

## GHOST MOVIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND BEYOND

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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' 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. Southeast Asian ghost movies reflect upon the identity crises and trauma of the living as well as of the dead. 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.

### Ghosts and the Biases of a Master Narrative

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.

Historically viewed, however, the fascination with the uncanny is a characteristic of Western modernity, which began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century through literature. Horace Walpole (1717-1797), Gottfried August Bürger (1747-1794) or Mary Shelley (1797-1851), to mention but a few authors, initiated the enduring and distinctly modern genres of gothic and horror writing, which would remain popular throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

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). Through Derrida the reference to haunting, ghosts and spectrality became an accepted, even fashionable trope in academia. He initiated, probably unintentionally, a 'spectral turn' which gained ground in the 'uncanny nineties' (Jay, 1998).

Despite such a 'spectral turn', in Western academia the topic of ghosts and spirits invariably invokes debates about modernity, reason and unreason, belief and knowledge, religion and science, 'us' and 'other'. 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.

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.

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.

The contributors to the volume *Ghost Movies in Southeast Asia and Beyond: Narratives, Cultural Contexts, Audiences* (ed. Peter J. Bräunlein & Andrea Lauser; Leiden: Brill; forthcoming) 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. These assumptions underlie the analytical perspectives of all contributors. 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.

### 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 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> 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. The mediation of ghosts has been constantly renewed in the course of over 150 years of media history. A hundred years after the heyday of spiritualism, and particularly since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> centu-

ry, ghosts have once again become prevalent across a diverse range of media, including films, television series, and video games.

With these remarks on spiritualism, we do not wish to maintain that today's ghost-movie fans can be simply equated with the spiritualists of 100 years ago. In no way do we 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, 2015: 3).

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.

### Post-Mortem Cinema, Trauma and Identity Crisis

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 within the fields of traditional religious competence, but are reflected in the products of entertainment industries.

Against this background, we want to refer to the prominent, invented genre label 'post-mortem cinema'. In their introduction to film theory, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010) 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 *Lost Highway* (dir. David Lynch, 1997), *The Sixth Sense* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), *American Beauty* (dir. Sam Mendes, 1999), *Memento* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2000), *Mulholland Drive* (dir. David

Lynch, 2001), *Donnie Darko* (dir. Richard Kelly, 2001), *The Others* (dir. Alejandro Amenábar, 2001), *Volver* (dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 2006) and many others.

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.

Southeast Asian ghost movies fit in a very literal sense to the label ‘post-mortem cinema’, because these movies explore and depict forms of postmortem 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

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)

### **Mediated Ghosts: Southeast Asia’s Haunted Modernity**

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 their works, Rosalind Morris (2000), Alan Klima (2002) and James Siegel (2006) 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.

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.

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’. In their efforts to this end,

they 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 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 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 his 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. The authors in this volume share with Teo 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.

### ... and the Audience

Studying ghost movies from an interdisciplinary perspective implies the necessity of bringing 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).

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 postmodern 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?

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.

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