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GHOST-MOVIES, THEIR MAKERS AND THEIR AUDIENCES

ANDREA LAUSER IN CONVERSATION WITH
THE FILMMAKERS KATARZYNA ANCUTA AND
SOLARSIN NGOENWICHIT FROM THAILAND AND
MATTIE DO FROM LAOS



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GHOST-MOVIES, THEIR MAKERS AND THEIR AUDIENCES

ANDREA LAUSER IN CONVERSATION WITH THE FILMMAKERS KATARZYNA ANCUTA AND SOLARSIN NGOENWICHIT FROM THAILAND AND MATTIE DO FROM LAOS

INTRODUCTION

In the DORISEA research project *Spirits in and of Modernity* (Peter J. Bräunlein & Andrea Lauser), communication with ghosts is a central theme. Typically, academics focus on communication with spirits in trance, possession cults, and through spirit-mediums. In a similar vein, few if any ghost movie fans would connect their passion for cinema with religion as such. Rather, ghost movies are more typically associated with popular culture and entertainment than with religion or ritual as such. And yet, ghost movies in Southeast Asia often focus on eminently religious themes. For one, communication with spirits plays a central role in the films. 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. Secondly, these ghost movies often deal directly with culturally rooted beliefs in the afterlife, concepts of good and evil, and the idea of karma. Indeed, the popularity of many ghost movies can only be understood through the way they draw on and reaffirm established, religiously structured, worldviews. As researchers then, we are interested in precisely this interface between popular culture and what is commonly referred to as religion. This approach is especially enlightening as 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 Ngoenwichit in Thailand, and Mattie Do in Laos are all involved in film production, especially of ghost films. In this interview the producers, directors and scriptwriters each offer unique insights about ghost movie audiences' expectations and cultural backgrounds.

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 Vientiane, the Laos capital, 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, *Chanthaly*. Mattie Do is currently working on her second feature film *Dearest Sister* (Lao: ນ້ອງສຶກ), 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* (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. How do you imagine your audiences? Do you create your film for an imagined viewer or an imagined audience?*

In any case, people who enjoy watching ghost movies expect to be confronted with fear inducing aspects. 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/Thai ghost movie?

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 thrillers than as horror, for instance Kongkiat Khomsiri's *Cheun (Slice)* or Nonzee Nimibutr's *Khon Lokh Jit (Distortion)*. The label *nang sayong khwan* seems to me more a theoretical possibility than a 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 early 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*. 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 outside the local imaginary – a certain *phi* is always expected to look the same and follow exactly the same habits.

As much as I believe that 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 a 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. The same goes for horror – if you cannot see the film as scary then nobody will.

Mattie: Well, my film *Chanthaly* 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 *Chanthaly* 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 Chanthaly 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 Chanthaly's father desecrates the shrine and I've 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've 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 *Chanthaly* 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.



Figure 1: Movieposter for Chanthaly

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/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 Lao/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.



Figure 2: Meeting the Ghost - Scene from Chanthaly

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 *Chanthaly* 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 for 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 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 films, Julian Hanich (in his contribution to this volume) explains a specific aesthetic strategy, called “suggested horror”. Suggested horror relies on intimating 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, *Chanthaly* 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. *Chanthaly* 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 (speak-ing 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* 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 behaviour, 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 taboo 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 behaviour 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 her, 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 are customarily placed in 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 meant 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 analysed 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 behaviour 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 Phi Sing (House)*, 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’ve 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, *Chanthaly* 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.



Figure 3: Mattie Do with her colleague and husband Chris Larsen on the set of *Chanthaly*

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).



Figure 4: Movieposter for Panang - The Monster Within

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 endeavour 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 *Chanthaly* really seemed to register strongly with local teenage girls who really identified with Chanthaly 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 *Chanthaly* 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 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)*, 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: Many 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-child 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?*



Figure 5: Photo from the set of *Chanthalay*. © Mike Phetchareun

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 ones 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 Weerasethakul 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 horror 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've 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. You described in an earlier interview the relatively intimate film set. You literally lived on the 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?*

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 *Chanthaly* - 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 *Chanthaly*, the father character absolutely is my father, but I'm not anything like Chanthaly, 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?*



See on youtube: http://youtu.be/Lp15vyy_e08

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 Western countries 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.

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 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 chat-

ter 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, Saw, and Hostel. 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 Lao/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 good 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* 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 did for the collection on Thai horror film I recently put together with Mary Ainslie, she convincingly argued that *Cheuuat Gaawn Chim (The Meat Grinder)* 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*) 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*, 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 *Chanthaly*, 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 *Chanthaly*, 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 manner. 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 figures 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.

Andrea: *Which film projects are you currently planning and/or working on?*

Solarsin: My current project, *Panang*, 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 writing two serial killer scripts (one a low budget road movie and the other one a more proper period piece, set between the 1940s and 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've almost got a treatment together for my third film....

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