film stylistics, where the vengeful ghosts are predominantly female, and all look like clones of Sadako from *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998). These new Thai ghost films seem to fit the global expectation of a ghost movie better than the pre-1999 films, which to outsiders often seem too comical, or even cartoonish. The conventions that are quite noticeable, and that have been imported from Hollywood and Japanese/Korean horror movies are the frequent greenish/bluish coloration of the films, the over-reliance on inducing fear through loud and sudden sound effects, and the construction of fear through the detailed display of bodily damage: both in the victims and the ghosts, which tend to be very material in such movies.

I think, probably the largest challenge for any ghost filmmaker in Thailand is that the audience is used to films based on stories taken from local ghost lore, or built around 'real' cases, which have already crystallized into a more or less fixed account. It is difficult to sell a ghost plot as pure fantasy, and the filmmakers are often criticized for not being 'true' to the story. It is also rather difficult to come up with new and different designs for spirits and creatures that exist as the part in the local imaginary—a certain *phi* is always expected to look the same and follow exactly the same habits.

As much as I believe every filmmaker has some kind of an idea of his/her audience when embarking on a film project, I also think this idea should not become a limitation. When working on a script I personally try to think more

of a broad horror audience than a Thai horror audience specifically. Perhaps this is because as a horror fan myself I feel more connected with the former, while in Thailand I will always be to a certain extent an outsider.

Solarsin: Many Thai people see the connection of ghosts with Buddhism and they have certain fixed ways to imagine what happens after people die. For instance, they believe that the four elements break free from the human body—first the wind, then the fire, then the water and finally earth, as we become dust. Since the wind is the first to go, traditionally many movies used the image of the wind to introduce the coming of a ghost. This was also accompanied by a sound—usually dogs howling in the night.

I think the biggest problem when making a Thai ghost movie is overcoming the stereotypes. There are so many stories out there about very similar ghosts. How do we tell a new story? When making any movie the director is the first audience. As a director you need to be able to see yourself as the member of the audience. This is also true when making a genre movie. Every step of the filmmaking process should be concerned with how to create entertainment for the audience, and this also means how to make the director entertained. If you cannot enjoy what you are making then nobody will.

Mattie: Well, my film *Chanthalay* (2013) was the first Lao horror film, so that first screening was a really interesting experience. I wasn't sure what to expect exactly, and the response from the audience really ended up shaping how I put together my next film. From a Western perspective, I know *Chanthalay* isn't really a 'scary' film since the film never really jumps out at the audience or tries to shock with gore, but it really scares Lao people. The film centres on this girl Chanthalay trying to communicate with her deceased mother through the family shrine, and this idea of calling out the spirits for messages is a really scary concept for them. In particular, there's a scene in the film where Chanthalay's father desecrates the shrine and I have had people tell me that was absolutely terrifying, whereas I think Western audiences approach the scene from the dramatic perspective of what's happening between the two characters.

I can't really speak about Thailand, but here in Laos, the hardest part would be the research of trying to make sure that the supernatural or 'superstitious' aspects are accurate to the culture. Lao spiritual belief varies drastically person to person, as does religious worship and practice. I didn't want to rely on Thai horror tropes, I wanted to make something uniquely Lao. My next film presents an entirely different view of the Lao Buddhist afterlife, both in terms of how the spirits operate and how that world looks, but both have basis in Lao belief. I have really tried to tap into something that the Lao audience will

recognize as their own, since they've only seen horror films that play to foreign beliefs and foreign fears.

Referring to the audience I think, first and foremost, I just try to get the story to the point that it feels like a movie that I would want to see myself even if I had no involvement in it. Then, I think I just try to make sure that it's something my cast and crew can get really excited about working on, since I really work with a close group of friends. And once we're all really excited and feel like it's working, I just trust that the film will find an audience of people like us. The response to my first film was really shocking, because people were tapping into parts of the film that I hadn't even thought about at any time while I was making the film. So I was reading reviews or talking to people, and then going back to watch *Chanthalay* again to try to see what they were seeing. But, I don't know how I'd even start to think about the film from all those angles, so I just make sure I'm making the film that I really want to make.

Andrea: More than anything, ghost movies are characterized by the evocation of the uncanny. How would you characterize the uncanny in the context of Lao or Thai culture? Would you say that there is such a thing as a specifically Lao/Thai uncanniness? Are there culturally specific characteristics to Thai/Lao ghosts which make them distinct or unique? How do the ghosts interact with the living in your movies?

How would you describe the role of religious and cultural beliefs communicated in Laos/Thai daily life and communicated in your movies? Do you use these elements to create 'horror' in your movies?

Mattie: One of the things I love about Laos is how close they feel to the supernatural. Talk of spirits and hauntings are sort of an everyday affair, and most people have their own stories of these sort of paranormal encounters. I know I do. And the Lao are deeply superstitious, so there is a lot of daily thought put into their personal relationship to the spirits around them. So in my films, I try to trespass across the borders of these superstitions. That said, we had a couple of real hauntings on set while making *Chanthalay* that actually caused us to shut down production for the night, to light incense and offer prayers to make sure we were all right with the spirits in our locations.

Unlike Western ghosts or phantoms, Lao ghosts tend to be these physical, tangible things rather than wispy, translucent apparitions. They don't float weightlessly. In fact, my next film sort of touches on this idea that an encounter with a Lao ghost might not be immediately apparent, the protagonist has trouble discerning between the living and the dead. And like I said, most Lao people have a personal story about interacting with the dead, so the idea of it

is sort of commonplace and not, by itself, necessarily a scary thing. I can't just put a ghost into my movie and expect that to frighten Lao audiences. What frightens them more is the context of the encounter, or the results of interacting with the spirit world.

I think I'd be wasting a massive opportunity if I didn't use Lao religious and cultural beliefs as the backbone of my films, simply because it's a culture that hasn't been examined in this medium. I am the only Lao filmmaker making horror movies, so everything I work on is crossing into unknown territory for my audiences, and I think that allows me to sort of keep the audience on edge since they can't necessarily anticipate what will happen next or what the consequences of particular actions will be. A big part of my first film revolves around this idea that the family spirit shrine is a daily conduit for communicating with the dead. And my next film, strangely enough revolves around the spiritual divination of lottery numbers...

Kasia: When I first came to Thailand in 2004 and started watching Thai ghost films I was struck by the uniqueness of their ghosts and spirits, which often were too strange to me to comprehend. Today, the more I watch regional Southeast Asian horror, the more I become convinced that this 'uniqueness' is pretty much shared within Southeast Asia. Take the most iconic Thai spirit—'Phi Krasue'—the flying head with entrails. You can find variations of this spirit in Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines—with different names and different specific mythologies but similar all the same. This is also similar in the case of perhaps the best known type of ghost—the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth.

For me, trying to come up with a script for a ghost movie made in Thailand is always a challenge. I was brought up as a Catholic and have been living in a predominantly Buddhist country for nine years now. I have an understanding of the connection between Thai ghosts and popular forms of religion but I cannot say I 'feel' it myself. So I'm always at a danger of over-intellectualizing things.

I am always interested in creating new types of ghosts and monsters in the script, characterized by their hybridity, something that being a non-Thai and a horror expert I feel I can contribute to. In doing so, I try to pay attention to what I understand the functions of ghosts in Thai beliefs and in Thai cinema are, and then try to make these ghosts accessible to horror fans who do not know much about Thailand, but have their own expectations about ghosts in horror movies.

Solarsin: Every ghost is unique because it carries a different personality. Thai ghosts are normally understood in connection to *karma*, and their function

is to teach the living not to do bad things. In the movie I'm currently making, the ghost lives among the living. The character is loosely based on Phi Krasue, which is more like a living person who is possessed by a spirit, rather than the ghost of a dead person. Most of the time the character looks and acts like anybody else in the village, only sometimes she turns into the flying head creature.

In Buddhism, anger is one of the major sins, called *dosa*. Anger happens in nature, which means we are born with it. You can fight *dosa* with *metta*—tenderness. In my movie, the transformation of a person into a spirit/creature is caused by anger. When you get angry you become a monster, and then you can hurt others. When you calm down you become a human being again. The secret to staying human is to control your anger.

Andrea: *In the context of horror-film, Julian Hanich (2010) explains a specific aesthetic strategy, called 'suggested horror'. Suggested horror relies on intimidating imaginations of violence or threat evoked through verbal descriptions, sound effects or partial, blocked or withheld vision. While in direct horror the viewer primarily perceives a visibly horrific cinematic object to which he or she responds emotionally, in most cases of suggested horror he/she visually concretizes through imagination a merely aurally present horrific object—and it is precisely this concrete and vividly visualized horrific object of imagination that scares the viewer.*

What is your opinion of this theory? Do you know this strategy, and do you find it plausible? Do you employ this strategy in your films? Which forms of horrific objects of imagination interest you in particular? Which cinematic elements/techniques (figures, language, music, myths, beliefs, etc.) do you employ most to produce feelings of horror among your audiences?

Mattie: That's interesting. One of the limitations of working in Laos is that local censorship won't really let me show what I guess you would call 'direct horror', it all has to be suggested or I can't screen the film. I can get away with a little blood or maybe some makeup effects, but that's about it. So I haven't really thought about it much since the decision has already been made and it's one of my working parameters. And like I said, my Lao audiences don't find the spiritual encounters themselves nearly as frightening as the context and consequences of the encounters. So I spend a lot more work on the drama and tension surrounding the haunting, and very little time trying to orchestrate that one perfect 'jump scare' moment.

I think one of the really cool things about telling Lao ghost stories is that unfamiliarity foreign audiences have with the culture. So that gives me the chance to throw some unexpected twists at the audience, or to allow me to sort of lead

foreign audiences into something they think they can anticipate, before taking them in an unexpected direction that comes from the uniqueness of Lao belief. For example, *Chanthalay* has a twist that comes at an unexpected moment in the film that really sets up some unsettling consequences for the characters. But it's a moment that works perfectly from a cultural standpoint.

More than anything, I think I try to have my characters approach the supernatural in ways that most Lao people would be too superstitious to act. *Chanthalay* stands at the spirit shrine and asks the spirit of her mother to manifest, and later in the film her father loads the shrine into the back of his truck and pushes the pedestal over. Both of these moments elicit gasps from Lao audiences because they would never risk offending the spirits in that manner. There's a protocol for spiritual worship here, and nothing scares the Lao like breaking that cultural or religious protocol.

Solarsin: I think that the effectiveness of such a strategy depends on the ghosts you want to portray and it also depends on the audience of the movies. If you compare this to food, for instance, sometimes your body needs just a small appetizer but sometimes you need the full course. The most important thing is to meet the needs of the audience. In Thailand, you also have to remember that censorship is creating certain strategies of inducing horror as well. For instance, if you want to show a naked body being taken out of a water tank, you would not be allowed to show the whole body in a close-up, or some specific details, so the way you end up showing the scene may be influenced by what you are actually allowed to show. The same goes for using weapons—you cannot, for instance, show a close-up of a gun being placed against someone's head.

It is important to remember that we're talking about making a motion picture, so the most obvious way to scare the audience is through picture and sound. I would use a lot of smoke to add to the visuals to blur out the edges and distort the division between reality/illusion. I would also use a low and echoing sound to create a sense of vacuum, empty space, and loneliness. Also, it is important to include a lot of visuals focusing on the actors' reactions—to use their reactions as a form of a testimony that they really have seen a ghost.

Kasia: I have always believed that the power of suggestion is extremely important in creating the atmosphere of horror in a movie. At the same time, as a horror fan, I know how frustrating it can get when you never get to see the horrific images you have been promised. This is why horror has embraced both ghosts and zombies—as the audience appreciates being scared through the subtle hints of moving curtains and windows bursting open, but they also like

to see someone's brain being eaten in all the gory details. Found footage horror films have found their specific niche when dealing with suggested horror, and the things that tend to happen off camera, or are only barely visible on screen. At the same time, not everyone is a fan of found footage horror and many fans find the lack of action and lack of visuals of such films really annoying.

The strategy that definitely works for me when creating the feeling of horror in the audience (speaking from the perspective of a fan) is the use of slow, long takes and the slow build-up to some horrific revelation. This technique requires of the audience to focus very closely on the movie as even momentary inattention can result in missing the appearance of the ghost. At the same time, the tension is built through slowly changing music, without the need to employ the exaggerated sound effects that have become popular in so many American movies. I think this technique worked really well for early British ghost films (and it's still used, as the second part of *The Woman in Black* (dir. Tom Harper, 2014) demonstrates). I have also found it used a lot in Japanese horror. What really puts me off is the use of loud explosive sound effects that make the viewers jump before they actually see anything. Unfortunately this seems to be a standard today, and this is also what you see in most Thai ghost films. Similarly, the typical Thai strategy of using exaggerated sound effects, similar to cartoons, which is often used in ghost comedies and occasionally in more serious ghost films is my personal pet hate, and I find it very distracting. It does appear to work with the Thai audience though.

Andrea: Ghost movie fans expect certain emotions to be aroused, and the films must arouse them, these include goose bumps, chills, shock, fear, anxiety, the feeling of the uncanny. They also expect certain generic devices, including certain ghostly figures and themes. It is interesting to note that the ghostly figure of the avenging woman is known and understood throughout Southeast Asia. Popular ghostly figures in the West such as vampires and zombies are, in contrast, barely present. How would you explain these differences? Is the 'female ghostly' particularly terrifying, or disturbing, and if so, can you tell us more about that?

Do you think the female ghostly figure is linked to wider discourses about womanly traits? And if so, why and how? Might it be that conniving and other negative traits are often considered womanly, to the point where, if a man were to engage in such behavior, he may be looked down upon for 'acting like a woman' or even considered to actually be a woman.

Solarsin: In the old days the average life span was very short. Men were dying in wars and women were dying while giving birth. But you had a smaller

chance to die in a war than to die in childbirth, so I guess that's why we have more female ghosts. Also, in traditional beliefs a lot of men who died and became ghosts went on to become angels (*thep*), while women ended up either as holy spirits or scary ghosts, since even in death they were lower in the hierarchy than men.

Also, I think that horror has always explored themes which are considered tabu in a given culture. In Europe, vampires drink blood because drinking blood is considered wrong and disgusting. In Thailand, people actually eat blood soup, so our ghosts do not show this preference, but some ghosts, like Phi Krasue are often described as eating filth—excrement, umbilical cords and placenta, which are considered disgusting by people here.

When it comes to the behavior of ghosts, I don't see much difference whether it is a female or male ghost. Most of the time the ghosts come at night and scare you, and you fear for your life, rather than just fear a ghost. There are however some specific ghosts that are strongly gendered, like 'Phi Tanee', a female ghost that uses her sex appeal to lure men into having a sexual relationship with them, and then makes them waste away until they die.

Kasia: Female ghosts and monsters tend to dominate horror movies wherever they are made, which obviously reflects the universal nature of the 'monstrous feminine'—the general association of women with evil and destruction, which in feminist discourse is attributed to the overwhelming patriarchal order of the world. This is no different in Thailand's strictly hierarchical society, where the women have always taken a lower position. In Thailand, the division is quite obvious: men are expected to live pious lives and have access to salvation through Buddhism (they can for instance become monks, and are often even expected to do so). The access to Buddhism is slightly restricted for women—as they get it through men rather than directly—and on the other hand, women are considered more susceptible to all sorts of supernatural powers. Women are considered to have weaker souls and therefore be more open to possession by spirits, and more inclined to dabble with occult for their personal gain (for instance, using love potions) rather than spiritual enlightenment (a more manly pursuit). And since in traditional beliefs you often become a ghost as a result of abusing magic—this also means that more women get 'punished' for their trespasses in this way.

When it comes to *phi tai hong*, or ghosts who died violently, a woman also seems a better candidate, as she personifies an innocent victim. But also, not so well trained in Buddhism, she seems more likely to be stuck on revenge rather than letting go of her suffering and achieving transcendence.

Thai female vengeful ghosts have certainly been analyzed as representative of the broader situation of women in Thailand, but I don't think they are portrayed as specifically 'female' in the films. I mean, they are more 'ghosts' than 'women' and their behavior does not seem to be marked by any specifically feminine traits. I can think of perhaps one motif that may be seen as more 'womanly', in *Baan Phii Sing/The House* (dir. Monthon Arayangkoon, 2007), we have a female ghost appearing in a traditional Thai dancing costume—which I suppose is quite gender specific—not the dancing as such, but the fact that women and men are expected to look and dance differently. The plot of the movie is quite complex: at first the ghost is supposed to be the ghost of a female actress, later we find out that the 'real' ghost is the ghost of a transsexual who died during a botched operation to look like the female actress. So there are plenty of gender speculations here.

Andrea: Mattie, both Chanthaly and Dearest Sister feature strong female leads. And both films deal with the topic of a 'sick body'. Chanthaly has problems with her heart, and in Dearest Sister the rich cousin has lost her sight. In this sense, you appear to be exploring women's role in the family and society in your movies. How are popular discourses about women and men then connected to the Lao horror imagination, and to cultural and spiritual beliefs?

Mattie: Laos is a very hierarchal society, and that hierarchy is sort of represented by men who are often backed by strong women. That said, it's hard for women to advance on their own merits. I have always sort of been interested in sort of introducing my female characters to that first moment when they consider the idea that they can act independently, and then give them the means to sort of exercise that independence. In *Chanthaly*, exercising this independence leads to some pretty dire consequences, and actually, the film was almost banned here in Laos due to the character's disrespectful attitude toward her father. We meet Chanthaly at the same age that her mother was when she died of the same terminal condition that Chanthaly herself has, so I think that's a real introspective moment for her. She starts the film staring death in the face, and that's before the ghost makes her first appearance.

Dearest Sister is also a film about female independence, and sadly, there are sort of two ways that a poor girl in Laos can change her socio-economic standing, and that's either by marrying into wealth or through prostitution. And while these two elements exist in the film (the first directly, and the second implied), I wanted to give my little village girl character a third option. The blindness in *Dearest Sister* is interesting, because on one hand it is robbing the rich cousin of her independence, while simultaneously giving a measure of independence to the poor girl.

Andrea: *To what extent is the enthusiasm for the ghost movie genre age and gender specific? Or are there other important demographic features of ghost movie audiences aside from age and gender, such as living in urban or rural areas, level of education etc.? Or are these films popular across the board?*

Where did your fascination and passion for horror movies come from? It might have been easier to produce a love story

Mattie: Well, *Chanthalay* was the first horror movie ever produced in Laos, and it only played for two weeks in the country's one cinema in the capital city. In fact, about twice as many people have seen the film in festival screenings than saw it here, just because there's no local access. The film is on YouTube, but Lao internet is generally too slow to watch it, and the bootleg DVD shops can be prosecuted for selling Lao media, so they won't touch it. So I think it's sort of impossible to gauge its local popularity. So I don't know exactly.

To produce a love story is not necessarily easier, since censorship won't allow any outward depiction of intimacy. It's racy in a Lao film to show two teenagers sipping from the same milkshake with separate straws, much less kissing or even hand-holding. To tell you the truth, horror films scare me to death. I have to watch them with the lights on and a pillow to hide my face in when I sense a jump scare coming. I'm the girl that screams out loud in the cinema and digs her fingernails into her husband's arm. But I wanted to make a movie based on a ballet, and the ballet I picked was a ghost story, and so it just sort of came together that way.

Solarsin: In my opinion the most typical audience for ghost movies in Thailand are male or female teenagers, doesn't matter whether they are rural or urban. What is important is the fact that they are young and they have curiosity about life.

I think my fascination with horror movies has a lot to do with my wife who is a horror expert. We end up watching a lot of horror movies together and talking about them. But in a more general sense, I could say that it also comes from everyday life which is filled with horror and being posed with the big question of where we're going after we're dead.

Kasia: Based on my observation of Thai horror audiences, I would say that the audience is predominantly adolescent—late teens to early 20s, both female and male. I have mostly observed the urban audience in Bangkok, but I have no doubt that young people in the countryside share the same appetite for horror as their urban counterparts. Because of their age, most of these viewers tend to be still at school.

As for my fascination with horror, I suppose it began simply from being a fan and growing up in the 1980s Poland when horror movies dominated the local VHS market. I guess maybe part of it was also that in the 1970s and 1980s Poland, where political censorship of film and television was rife, the government seemed to allow a steady supply of sex and violence in the foreign movies to keep the local audiences entertained. Many foreign films made in the West were considered too politically sensitive to show, but this did not concern horror, so both the cinemas and television showed horror films. This early fascination eventually led to a career choice and I have been researching gothic and horror ever since (for almost 20 years now, in the last decade focusing mainly on Asian horror films). After my move to Thailand I have had a chance to work closely with Thai film directors—first simply writing about their films and then trying my hand as a script writer. Hopefully, one day I will see one of my ideas brought to life.

Andrea: A common thesis is that horror films—and ghost films in particular—are especially attractive to adolescent audiences because these audiences are in the stage of developing both their sense of identity and their emotional equilibrium. That is to say, these films confront adolescent audiences with the intense emotions that help them on a path of self-discovery. In this way, cinema offers an opportunity to experiment and engage with violence, sex, and murder, and to experience a feeling of catharsis through the film, enabling them to leave the cinema (or the sofa) feeling more confident and stronger than when the film began.

Another theory argues that horror offers a field of competition between adolescents to see who can endure the fear the films endeavor to evoke: Who can withstand the onscreen horrors with open eyes? Who keeps their eyes shut and who screams?

What do you think about these theories? Do you agree that ghost films function as a kind of educational aid for adolescents?

Solarsin: I agree. In fact, every movie genre activates a different part of the brain and can have an educational function, including horror. Horror film provides both a safe environment in which the young viewers can test their theories through watching the choices of the protagonists in film, and also an opportunity to test each other's 'toughness' in the real world.

Kasia: I definitely agree with both of these theories. But I also believe that in the Thai context, where many people treat the supernatural very seriously and encounters with ghosts are commonplace, these films allow young people to make sense of their own supernatural experiences. Almost every time when I

lecture on ghosts and ghost films in Thailand, I have people coming up to me to share the stories of their own personal encounters with ghosts, so I believe that in a sense these films also validate such stories for the audience.

Mattie: I think this sort of ties into what I was saying earlier about my films exploring this idea of female independence. I can only speak to my personal experience, right? But *Chanthalay* seemed to register strongly with local teenage girls who really identified with Chanthalay herself, and with this desire to stake out a personal identity that sort of disrespectfully bucks the social hierarchal norms. Which again almost got the film banned here.

And I hadn't even thought about it until I was talking about the film with the secretaries in my production office well after the film was finished. But *Chanthalay* is not a violent or gory film. ... I'm taking a few timid steps into that realm with *Dearest Sister*, and I think it will be interesting to get some local response on it.

Andrea: *Ghost films are grisly and yet highly moral. Pattana Kitiarsa (2011) once wrote about Thai ghost films: "These films have undressed modernity and its naked truth revealed. They mirror (ed) modernity's ironies. [...] In the Thai context, horror films reveal the dark side of urban modernization." If ghost movies tell moral stories, what forms of moral decay or immorality do these films speak to and deliver answers to?*

In your opinion, what is 'the dark side of modernization' in the social context of Laos/Thailand?

Mattie: I get a little uncomfortable weighing in on these kinds of questions, simply because it's part of my thinking to show issues that we contend with in our modern and rapidly changing society when I'm figuring out my stories or making my films, but conversely I don't intend by any means to push any 'solutions' or even opinions on people. I just want to show people my observations on our society, and sure, some of the changes are dark and almost ominous, but there are beautiful snippets of our society that I highlight too. Most of my own analysis comes in retrospect, since I'm just not a political or activist personality. Now I am interested in watching how girls in Lao are staking out their identities and how they are trying to become more independent, but I never let agenda take precedence over character. For example, *Chanthalay* isn't a feminist film just because it's about a girl, in fact an argument can be made that she actually gets punished for stepping out of the hierarchy. And if it is feminist in some way, then it's a 400-year-old version of it, I guess, since I based the film on a really old ballet. *Dearest Sister*, being less based on anything

pre-existing, will be an interesting glimpse at our developing social relationships here in Laos.

Kasia: The ‘dark side of modernization’ in Thailand is commonly portrayed in local discourse as the corrupt influence of the West and its decaying moral values, and also as the steady exchange of the idealized ‘Thai’ values with ‘Chinese’ ones—commonly associated with greed and the ruthless drive for economic success. This fits very well in the overtly nationalistic discourse of ‘Thainess’, where the imagined community of ‘Thailand’ is praised as a country that was never colonized, never bowed down to Western imperialists, and generally is so much better than anyone else. The negative side of the Western/Chinese-style of modernization has a lot to do with corruption, greed, pollution, impunity of the wealthy, exploitation of the poor, etc., which are portrayed as a bad foreign influence and a corruptive force destroying Thai society. Take, for instance, the movie *Khon Fai Look/Burn* (dir. Peter Manus, 2008), where we deal with cases of spontaneous human combustion, which are at first seen as supernatural, but later we find out that they are side effects of a new drug being tested in Bangkok by an unscrupulous foreign medical corporation.

Given the strict censorship of any matters pertaining to monarchy, national history and politics in Thailand, it is unlikely to see Thai horror films openly engage with sensitive topics, even if they are supposed to be mediated by ghosts. We hardly ever see corrupt government officials, police or soldiers—the best the films can offer is the critique of professional men, like medical doctors, university teachers, or architects, perhaps the first level in the national hierarchy that can be openly criticized without too many serious consequences for the filmmakers.

Solarsin: Most of the time, the Thai films show the conflict between the new and the old—haunting always comes from the past, the traditional influences modernity. But, I believe, most of the time Thai ghost films are predominantly concerned with religious teaching. A great majority of people in today’s Thailand consider themselves Buddhists, and many of them are very eager to describe themselves as very pious. But they talk about Buddhism more than living according to its principles. This is why the films try to teach people the consequences of what’s going to happen when you do not follow the rules of *karma* in Buddhism.

Andrea: *Perhaps, however, the newer ghost films do not focus on the ‘dark side of modernization.’ Maybe the presence of ghosts provides an opportunity to shine a light on the dark sides of the Thai and Lao societies? I’m thinking about films*

which thematize (traditional) role constraints, difficult parent-children relationships, abuse and other societal issues that cannot be discussed, criticized or thematized in other—and perhaps more direct—ways? What do you think about the argument that ghost movies work as a form of social critique?

Kasia: I have always seen horror films as a form of social critique. At the same time, after talking to several Thai film directors, I tend to think that the critique they originally intend is not as strong as the one academics often read from the movies. I think this has to do with a strong tendency to self-censorship and a certain fear to touch upon topics that are considered off limits to discuss in public, like certain political or historical issues. To put it another way, I believe it is more likely to see an independent Thai drama engaging with the issues of history and politics than a commercial Thai ghost movie. Directors like Apichatpong are keen to employ ghosts to tackle important political and cultural issues, but I would not call Apichatpong a Thai commercial director, and many of his films are foreign funded. Mainstream ghost productions tend to 'stay safe'. One particular exception here is perhaps the work of Kongkiat Khomsiri, who has tackled such issues as state and police corruption, paedophilia, the sexual abuse of children, violence in the family etc. Although his movies win prizes at Thai film festivals, they do not seem to be too popular with Thai audiences and usually make little money at the box office, so it's obvious that they do not deliver the kind of entertainment the audience expects.

Mattie: This is interesting, but it's just not something that I have ever dealt with in my own work. For me it's just character, plot and a hope that a theatre full of people will enjoy the film. My stories are both reflections of what I see in Laos, so I'm sure there is something getting in that. A year from now, maybe we can look back at *Dearest Sister* and identify some social themes. But it's really a secondary consideration. I make horror films in Laos because I live in a spiritual, superstitious place, and leaving out those supernatural elements seems like a missed opportunity since it informs so much of daily life here.

Andrea: *Mattie, Chanthaly is a father-daughter story (see figure 11.1). You described in an earlier interview the relatively intimate film set. You literally lived at the film set, filming in your own house. What were the advantages and disadvantages of this approach? To what extent is the story connected to your life story?*

Will you also be producing your second film, Dearest Sister, in your home? And, will you be using the same techniques for creating horror, or will you employ other techniques?



FIGURE 11.1 *Chanthaly* (dir. Mattie Do, 2013)

Mattie: I will not be shooting *Dearest Sister* in my house this time, and hopefully, I'll never shoot where I live again. For months during *Chanthalay*—we shot for 50 days over four months to accommodate the full time jobs of our cast and crew—I just never felt like I had time where I wasn't working. That said, it did solve some major logistical problems, which was really important since I only had US\$5,000 to make the movie. With *Dearest Sister*, I hope to get out into Vientiane a little and show off a little more of Laos than just my front yard.

About the father-daughter relationship in *Chanthalay*, the father character absolutely is my father, but I'm not anything like Chanthalay, she's drawn from Giselle.

Andrea: *In Western countries, watching movies in the cinema is a highly disciplined activity. One must sit still, and one should never make a commentary out loud. In Southeast Asia, cinema protocol appears to be very different. How do audiences in Thailand or Laos behave? Ghost films evoke intense emotions. How do audiences react?*

Solarsin: I have seen some people panic or scream out loud, but I'm not sure this is specific to Thailand.

Kasia: I believe that watching a horror movie has always been a more social experience than in the case of any other genre, regardless of whether it's here in Thailand or in other countries. There have been some theories linking the fragmentary structure of early Thai ghost films to the communal methods of film enjoyment when dealing with mobile cinema screenings, but most modern films have been made with the thought of urban multiplexes in mind.

Also, the new habits such as texting or playing games on the phone while watching a film I think are not necessarily specific to Thailand—I have read about shows being cancelled in Spain because of the 'lack of manners' of the audience.

Mattie: Lao people laugh when they're nervous, which makes watching a horror film with them feel more like a comedy. On the way out of this screening, the kids were all chattering about how scary they thought the film was, but it was 90 minutes of laughter. (See on youtube: http://youtu.be/Lp15vyy_eO8.)

Andrea: *Have you carried out pre-screenings of your movies, or been able to observe audience reactions to your films? And if so, what did you learn from these*

opportunities? What role do emotional fascination and the imagination of your audience play in the movies?

Have you experienced any problems with cultural (mis)understanding during the process of the film making—with the crew, actors, with the content, or in relation to the audience?

Mattie: It was interesting to sit with audiences during the screenings and to listen to the chatter during the film. But by far the biggest response from the local audiences happens in the beginning of the film when Chanthaly cooks dinner for her father. They love seeing the basket full of sticky rice. I wish I had a video of that moment, there was always an audible murmur through the crowd. And I guess you can laugh about that, but after years of only seeing foreign cultures on film, they finally got to see something from their own lives. I think that's pretty cool.

Kasia/Solarsin: We have not actually produced a ghost movie yet (our film is still in development), so we can't answer these questions.

Andrea: Watching movies in the cinema is one thing, but watching them on a computer or DVD is something else. What can you tell us about the consumption of ghost movies in Thailand/Laos outside the cinemas, in a homely setting? Does it make a difference in creating or evoking fear/horror at home? Do the audiences differ? Are the audiences mostly adolescents with their peers, boyfriend and girlfriend, or people alone?

Mattie: I know that home media is prevalent, I just don't know much about this. Sorry.

Solarsin: There's always a difference between the two and the effect of the movie will be different. But then, sometimes it seems to me that many of the Thai films have not really been created with a specific coherent vision to have that 'cinematic' look, and they often look like a production for TV anyway, so perhaps for Thai movies it is not so different after all.

Kasia: I agree that there's a difference but then many people seem to be okay with watching films on small screens and in bad copies with low visual quality. I find it a little hard to understand myself but perhaps it's just a question of convenience. This seems to suggest that films have become consumable goods rather than works (of art?) that should be appreciated more thoroughly. How effective can a horror film be when accessed on a smartphone or a home TV? Well, definitely less than in the darkness of the cinema auditorium. But then

perhaps the watching pleasure lies somewhere else here, for instance in the confirmation of one's expectation about the story.

On the other hand, there are also theories which originally tried to assess the popularity of horror films accessed via VHS tapes, which have to do with exercising control over the text. When the film can be stopped at any moment when the emotion becomes unbearable, or when certain scenes can be replayed for more voyeuristic pleasure. So perhaps this could be part of the answer as well.

Andrea: *In the last 10 years the so-called 'torture porn' sub-genre of horror has become very popular, with films such as Cube (dir. Vincenzo Natali, 1997), Saw (dir. James Wan, 2004), and Hostel (dir. Eli Roth, 2005). In the horror films of the 1970s and 80s, primarily teenagers were massacred for their moral failures. In contrast, victims in 'torture porn' are typically coincidental, innocent people like you and I who fall prey to the whims of a sadistic murderer. Are such films also popular in Thailand and Laos? Or are they not shown in cinemas there, and watched only online or on DVD in people's homes? Could you imagine a Laos/Thai 'torture porn' film doing well in the local market? Why or why not?*

Solarsin: I don't think people understand the difference between motivated and random killing here. We look at the main guy and the bad guy in the movie and there has to be a reason to punish someone, like revenge for something. Even in a movie like *Countdown* (dir. Nattawut Poonpiriya, 2012) where seemingly innocent people are being terrorized by a psychotic drug dealer, we later find out they were all guilty of something and there is a reason for the story.

Kasia: In the article that Colette Balmain (2014) did for the collection on Thai horror film I recently put together, she convincingly argued that *Cheuuat Gaawn Chim/The Meat Grinder* (dir. Tiwa Moeithaisong, 2009) could be seen as a Thai movie that fits into the category of torture porn. In the movie we are dealing with a psychologically disturbed noodle maker who ends up using human flesh to make her meatballs. If we want to use an earlier example then the *Long Khong* movies (*Art of the Devil 2* and *3* [dir. The Ronin Team, 2005, 2008]) dealing with the abuse of black magic could also fit the pattern. At the same time, we're always going to have the problem with a concept of a completely random victim in a Thai horror film, and usually we find out in the end that there is some reason why the horrible things happen to these specific people. I think it goes back to the concept of *karma* and karmic retribution in the end.

I remember interviewing a Thai film director, Pakhpoom Wonjinda, who talked about his lack of success when he tried to sell a psycho-killer slasher

theme to the producers. He claimed that the producers insisted that any killing has to be motivated, mostly by revenge. The idea of a serial killer, as shown in American films and TV series, who simply kills accidental people to satisfy his/her urges does not seem to work well in Thailand. In *The Meat Grinder* (2009), the noodle lady makes meatballs out of the students killed during the clashes with the military—these are probably the most ‘random’ victims shown in the movie. But at the same time, the act of turning their bodies into food can be seen as a desire to avoid trouble by disposing of the evidence of someone else’s crime, in order not to be accused of having something to do with it.

Mattie: A year before *Chanthalay*, a friend of mine here in Laos made a great thriller set here in Vientiane. There’s a scene near the beginning of the film where a couple of guys get into a fight at a night club and one of them pulls a gun. After the film, I was talking to some of the Lao guys that work at my production company who totally lost the film when the gun appeared. Even that little bit of violence struck them as being against their Lao cultural identity. So, even if a filmmaker could get something like that through the Department of Cinema approvals process, I don’t think the Lao would accept it.

Andrea: *Which types of ghost stories cannot be told in Thailand or Laos? Or is it possible to make essentially all forms of ghost movie?*

Mattie: When I think about my stories, I tend to start the supernatural elements with a single idea that I draw from Lao folklore or superstition. With *Chanthalay*, that was the spirit shrine. So all of my stories tend to originate from Lao belief from the outset, instead of starting out with the story and trying to make Lao culture conform to the idea. It’s never crossed my mind to try to tell a story outside of those parameters.

Solarsin: Anything related with the royalty, especially past or present kings, or real history.

Kasia: Definitely anything that deals with Thai history in a more realistic matter. In fact, even the most outlandish fantastic plots that relate to recognizable moments in the national historical narrative, especially built around the past and present kings, are completely out of the question. We can have Abraham Lincoln portrayed as a vampire slayer, but probably even the thought of using any of Thai historical figure in a similar way could land you in jail. And recent censorship shows that ghost stories that deal with contemporary politics are also unlikely to get off the ground.



FIGURE 11.2 Panang (dir. Solarsin Ngoenwicht, forthcoming)

Andrea: *Which film projects are you currently planning/working on?*

Solarsin: My current project, *Panang* (see figure 11.2), is a ghost/monster movie loosely inspired by the most iconic Thai ghost, Phi Krasue, although I do not want to call my creature that so as not to build up any expectations in the audience. Anyway, my creature is a completely new breed of a monster, a hybrid creature made up of all sorts of elements that are supposed to make people uncomfortable, and it comes with a new mythology. It also carries with it the obligatory Thai Buddhist teaching on the dangers of anger which turns us into monsters.

Kasia: Since I can only help with scriptwriting this means that I am always dealing with the initial part of any project—once we're talking production my knowledge and skills are of limited use. This means that I am always juggling a few newer projects that may or may not lead to anything. Until recently, I was developing a historical epic *muay thai* zombie movie but in the light of two similar productions coming out soon (one a period zombie movie and the other one a contemporary *muay thai* zombie movie) we've decided to halt this project. I'm currently developing two serial killer scripts (one a low budget road movie and the other one a more proper period piece, set between the 1940s to 1960s), that is, trying to challenge the supernatural dominance over Thai horror. In the future, I am also interested in writing something based on the vampiric dimension of the Kinnaree, but I'm not sure whether I could actually write the script I would like to write, since my ideal background to the story would deal with women's abuse and the conflict in the Thai South.

Mattie: I'm producing a Canadian thriller set in Laos right now, and two weeks after I finish that, I begin production on *Dearest Sister*. And I have almost got a treatment together for my third film....

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italic numbers denote reference to a whole chapter or subchapter

abbreviations in brackets denote origin or context of use of foreign-language words:

GER – German/Germany PLI – Pali
ID – Indonesian/Indonesia TH – Thai/Thailand
JAP – Japanese/Japan

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