Post-war Thai Cinema and the Supernatural: Style and Reception Context

Mary Ainslie (Kuala Lumpur)

Film studies of the last decade can be characterised by escalating scholarly interest in the diverse film forms of Far East Asian nations. In particular, such focus often turns to the ways in which the horror film can provide a culturally specific picture of a nation that offers insight into the internal conflicts and traumas faced by its citizens.

Considering such research, the proposed paper will explore the lower-class ‘16mm era’ film form of 1950s and 60s Thailand, a series of mass-produced live-dubbed films that drew heavily upon the supernatural animist belief systems that organised Thai rural village life and deployed a film style appropriate to this context. Through textual analysis combined with anthropological and historical research, this essay will explore the ways in which films such as Mae-Nak-Prakanong (1959 dir. Rangsir Tasanapayak), Nguu-Phii (1966 dir. Rat Saet-Thaa-Phak-Dee), Phiit-Saat-Sen-Haa (1969 dir. Pan-Kam) and Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii (1967 dir. Nakarin) deploy such discourses in relation to a dramatic wider context of social upheaval and the changes enacted upon rural lower-class viewers during this era, much of which was specifically connected to the post-war influx of American culture into Thailand. Finally it will indicate that the influence of this lower-class film style is still evident in the contemporary New Thai industry, illustrating that even in this global era of multiplex blockbusters such audiences and their beliefs and practices are still prominent and remain relevant within Thai society.

Thus, by examining this neglected but critical filmic era from such an ethnically divided and unequal Southeast Asian nation, the essay will build upon previous examinations of culturally specific horror films, arguing that national populations produce a variety of diverse cultural texts that may not necessarily be characteristic of a homogenous national response but rather represent a particular experience within the nation.
That's the Spirit! Horror Films as an Extension of Thai Spiritualism

Katarzyna Ancuta (Assumption University, Bangkok)

One of the perhaps less discussed effects of modernism is its contribution to the metaphorization of ghosts and spirits. Redefined as symbolic cultural constructs, in the modern world supernatural beings are no longer expected to co-habit the same dimension as its human population. Critical analyses of ghost films and literature deconstruct their ghostly protagonists in the contexts of psychoanalysis, history, politics, postcolonialism, race, gender, and any other methodologies invested in resisting the cultural production of marginalized others. Both the horror authors/filmmakers and the horror audiences are expected to be equally committed to the conscious codification of ghosts and spirits as signs. Admitting one's belief that ghosts are “real” is simply inconceivable.

Thai spiritualism, attributed by some anthropologists to the hybridization, consumerization and politicization of Thai popular religion, can be seen as having significant consequences for the study of Thai horror cinema, since it allows for both a metaphorical (modern) and literal (pre-modern) reading of its ghost movies. On the literal level, these movies function as a fictional retelling of real or hypothetically possible spiritual encounters, and by tapping into the personal experience of their audience they can be found particularly frightening. On another hand, if the filmmakers stray too far from the audience’s expectations they risk getting seriously criticized for producing an “unconvincing” film narrative. Adding to this, the movies themselves are frequently being produced and promoted in a variety of supernatural contexts, including making offerings to the spirits, employing mediums and fortune tellers, or documenting instances of haunting on set. Last but not least, as a peculiar form of spiritual exchange, movies (though not necessarily horror movies) are commonly being screened at shrines and temples to appease local spirits and deities, or as a form of post-mortem entertainment for the recently deceased during the wake.

This paper discusses these and other examples of the mutual relationship between Thai horror movies and Thai spiritualism and suggests a connection between the popular animistic, mediumistic and religious practices of the Thais and their love of horror cinema.

Tamnan Krasue – Popular Cultural Perceptions of ‘Khmerness’ in a Thai Ghost Movie

Benjamin Baumann (Humboldt University Berlin)

Phi Krasue is one of the most well known malevolent ghosts in Thai popular culture. Commonly depicted as a woman’s head flying around at night with only its intestines dangling beneath, it is emitting a pulsating glow while looking for raw and impure things to eat with a special craving for placenta and pus. The victims of Phi Krasue commonly waste away and it thus shares many characteristics with analogous malevolent ghosts found throughout Southeast Asia.

By focusing on Bin Banluerit’s (2002) “Tamnan Krasue” (Demonic Beauty), one of the more recent ghost movies being based on the Phi Krasue theme, I want to discuss how “ethnic” relations and stereotypes are represented and thus reproduced in Thailand through this popular cultural medium.
I will argue that, at least since the end of the Cold War, black-magic has become the major symbol of ‘Khmerness’ in Thailand’s popular discourse. “Tamnan Krasue” thus locates the origin of Phi Krasue in present-day Cambodia, from where it sets out to wreak havoc on a peaceful village community in Siam, as a revenge for the cruelties committed by a Thai conqueror. “Tamnan Krasue” can therefore be read as a popular history of the conflicting Thai-Khmer relationship and as a popular cultural attempt to deal with the ambiguity arising from Thailand’s Khmer cultural heritage. Finally, I will present ethnographic data on how Khmer speaking villagers in Thailand’s lower Northeast conceive of Phi Krasue and how their ‘marginal’ conception differs from the Bangkokian view as depicted in “Tamnan Krasue”.

Ghostliness and the Nation’s Borders in „Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives“

Nathalie Böhler (University of Zurich)

In Southeast Asian cinemas and its theorizations, ghosts have come to occupy an important role as figurations of a precolonial or premodern age. As beings with temporalities „out of joint“, they blur the linearity of time and history and instead transport „haunted time“ (Berry/ Farquhar 2006), often appearing as figurations of the premodern and as carriers of memory and trauma. Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s film „Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives“ (TH 2009) is set in Isarn, the Thai northeast, a rural borderzone with a long history of guerilla left-wing movements, state repression and violence. The film deals with the region’s traumatic past, hidden memories and unofficial, alternative historiographies, employing the subject of death, rebirth and ghostliness to emphasize the liminality inherent in the Northeast on social, political and cultural levels. Focusing on an analysis of a sequence from the film, I will show how „Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives“ features various ghost and spirit characters that stem from a reimagination of the premodern, while at the same time referring to modernist cinema. From this interplay arises a nexus of meaning that is highly charged with a critique of the state politics of repression and image control. Further, I shall explore how Apichatpong employs cinematography and the soundscape to evoke a state of sensory liminality on the part of the spectator.

"For Tomorrow, For Tonight" - queer aesthetics of haunting in Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s recent cross-media projects

Arnika Fuhrmann (University of Hong Kong)

Studies of haunting as historical or social allegory are dominated by the assumption that the appearance of the ghost will represent an ideal vehicle for subaltern justice, and that the shattering effect that characterizes haunting in Freud’s notion of the uncanny will bring about a shift in historical or political consciousness as a matter of course. In the imaginary of contemporary Thai cinema, however, haunting is such an overdetermined force that, although it may bring minority grievances to light, most of its stories do not achieve critical intervention or adjudication of the
problem at hand. In particular, in a large series of Thai films Buddhist-coded tropes of ghostly return are centrally instrumental in advancing new bourgeois gender, sexual, and familial standards. Against this background, the paper examines the political models and representational strategies that independent filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul develops through his use of haunting in his recent multiplatform projects Primitive and For Tomorrow, For Tonight.

In particular, the paper investigates what happens when desire and sexual personhood are rendered neither exclusively in liberal terms nor entirely in Buddhist and magic, folkloric idioms purported to be antithetical to liberalism. While Apichatpong’s work signals its awareness of (illiberal) national sexual politics throughout, it eschews liberalism as the dominant language and framework of oppositional aesthetics and politics. How then does this cinema and art deploy ghostly return to expand the notion of how the historical and social negativity of same-sex desire may be engaged beyond the frameworks of juridical reparation, national reconciliation, and notions of diversity? How does temporal difference enable or enhance the imagination of future-contemporary forms of sexual personhood and kinship?

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**Fictions of Mulian ghosts in Lu Xun and Jia Pingwa’s writings**

Jessica Imbach (University of Zurich)

Under the aegis of scientific reason the May Fourth iconoclasts at the beginning of the 20th century heavily criticized ghost belief and representations of ghosts in the arts. The Mulian dramatic cycle, however, which is best known for its vivid portrayal of ghosts and the underworld, was a famous exception. The stories about the monk Mulian rescuing his mother from the underworld had become an immensely popular ritual opera by the time of the Northern Song and was performed most often during the Ghost Festival and at funerary ceremonies. In the eyes of the Shaoxing born Lu Xun (1881-1936) and his brother Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967) the Mulian opera was a cultural expression of the peasants worth preserving. Still, Mulian performances were already to Lu Xun’s time perceived as a waste of material resources and were increasingly rejected – just like supernatural fiction – as remnants of a “feudal” past. It was only in the 1980s that Mulian performances could come back to public stages. By studying the Mulian cycle as a “living fossil” of the synthesis of Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, official state culture politics nevertheless continue to try to take the subversive sting out of the ghost performance, while for example Jia Pingwa’s (1952-) novel Baiye (“White Night”, 1995) creatively exploits the cycle’s historical role as social and political commentary. In this paper I aim to investigate the creative appropriations of the Mulian opera by Lu Xun and Jia Pingwa by contextualizing their writings within the Chinese literary practice of xinbian (re-edit/re-write) made famous by Lu Xun’s Gushi xinbian (“Old Tales Retold”, 1935).
Universal Hybrids: the Trans/local Production of Pan-Asian Horror

Vivian Lee (City University of Hong Kong)

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’, 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 and The Eye 2 (Oxide and Daniel Pang, 2002, 2004), this paper 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 by 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’.

The Phenomenology of Ghost Hunting Groups in the USA and in Germany

Gerhard Mayer (Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health, Freiburg)

Over the past several years, Ghost Hunting Groups (GHGs) were founded, particularly in the United States, which have committed themselves to the investigation of haunted sites. The presentation will focus on the analysis of this movement and its remarkable development, which results from three major factors: (1) the presence of ghost-hunting-related themes in the media, such as on television and in movies, (2) the popularization of the internet and the possibilities that emerge in the area of information access, general exchange and networking, as well as (3) easy availability and manageability of high-tech equipment along with the simplification of data processing due to data digitalization. First, an attempt is made to reconstruct the emergence of the movement. Next, the most important methodological approaches (equipment, procedures) used by such groups will be outlined. Finally, the presentation will provide a phenomenological picture of GHGs based on self-portrayals on their webpages, the analysis of the Ghost Hunters TV series that plays an important role in the emergence of the movement and is closely linked to the GHG The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS), as well as on the few scientific studies that exist on the movement. Finally, we will
look at GHGs in Germany, which, while they adopt the American model, in many cases use a different culture-dependent framing.

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**Phantom Menaces, Magic Powers, Invincible Bodies – Examining the Interplay Between Movies, Post-Conflict Violence and Re-Imaginings of Tradition/Modernity in Timor-Leste**

Henri Myrttinen (Berlin)

Based on ethnographic research in Timor-Leste, the paper examines the interplay between imported ghost and action movies, violence and the re-imaginings of tradition and modernity in the country. The paper will look at three phenomena: the re-appearance of ‘ninjas’ after independence; the use of magic, especially black magic, by gangs, martial arts groups (MAGs) and ritual arts groups (RAGs); and the identification of the members of these groups with movie icons. The paper argues that ghost and action movies play a key role both in the post-conflict social construction of fears and of the masculine identities of the men involved in the various groups.

In examining the first phenomenon, that of the ‘ninjas’, the focus will be on a ‘ninja’ scare in rural Timor-Leste which triggered a major police crackdown of which members of a MAG, rather than the phantom warriors, were at the receiving end of. The discussion of black magic will focus on how imaginings of traditional magic powers are being re-interpreted especially in the RAGs by drawing in imported movie and TV imagery. Thirdly, the role played by (hyper-)masculine movie icons in the processes of masculine identity construction amongst gang, MAG and RAG members will be discussed. While the focus will be on Timor-Leste, comparisons will be drawn to neighbouring Southeast Asian (especially Indonesia) and Melanesian societies where appropriate.

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**American television fiction transforming Danish teenagers’ religious imaginations**

Line Nybro Petersen (University of Copenhagen)

This paper argues that American television fiction with supernatural themes offers Danish teenage audiences a playground for exploring different religious imaginations in a continuous process of internal negotiations; thereby transforming their imaginations. This process of the mediatization of religion is strengthened by three dominating factors: the absence of a homogenous religious worldview in Danish culture, the importance of high production values and visual credibility to supernatural concepts in these shows, and the appeal of transformed religious content in open-structured serial narratives. This essay presents the findings of an empirical qualitative study of seventy-two Danish teenagers and considers two primary parameters for the case-based reception study: the teenagers’ levels of fandom and their connection with institutionalized religion. In other words, how are religious imaginations transformed in relation to viewers’ level of commitment to the television fiction and to traditional institutionalized religion?
Sundelbolong as a mirror of State Ibuism? - Analysis of popular Ghost movies in Indonesia

Yusuf Pratama (Humboldt University Berlin)

Maren Wilger (Humboldt University Berlin)

Sundelbolong, a gruesome furious female ghost with a hole on her back, originates from Javanese tradition. A woman transforms into Sundelbolong when she commits suicide during her pregnancy (Siddique, 2002). Her revengeful spirit seeks justice by viciously slaughtering her rapists. Analysing two films from Indonesia, Sundelbolong (1981) and its remake Sundel Bolong (2009), this paper aims to underline the representation of woman, or womanhood, during the New Order and post-Authoritarian regime. Against the hegemonic ideology of Indonesian New Order, which Suryakusuma (1996) describes as a regime of State Ibuism -State of Motherhood- as cultural and structural mean of the state to control its female population, this paper should ask furthermore whether woman represented as Sundelbolong embodies this propagated state ideology? Or does it question, reject and propose another possible model? How did this representation change in its remake, almost decade after the fall of New Order regime? Is it possible to think of Sundelbolong as symbolizing image of a/any subaltern position of women within the ever contested imagined Indonesia?


The trans-cultural changes of the Philippine Aswang before and during its international career as main actor in ghost movies

Imke Rath (University of Hamburg)

The Aswang is one of the many Philippine creatures, probably a type of undead, who did not retire in a remote otherworldly place, but constantly interfered in human life. Therefore it caused and still causes fear and anxiety among the people. The earliest still preserved accounts are Spanish written sources, describing Aswangs (or similar named creatures) as witches. These accounts must be understood as perception, categorizing these creatures within Spanish Catholic realities. Although Catholic mission tried to abolish all indigenous phenomena, various non-Christian creatures survived as a part of the Philippine reality. They can be bestowed with educational functions, they can be part of entertaining ghost stories or even be considered as the reason of serious deceases and threats. And they are an important part of Philippine folklore.

My paper will discuss the trans-cultural development of the Awang within Philippine ghost movies in comparison with its appearance in US-American horror movies and a TV show. The trans-cultural element of this development will be observed with the help of the different perceptions: First, as a
witch by Spanish missionaries. Secondly, within Philippine movies, mainly based on indigenous folk tales, but directed according to the changing taste of the actual Philippine audience. And finally, as a very Vampire-like Aswang in American movies. The presentation will not pretend to discover a “pure” and “real” indigenous Aswang in comparison with foreign versions, but it will trace the influence which the different functions of this creature has on its own development. It will focus on the mutual relationship of the Aswang with its presentation in ghost movies and it will show how this creature can be and has been modified due to the liking of its audience.

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**Fear behind crumbling concrete walls: J-Horror ghosts as symbols of social issues in contemporary Japan**

Elisabeth Scherer (University of Duesseldorf)

Yūrei, a term denoting ghosts such as Sadako in Nakata Hideo’s film Ringu, can be traced back to the restless souls in Nō theatre, horrific creatures that populated the Kabuki stages of the Edo period (1603–1868), and works of ukiyo-e masters such as Hokusai or Yoshitoshi. One of Elisabeth Scherer’s research objectives is to determine what these representations of yūrei and their modifications throughout history reveal about Japanese society.

This presentation attempts to characterize the ghosts of J-Horror films, which proliferated in the 1990s. By analyzing early and generally unknown films as well as representative ones, Scherer shows that Japanese directors have been influenced by folktales, traditional Japanese theatre, Western horror films, and urban legends.

She reveals that although the outer appearance of Japanese ghosts has changed little over the centuries—the villains of the 1990s J-Horror films closely resemble their Edo predecessors—the fears that the modern ghosts allude to have changed. In contemporary films, the people who encounter ghosts are in difficult situations marked by obscure intersections of the present and the past, of traditions and urban loneliness. Another peculiarity of contemporary J-Horror films concerns the use of architecture: Haunted houses in J-Horror films have, instead of sliding paper doors and tatami mats, crumbling concrete walls signifying isolation, neglect, and sometimes, scientific wrongdoing.

In films like Ringu or Ju-On, there are only a few hints on how to decipher the phenomena that threaten the protagonists. These “new ghosts” often derive from dysfunctional or even destructive family structures. Instead of being a refuge, the dissolving family becomes a phobic institution with a high potential for generating ghosts.
Shake, Rattle and Roll Franchise and The Spectre of Nation

Roland B. Tolentino (University of the Philippines)

The paper looks into the most successful horror franchise in Philippine history. "Shake, Rattle and Roll" has had a successful 13-film run since its introduction in 1984 and is composed of a three-part segment, each tackling a horrific experience: ghosts and folk creatures in provincial and city settings. My paper maps out the narratives, and the social and political contexts of the series. Specifically, the period beginning 1984 marks a series of national transition: political crisis of the Marcoses, People Power 1, rise of Corazon Aquino, economic crisis in 1997 and 2007, ousting of Joseph Estrada, rise of neoliberalism, coming of Noynoy Aquino, and the incarceration of Gloria Arroyo. How might these films also be read as analog of the anxieties of the nation.