Spiritus ex Machina: Spectral Technologies in Asian Horror Film
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ABSTRACT

Difficult as it may be to talk about a unified category of "Asian Horror Film," this article originates from an observation that in a great majority of Asian horror films (exemplified in this research by Japanese, South Korean, Hong Kong, Chinese, Thai, Taiwanese, Singaporean and Vietnamese films) the horror film is almost equivalent with the "ghost" film. At the same time, it is relatively easy to notice that the celluloid representations of Asian spirits frequently do not comply with the Hollywood-established patterns, easily recognizable to a Western horror fan. This, to a certain extent, can be said to reflect local religious beliefs, customs and traditions, as well as numerous Eastern aesthetic and philosophical values. Recently, however, many Asian horror films seem to convey a message that the spiritual world is in need of a technological upgrade. This, in turn, has a direct effect on the popular understanding and representation of the supernatural, as observed in everyday life in the said Asian cultures, and the idea of "the ghost" evolves.

This paper examines the notion of spiritual technologies, understood in a twofold manner. On the one hand, based on an analysis of a number of contemporary East Asian and South East Asian horror films, the discussion will focus on the ways modern technologies, particularly visual and media technologies, have contributed to a shift in understanding the concept of the ghost. On the other hand, this paper will focus in more detail on the case of Thai horror cinema, where ghosts have become a narrative technique and ghost stories seem to have contributed to the development of cinematic technologies in general.

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Pondering about human attitudes towards death, Robert C. Solomon observes that specific strategies for appeasing and warding off the spirits of the dead were developed as early as in the Palaeolithic period. This fact can easily translate into a belief that "[t]he dead, in other words, [are] not wholly dead, even after giving up some of their earthly pleasures and powers" (157). The construction of the afterlife as an alternative reality parallel to the world of the living is a phenomenon acknowledged by comparative religion. As evidenced by tales of exploration of the underworld in ancient beliefs and mythologies, popular customs and rituals in practically every existing culture, and more than one official religious scripture, we can surmise that "individuals essentially perceive death and afterlife on the pattern of their life in this world, by the projection of their anthropomorphic categories and relations" (Berra 1).
The decision to endow the dearly departed with human attitudes and desires in their life after death is, according to Berta, supposed to alleviate death-related stress in the survivors, allowing them to cope with grief after the loss of their loved ones. One side effect of the mechanism populating the afterlife with human-like spirits, however, is the fact that the dead simply do not want to stay dead. Apparently, they refuse to disintegrate and vanish into thin air, retire to the heavenly spheres or even get reincarnated and reborn, and all for the sake of their ghostly desire to interfere with the lives of the living. The anthropocentric image of the afterlife can account for the fact that the great majority of depictions of spiritual encounters (be it in myths and legends, art, literature, spiritual photography, psychic séances, or alleged "real life" hauntings) regardless of the culture of origin, stubbornly insists that ghosts and spectres are in their form indistinguishable from humans. This is not to say, however, that the culturally coded image of the ghost is resistant to the ever changing trends and fashions.

With the advent of the Age of Reason, ghosts and other supernatural phenomena were dismissed as medieval superstition unworthy of the attention of the rational mind. The triumphant return of spiritualism in the 19th century, complete with spectral photography, séances, and the establishment of numerous respected societies for the study of the supernatural phenomena worldwide has frequently been described in terms of a reaction to the years of repression imposed on such matters by Eurocentric rationalism. At the same time, however, it can be suggested that these post-Enlightenment ghosts were summoned in order to "enact the hypothesis of a different kind of body in this world" (Connor 209). It is thus significant to notice that while the ghost of Banco, or unfortunate Hamlet's father could still reveal themselves to us in all their human-like glory, by the end of the 19th century, at the time when the ghost story became fully established as a literary genre in Anglophone literatures, European (and by extension also colonial) ghosts underwent a radical change. No longer portrayed as bleeding corpses, headless riders or animated skeletons, the spectral protagonists of 19th century and early 20th century ghost stories (exemplified in English literature at their best by such writers as M.R. James, Algernon Blackwood or Sheridan Le Fanu), began to be introduced as a sudden temperature drop, a faint noise, a subtle sensation, an invisible touch etc. etc.

This decreasing iconicity and increasing indexicality of spirit representations, as discussed in my paper on "Ghosts and the Machines," was particularly characteristic of western supernatural narratives, which developed in direct relation to the encroaching rationalisation of the
western civilisation. And since the suggested indexical model of the spirit was soon adopted for the purposes of the emerging medium of cinema and popularised by mainstream Hollywood filmmakers, those new celluloid phantoms quickly became a stylistic benchmark for anyone involved in any form of the spiritual business. This is not to say that all representations of modern ghosts and spirits are of indexical nature. I have argued previously, that in East and South East Asian cultures, most ghosts tend to retain their iconic, anthropomorphic character ("Ghosts and the Machines" 34). I have also posited that in the information era, we can observe a gradual shift in our understanding of ghosts, which in turn end up frequently portrayed as digitalised, electromagnetic entities enmeshed within the global telecommunication system (35-36).

The relationship between ghosts and technology can be examined from a variety of perspectives. My research brings into discussion four of them. The first approach questions theoretical implications of new technologies and scientific inventions, with a particular reference to those that have enabled us to capture still and moving images, as well as sounds. Although the chief example here will obviously be photography and cinema, some attention should also be paid to the discourse of sound recording, mobile phone and computer networks. As this approach takes into consideration philosophical, critical and popular responses to the emerging technologies and media, it allows for a number of speculations concerning the network of relations between various conceptualisations of modern technologies and discursive constructions of death and the afterlife (see Ancuta, "Still Deaths...").

The second approach bringing ghosts and technology into focus dwells on the inherent, although not always immediately visible, connection between the scientific and the spiritual and has already been hinted upon in this article. A careful examination of the established ghost story model will reveal that the narratives in question tend to embrace patterns of rational verification frequently involving a number of scientific procedures. This, in turn, has its effect on our explication of ghosts that cease to be perceived solely as uncanny manifestations of the spirits of the deceased in favour of becoming redefined in terms of scientifically measurable units. And so, with each scientific breakthrough we encounter a steady growth of easily recorded spiritual electromagnetic impulses, ghastly sound waves or spectral fractals (see Ancuta "Kaosu means Chaos...", "Ringu and the Vortex of Horror...").

The third perspective on spiritual technologies stems from an analysis of a number of representations of ghosts in contemporary Asian horror films and the ways the ghosts in question interact with modern technologies. In
many parts of Asia the popular belief in the supernatural is almost palpable, making it easy for ghosts to invade hi-rise office towers, multi-storey condominium and luxurious department stores. If European and American ghosts are cursed to haunt old castles, churchyards and abandoned mansions, Asian ghosts tend to “live” in elevators and huge ventilation shafts of large buildings. They commute to work using public transport and utilise every possible technological device known to man because, after all, as iconic signs, they are nothing but the likenesses of humans (see Ancuta, “Ghosts and the Machines”).

Last but not least, based on my personal involvement with the Thai film industry over the last few years, I would like to suggest yet another, fourth, way of approaching the question of interaction between ghosts and technology. Contemporary Thai horror cinema will serve here as a case in point. Bearing in mind that ghost stories have accounted for more than a third of all the Thai cinematic releases in the last three years (not counting straight-to-DVD productions where ghost stories also predominate) and that a great majority of the remaining Thai films have featured at least one scene involving a ghost, I would like to suggest that (1) cinematic technologies used in Thai film industry develop mostly in the direction dictated by the specific needs of the horror film (in Thailand equivalent with the ghost film – nong phii) and (2) the spectral element – roughly understood as “a scene involving a ghost” – can be seen as a characteristic feature of many Thai film narratives and as a specifically Thai narrative technique. These two points will be the core of my discussion in this paper.

When the ancient Greeks invented tragedy they limited themselves with the notions of decorum specifying what can and what cannot be said and performed on stage. To avoid the unavoidable holes in the plot they invented a perfect tool – divine intervention. Whenever the author was at a loss how to resolve a conflict that had become too tangled for the mere mortals to deal with in compliance with the strict rules of tragic decorum, the gods would swoop from heavens to the rescue, very literally in fact, thanks to an ingenious theatrical contraption known as Deus ex Machina that allowed a god-portraying actor to be lowered onto a stage on a rope. By extension of the thought, anyone who attempts a systematic study of contemporary Thai horror film might easily come to a conclusion that where gods have failed, spirits are frequently called upon to account for the unaccountable and strengthen up the frail narrative structure.

Those familiar with contemporary Thai cinema will immediately notice that the films in question do not follow a typical cinematic narrative
structure as standardised by Hollywood. Those familiar with contemporary decentralising critical theories will immediately point out that we should not reject any atypical narrative structures only because they seem to defy predominant patterns established as a result of years of western hegemony. In his lecture delivered at Assumption University in 2007, Adam Knee suggested that South-East Asian horror film, which by definition includes also Thai horror film, is a generic hybrid reminiscent of the evident hybridisation of the postcolonial subject. While Thailand seems to be a difficult and complex case to argue here, taking into consideration its resistance to European colonisation, its own colonial aspirations and its present vulnerability to western economic imperialism, hybridism of contemporary Thai cinema is undoubtedly its central feature. Based on my personal observation, however, I would like to suggest that this hybridism should not be viewed as a mere ad-hoc compilation of imported foreign elements and genres, in the shape promoted by the Hollywood-influenced standards of film theory. Quite the contrary, the apparent inconsistencies and fragmentation of Thai film narrative delineate, in fact, a characteristically Thai cinematic genre depending on a specific narrative structure. For the purpose of my research, I have chosen to call this genre Thai Moir (ลมฝรั่ง), derived from the Thai word mua "ฝรั่ง" meaning "unclear."

Many critics who evaluate Thai cinema from a non-Thai perspective describe Thai films as confusing, lacking clear structural organisation, unable to decide which genre they are supposed to belong to, or consisting of a patchwork of seemingly unrelated elements. This can obviously all be presented as a weakness of Thai cinema, or even a failure of the Thai filmmakers to create a work of cinematic art, but it is also worth noticing that when studied on their own, Thai films reveal an astounding regularity of structural patterns, which suggests that perhaps they should be given justice and appraised critically for what they are rather than for what they are not. While the actual structural elements differ to a certain extent from one film to another, it is interesting to notice that a great majority of Thai films share at least three common components: a comic/slapstick motif of surprise (taloc ผัน; frequently built around the specific stage personality of the performing comedian), a supernatural element (most likely an introduction of a ghost: phii ผี) and at least a short reference to transgender/transsexual/transvestite characters (khatoey ผู้ชาย). It is at this point that the established (western) genre logic fails us, because categorising a taloc-pee-khatoey film as a "gay horror comedy with a touch of drama and some martial arts scenes" seems to question the usefulness of genre distinctions in general. By accepting the
"confusion" and "lack of clarity" of Thai films as part of their internal generic characteristics free from a value judgment we can move the discussion of Thai cinema forward.

Since Thailand does not boast any particularly influential film school, a great majority of Thai filmmakers have veered into the cinema from various artistic professions or commercial advertising agencies. Quite understandably then, in the Thai film industry more attention is paid to the visual side of the production than to the story itself and studios frequently invest their money before seeing even a page of the script, based entirely on a judgment about the marketability of the concept. Kong Rithdee, a Bangkok-based Thai film critic complains that:

[... ] a screenplay is probably the most undervalued element in the Thai filmmaking process. The lack of trusted and inspired writers means most filmmakers take on the dual role of writer/director, and while some of them carry their projects to success, the majority of poor-quality Thai films are the result of bad scripts. Film studios, meanwhile, decide to invest in movies based on genre (horror and comedy are priorities) and marketability (stars and hype factor) rather than quality or the originality of the scripts. ("A Fine Romance" online)

Rithdee rightly notices that in Thai cinema, writers are frequently seen as dispensable, since the ability to produce a well-structured narrative is commonly less sought after than the ability to create visuals. In a rather judgmental fashion, Rithdee calls it "a symptom of an immature film industry." At the same time, however, a quick look at Thai film production methods suggests that this does not necessarily have to be the case.

Prachya Pinkaew, a Thai film director and the head of Baa-Ram-Ewe, a production studio for Sahamongkol has a rather critical opinion of contemporary Thai cinema himself. In an interview conducted in 2007, Pinkaew admits:

Thai film is like a kid that has just become a teenager. But it's a sickly teenager that had to be taken to an emergency ward and is now recovering in hospital. It's getting better every day but still cannot stand on its own legs. (92)

Although Pinkaew stresses several times that Thai film needs "to overcome the script problems" and improve the plots of the movies, Sahamongkol, which remains one of the major film production studios in Thailand still
favours the visual approach and it is rumoured that the decisions on whether
to greenlight a particular production or not are commonly made on the
base of นาสนใจหนัง (translated roughly as “poster that tells the plot”), a
poster introducing the general concept and the star of the movie to be made.
In effect, as there is no need to approach the studios with a fixed script, film
scripts tend to get written in parts or never at all, pre-production takes
place simultaneously with production and the labour is commonly divided
to speed up the process. As a result of this, it is not uncommon to find Thai
films written and directed by as many as seven different people leaving the
audience to wonder how many of the collaborators were left uncredited.

The fragmentation of the writing process is a common phenomenon,
found even in the studios that appear more rigorous towards the standards
of screenwriting. In an interview conducted in 2008, Songyos Sugmanakan,
the director of such critically acclaimed movies as Fan Chan and Dek Hor
(Dorm) comments of the script reviewing methods of the GTH studio that
resulted in his rewriting of the script of Dek Hor more than 20 times.

I can see why GTH is doing it because I’m used to shooting commercials.
And with 20 roughs, although it’s a lot, I have to admit that the script got
better after all. So I am happy with it. (155)

Speaking of his experience when making Fan Chan (directed by six people
and written by seven), Sugmanakan explains:

*Fan Chan* is a nostalgic movie. It talks about experiences and memories.
In order to do that you need to find something from the time period that
relates to the audience. In the case of *Fan Chan* it helped to have a number
of writers who could share ideas. (156)

While undoubtedly, the “sharing of ideas” that Sungmanakan refers
to can be seen as equivalent with brainstorming sessions that constitute
a typical script-oriented production meeting, particularly where more
complex, longer projects and TV series are concerned, what is interesting is
the fact that in Thai filmmaking, the collaborative process commonly tends
to involve the writing and directing as such. As a result of this, the film’s
narrative, rather than undergo several phases of structural convergence, as
expected of a work of a single person, becomes fragmented instead; first, as
the writers continue adding their personalised scenes to the plot, and then as
the multiple directors strive to accommodate everyone’s artistic vision in the
making of the picture. The fragmentation of the narrative that occurs both in pre-production and production of the film is rarely smoothened out in the editing stage, contributing greatly to the evaluation of many Thai film plots as excessive and disorganised.

In his book on narrative, Paul Colby defines it in terms of “a communicative relation which is often conflated with straightforward understanding of what a story is” (2-3). Colby sees narrative as “a particular form of representation implementing signs” that “is necessarily bound up with sequence, space and time” (3). The signs that the narrative contains are thoroughly human made and the basic characteristic feature of narrative is its sequentiality. Colby focuses his attention on discussing the process turning a “story” (everything that is to be depicted) into “plot” and “narrative,” stressing causality as the necessary element in the creation of a plot, and the rules of selection and organising that are responsible for the narrative formation.

Such a structure-oriented approach to narrative is echoed in a multiplicity of books analysing the screenplay and in scriptwriting manuals aimed at film professionals. It allows Margaret Mehring to claim with confidence that:

The structure of a screenplay is never an accident. It is deliberate. It is designed. Its elements are structured in a specific way for a specific reason within a specific time. Each one of the medium’s elements – filmic time, filmic space, motion, imagery and sound – has its specific characteristics. (9)

Mehring speculates that storytelling, which lies behind any film script, has always led to, and continues to lead to, a production of stories developed according to a very similar structural pattern. This pattern involves a time, a person[s], a place, a set of circumstances, initial action that puts everything in motion, difficulty in achieving set up goals, change in character and circumstance that helps him/her overcome the difficulty, and the result that tells us something and becomes the theme of the story (226). Such crafting of a story, strengthened by the rule of internal causation that shapes the story into a plot, results in a multilayered complex structure that runs through the narrative.

Causation does not seem to be the strongest point in the majority of Thai film narratives, which on the whole commonly tend to evolve in a linear way (even if the line is hardly ever a straight one). A careful observer is usually capable of working out some connection between particular scenes, even though the cause-effect relationship involved frequently seems to defy western rationalism. A perfect example of such a structure can be a 2006
release, Koy Ter Yuem (See How They Run), described on twitchfilm.net as "a low-budget horror comedy which reuse[s] the once popular Thai film formula - no story, no character development just a group of people running away from [a] ghost in a funny way." The film was directed by Jaturong Mok Jok, a popular comedian with no directing experience and its entire raison d'être seems to be a display of sequences of separate gags involving various locally-known comedian personalities, connected chiefly through the central figure of a mischievous ghost-monk that everybody is greatly afraid of. Still, having said that, the undisputable weakness (not to say the non-existence) of the film script, did not prevent the picture from becoming the fourth highest grossing Thai film in 2006, with the box office estimated at 1.6 million US dollars. Obviously, Thai audience did not view the film as a failure only because it blatantly disregarded the rules of scriptwriting, as taught to the members of the profession.

Scriptwriting guides never fail to enumerate useful suggestions that a writer should consider when constructing his/her story. In *Screenwriting for Film and Television*, William Miller pleads with the readers:

To work with an audience, a story needs emotion (and/or humour) to involve us emotionally and make us care. We want to see characters we can get involved with, heroes we can identify with, who have something vital at stake in achieving a clear, strong goal that they must achieve or else. Conflict with a strong antagonistic force – usually a villain that opposes the hero – gets us involved.

We want to be hooked on suspense throughout the story as we wonder how each new crisis will be resolved. We want to be surprised at unexpected twists of the plot. Generally we want a clear resolution, and typically a happy ending. (21, italics removed)

While obviously, the decision of the writer or the director to break away from that pattern can and very often does result in creating a cinematic masterpiece, there is no denying that the great majority of Hollywood and Hollywood-inspired blockbusters tend to take the above formula very seriously and their general financial success in a way proves that artistic merits aside, film audiences all over the world are quite predictable when it comes to their expectations and taste. As box office figures show, Thailand is no exception here with its filmgoers visibly favouring mainstream American movies over domestic production.

In *The Complete Book of Scriptwriting*, J. Michael Straczynski lists 12 basic points that need to be considered when creating characters and structuring the
plot. Among the pointers we find a suggestion to avoid convenience (making characters do things for a reason rather than just because we want them to), to make every action and every scene do more than one thing at a time, and never to cheat the audience. Straczynski advises sticking to the Chekhov's formula of playwriting, reminding the reader: "If there is a gun on the wall in act one, scene one, you must fire that gun by act three, scene one. The inverse is also true: if you're going to fire the gun in act three, establish it in act one (32). In contrast, a very typical example of Thai scriptwriting can be Piyapan Choonpetch's Phi Mai Jim Fun (known also as The Toothpick Ghost or Vow of Death, 2007). The plot of the film follows the trials and tribulations of four friends in their search of the Banyan tree whose spirit they have offended. As the tree has been turned into a bunch of toothpicks, their mission turns out to be more complicated than they have originally expected. The narrative of the film is split in two parts, one directly connected with the boys' quest, and the other — recounting the story of the evil ghost masquerading as the Banyan tree spirit. As the boys progress on their journey, new characters are added, one scene at a time, never to be seen again. While these characters perform a clear function within their particular scenes, their contribution to the narrative as a whole is minimal, bringing into question their general purpose in the story. If a scene does not advance the story, or does not have a purpose, Miller strongly suggests it should be eliminated from the script (157). If we wanted to adhere to that formula, we would need to eliminate a large part of this particular movie.

One other suggestion of Straczynski refers to the task of creating intelligent and resourceful characters: "Just as your character must get into trouble on her own, your character must get out of trouble the same way" (33). Once again, this is not necessarily the case in Thai cinema, as can be observed in a 2008 Thai horror movie Soul's Code (Atsajun Sartakovic) — produced chiefly to promote Nuttakorn Taewakul in his attempts to become a more easily recognisable face on the Thai political scene. In one of the scenes in the movie, a forensic examiner is showing her case folder to a detective in charge of a murder investigation. The folder in question contains a selection of victims' pictures, some of which have been marked with a large red cross, or with a large red dot. The examiner explains that she managed to solve all the cases marked with a dot thanks to the clues obtained from autopsies and other forensic evidence. When asked about the x-ed cases she calmly admits: "in those cases I had no clues but the ghosts came down and told me everything." A careful examination of the supernatural elements in Thai narratives is very likely to point to a similar pattern — if the writers are
at a loss what to do with the story to keep it believable very often the easiest solution proves to be producing a ghost. In his book on screenwriting, Miller advocates following the classic dramatic structure, as evolved in ancient Greece (49). While Thai scriptwriters seem to have some difficulty adhering to the conflict-development-climax-resolution-denouement model promoted by Miller (49), they have obviously grasped the idea of divine, or rather spiritual intervention and have utilised it to the extreme.

The ghost-out-of-the-box narrative-strengthening technique, however, is of limited use when applied directly to ghost stories, for by definition ghost stories tend to abound in ghosts. While most critics agree that contemporary horror film does not necessarily need to follow a supernatural plot, Thai language refers to horror movies simply as “ghost movies,” mung phii, which makes it rather difficult for the genre to evolve beyond that category. Still, the appeal of horror, to a large extent lies in a balanced relationship between originality and repetition, where the unfamiliar has become very familiar over the years, which is why horror fans seldom complain when confronted with yet another sequel to the story. Ironically, however, for Thai filmmakers, making a horror film is frequently a chance to experiment and to go beyond the established Thai cinematic patterns.

In her article justifying the development of New Thai Cinema (published online by Fipresci), Anchalee Chaiworaporn defines it in clear artistic opposition to what she refers to as the Thai cinematic “main course” – a steady supply of horror films and comedies responsible, in her eyes, for the decline of Thai cinema during the 1980s and 1990s. According to Chaiworaporn, New Thai Cinema emerged chiefly thanks to the work of aspiring television advertising directors: Pen-Ek Ratanaruang, Nonzee Nimibutr, and Oxide and Danny Pang (Hong-Kong directors with Thai connections obsessively claimed by the Thai film industry as their own). Her list is further expanded to include Wisit Sasanatieng, and Aphichatpong Weerasethakul, which makes it easy to speculate that the label “New Thai Cinema” is meant to be inclusive only of the selected highbrow productions that can be categorised as art film and promoted through film festivals worldwide. In contrast with that, the remaining Thai films are seen by the author as “a low-grade cultural product” with “[b]ad plots, nonsensical scripts, exaggerated performance and poor production […] appreciated only by rural, low-class audiences.” The author, identifying herself with “educated, urban audiences in Thai society,” defines the filmgoing audience in Thailand as consisting of two distinct groups – the urban, educated Bangkoksians and the rural, uneducated mass outside of Bangkok, going as far as to blame the bad taste of the
country folk for the fact that unlike the shiny multiplexes of the capital, "in upcountry Thailand most theatres are still run-down stand alone cinemas, where audiences are offered movies only as mass entertainment." While such opinion is by no means uncommon amongst many Bangkok Thais, it is perhaps not entirely accurate. According to Prachya Pinkaew, Thai box office figures are calculated entirely based on the data from Bangkok cinemas. The revenue from the ticket sales outside of Bangkok is insignificant. Pinkaew says:

Out of roughly 60 million people in Thailand, perhaps only 1 million people ever go to theatres. So, as you can see, the audience is not that large. (91)

With no access to cinemas in large areas of rural Thailand, it is hard to discuss the tastes of upcountry cinemagoers. If the preferences of the film audience have indeed any influence on the decisions of the film producers concerning what kinds of films to make, the only audience whose opinions count in Thailand is exactly the educated urban Bangkok audience whose interests Chaiworaporn apparently represents. Interestingly also, the acclaimed art film directors from the much celebrated New Thai Cinema, find producers within the same studios that focus mostly on catering to the much criticised Thai need of "low-class entertainment." What the article also seems to exclude is the fact that within the last decade, we have witnessed several very interesting developments in the horror genre the author seems to dismiss in its entirety as apparently having nothing valuable to offer.

Contemporary Thai horror has certainly been amongst the most ambitious commercial Thai genres of the decade. Many of the recent Thai horror films (Shutter, Alone [Banjong Pisanthanagoon/Pakpoom Wongpoom], The Victim, The House [Monthon Arayangkoon], The Body #19 [Paween Purijitpanya], The Screen at Kampot [Songsak Mongkolcon], Coming Soon [Sopon Sakdapisit], Dorm [Songyos Sugmakanan]) proved not only hugely successful with the critics and won numerous international awards, but also ranked among the highest grossing productions in Thailand, which can vouch for their popularity with the local audience. Several of these films were debut features of young directors, who similarly to the Thai art film giants started their careers in the TV advertising and music video industry. Interestingly enough, Chaiworaporn also fails to mention that the Pang brothers have paved their way to Hollywood thanks to their attraction to horror and that despite his prolific filmography Nonzee Nimibutr's remains chiefly recognised outside of Thailand as the director of the horror film,
Nang Nak. Ironically, Pen-Ek Ratanaruang's newest film to be released in Thai cinemas in July 2009 is Nang Mai, a story involving a malignant tree spirit, which is clearly marketed as a ghost story, despite its other merits.

All the Thai film directors I have interviewed confirmed that Thai investors tend to consider ghost stories a "safe bet," which may not necessarily break the house (up to date very few Thai films have actually earned a lot of money) but at least will not make a loss. Since Thai horror films are not considered to be very expensive they are usually allocated moderate budgets, but it also means that the investors are unlikely to go bankrupt even if the film proves a failure. This accounts for the fact that where ghosts are concerned Thai film studios are far more likely to allow for artistic experimentation, testing new techniques and technologies or to trust newcomers with no prior experience in filmmaking. Not surprisingly then, Thai horror films are among the most innovative and experimental films currently made in Thailand, they can also boast the best camera work and visual effects, and their overall production value has increased greatly over the last few years. True, horror films in general do not usually meet the criteria of art film critics but it is worth remembering that the first Thai film ever sold to an international distributor was the already mentioned Nang Nak by Nonzee Nimibutr and the first Thai film that was re-made outside of Thailand was Shutter (Banjong Pisanthanakun/Parkpoom Wongpoom), both of them impressive ghost stories. It may also be interesting to mention that Shutter has already been re-made twice – once legally as an American-Japanese co-production and once not very legally in India – and that the directors of Shutter have already sold the re-make rights to their second film Alone, also a ghost story.

It is perfectly clear that films like Shutter, Nang Nak or Alone have won their international audiences with their production value, thanks to which even the seemingly alienating Thai narrative structure proved not much of an obstacle. As Thai horror film continues to evolve visually, mostly thanks to the involvement of directors of photography, visual effects specialists and CG teams trained professionally in the competitive business of commercial advertising, filmmakers put to test the narrow formula of the ghost movie genre introducing non-supernatural plots and motifs in the hope of challenging the audience's (and the investors') expectations. This, however, is not always easy, for some habits are difficult to break.

In the interview conducted in 2007, Pakhpum Wonjinda, the director of Rab Nong Sayong Kwan and Videoclip spoke of his difficulties with rationalising what seemed a banal slasher plot. In Wonjinda's film, Rab Nong
a group of first year university students is on their way to their initiation ceremony in a remote rural location when things begin to go wrong and they all fall victim to a mysterious masked killer. Horror fans will have no difficulty recognising a very popular pattern immortalised in the cinema by such multi-sequel productions as *Friday 13th*, or *Halloween*. If, however, after watching *Rab Nong* they find themselves mystified by the film’s seemingly incoherent twists and turns and a rather incomprehensible ending, it is because the director failed to convince the investors that his original idea actually made sense. Wonjinda explains it as following:

> Take American and Thai culture as an example. If you want to talk about, let’s say, serial killers you’re going to hear that we don’t have serial killers in Thailand. It’s simply impossible to make people believe that serial killers could actually exist here. You cannot even say that this or that guy is sick and he’s running around killing people. Thai people would deny it – no there is no one like that in Thailand. It’s simply impossible. So if I chose to have some psycho running around killing kids in *Rab Nong* nobody would take it seriously. You see, in American culture it may be easy to portray a killer like that in a movie; a killer who just grabs a gun or a knife and sets out to kill people at random. But in Thailand most crimes are seen as motivated by personal revenge. People believe there has to be a reason to kill; cause and effect. And so the only way to show killing outside that cause-and-effect pattern is to involve black magic. And that’s something the audience will easily believe here. (125-126)

Once again we are led to a conclusion that if you encounter any difficulty with creating or justifying the plot the safest way out for Thai filmmakers seems to involve the supernatural. What seems particularly meaningful is the fact that spiritual intervention seems to cover both the cases of internal problems with the narrative structure and external obstacles resulting from the relationship of the filmmakers with their audience and their investors. On a more extreme end of the spectrum we find examples such as *Spiritual World* (*Deadly Ghost*, 2007), yet another story about a girl who can see dead people, and lots of them. Since the convoluted narrative structure of the film had proven difficult even to the Thai audience and the film’s poor visual quality had left the viewers disappointed, the Q&A session with the director Tharatap Theusomboon at the Thai Directors’ Club began with a prolonged moment of much-telling silence. When the director was finally asked about his view on the film he embarked on a lengthy monologue in which he explained that he frequently communicated with the spirits and
that the ghosts of his deceased friends and family members advised him how to shoot his movie. Needless to say, after such an introduction, the audience did not have the spirit to question anything else. For indeed, how could they have?

The intricate network of relationships between the spiritual and the scientific, between ghosts and technology, between scientific inventions, technological devices and the images of the afterlife is a fascinating area for exploration. It also seems to be a potential common ground bringing the disparate cultural values and beliefs together. Not surprisingly all of the recent Asian horror films instantly grabbed by Hollywood for re-makes were the films featuring technologically upgraded spirits. Obviously the people responsible for making the decisions felt that the films involved “translated” better into more mainstream horror narratives, as they touched upon concepts their non-Asian viewers could also relate to. Still, if these films are ever to become more than unsuccessful copies of their Asian originals, we need to understand the nature of Eastern spirituality and its place in the modern technologically-oriented world, rather than simply cut and paste whichever film elements seem desirable at the moment.

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