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A Ghostly Feminine Melancholy: Representing Decay and Experiencing Loss in Thai Horror Films

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By analysing significant Thai horror films from 1999—the year Nonzee Nimitbut’s emblematic *Nang Nak* was released—to 2010, this essay focuses on the presence and representation of female ghosts and undead spirits from traditional Thai myths in contemporary Thai cinema. More precisely, this essay highlights traditional female characters as mediators between horror and love, and fear and mourning, instead of as traditionally frightening entities. This distinction was made possible after the Thai “New Wave.” As ancestral mirror of inner fears and meaningful images reflecting societal concerns, female spirits in contemporary Thai cinema become the emblem of a more complex “monstrous femininity,” merging fear with melancholy, and an irreparable sense of loss with reflections on the ephemeral.

Keywords: Thailand, horror, cinema, female ghosts, melancholy.

Introduction

Asked why horror movies seem to be quite popular with Thai filmmakers and why Thai directors make so many horror films, the short answer of famous Thai film director, producer, and screenwriter Bandit Thongdee was: “It’s because the belief in ghosts seems to be part of everyday life. So it’s easy to find an idea for a movie. There are so many ghosts in Thailand. *Kumantong*, *Takien*, *Krasue*...There’s so much information about them” (Ancuta, 2007, para. 1).

Spirits and ghosts in Thailand existed by definition: they existed in the past and still do. Like any reality, they have their space in the collective imagination and its most emblematic contemporary representative: Thai cinema.

Thai horror films have, in fact, from the 1950s onwards and with little to no influence from the West, brought to the screen the same entities that had, for centuries, been the undisputed protagonists of ancient local legends and cults. Those were mostly female entities. Indeed, although in Thai horror

films the male characters had their origins in the fantasy of film directors or screenwriters, the female ghosts have always belonged to the ancestral imagery of ancient folktales. For example: the unhappy *phi tai hong tong kloms*, the spirits of women and their babies who died in childbirth or immediately after the birth of the child; *phi krasue*, the horrible flying head; and *phi takien*, the tree spirit. They with their ghostly sisters reappear on the screen glorified by the lights of the set, rehabilitated by strong and touching passions, or mitigated by subtle irony.

Beyond the fascination produced by images of female ghosts, their visual presence in horror films embodied values ranging from inherited ancestral notions of dangerous femininity¹ to specific Theravada Buddhist practices connected to meditation on female corpses; and from the representation of universal emotions—such as melancholy, maternal love, and passion—to more contextual and circumscribed meanings in recent Thai history and culture. After the crisis that affected Thailand in 1997, the presence in Thai cinema of ancestral female ghosts acquired a symbolic sense.

The Monstrous-Feminine In Contemporary Thai Cinema

The 1980s and 1990s saw rapid growth in the Thai economy, which boomed from the influx of international investments and the expansion of both the domestic manufacturing and the service sectors. Journalists, politicians, and intellectuals consciously embraced discourses of *lokapiwat* or *lokanuwat*, Sanskrit Thai terms for globalization. Thailand became central to both Asian economic ascendancy and cultural parity (Furhmann, 2009). This period of growth, related to a period of growth in an unstable economy, was destined to fail. It ended abruptly in 1997 due to the widespread and profound Asian economic crisis. In Thailand, this contraction led to a radical rejection of globalization and, from all perspectives, to a reassessment of notions of “Thai-ness,” and, consequently, a resurgence of widespread cultural nationalism in many sectors of cultural and social life (Reynolds, 2002; Williamson, 2005).

This period of introversion coincided with a major crisis in the Thai film industry, which collapsed under the double pressure of television and imported Hollywood films. In 1997, Thai filmmakers aligned themselves with the general renewal of nationalist sentiment embodied by cultural policies and realised the need to focus on their own country through themes, subjects, emotions, audience, and investment. They began the Thai New Wave, a specific movement crucial to creating the unique identity of contemporary Thai cinema, both at home and abroad.

In 1997 saw dramas about love, crime, and violence from director Ratanarung Pen-ek’s production, *Fun Bar Karaoke*, and filmmaker

Nimibutr Nonzee's *Dang Bireley's and the Young Gangster*. These two films were followed by Nimibutr Nonzee's *Nang Nak* in 1999. Love, violence, and ghostly apparitions converge to narrate the story of the most famous and venerated ghost in Thai culture—*Mae Nak Phra Khanong* [Lady Nak of Phra Khanong].

Nimibutr intentionally adapted the legend of Mae Nak as a symbol of Thai cultural heritage and Thai values. Taking elements from contemporary Japanese and Korean horror traditions, *Nang Nak* established Thai horror as a viable genre for a wider Asian perspective (Richards, 2010).² By choosing the character of the venerated lady revenant, Nimitbutr embraced Thailand's traditional values, imagery, and popular devotion.

Historically, *Nang Nak* was the last of a long series of visual portrayals of Mae Nak. In Thai visual culture, Vengeful women subvert social order as angry spirits who break natural laws with their overwhelming interference in earthly matters. Another trope included in this category was the dead wife haunting her beloved husband. These women maintain a central position in Thai cinema. Among such figures, Mae Nak has, over the years, been the subject of cinematographic representation more than any other woman.

She was the subject of the early Thai silent films, *Ee Nak Phra Khanong* [Lady Nak of Phra Khanong], by Mom Ratchawong Anusak Hatsadin in 1930 (Rutnin, 1996). Mae Nak has appeared in nearly thirty films over the last fifty years (Rithdee, 2013), in television serials, once as an animated cartoon character, and twice in plays dedicated to her. Each time she brings to the stage her desperate love and the intrinsic duality implicit in her desire to be a perfect wife and mother and the impossibility of reaching this status due to her unquiet death (Diamond, 2006). Though previous representations depicted Mae Nak simultaneously as a symbol of the ideal woman and her perfect opposite, the representations never dwelt on the deeper feelings of the female ghost, highlighting instead the fearsome, sexual, and comic aspects of Nak's haunting to focus on the angry ghost's destructive jealousy.³ On the other hand, Nimibutr's subversive approach compared to previous representations of Mae Nak, brought a novel perspective to the trope; he based his version of the legend on the grand emotions of loss, love, and detachment.

Introducing Mae Nak with the phrase "*Mae sin lorn sin jai / rue ja sin alai sineha*" [Although dead/her desire persisted], Nimibutr harnessed the pathos of other Asian horrors about menfolk bewitched by a phantom lover. The phrase sharpened the melancholic mood deeply rooted in the vicissitudes of the sad spirit in love carried over from the original version of her myth. Narrating the biography pre- and post- mortem of the venerated Thai woman and her ghost, Nimibutr tried to tell the story from the point of

view of Nak—first as the woman, then as ghost—to evoke a deep sympathy for her and her desperate love.

As with the two previous films that ushered in the Thai New Wave by foregrounding stories about love and crime, the Thai audience appreciated Nimibutr's play on love and horror vis-à-vis the supernatural. In *Nang Nak*, this fortunate combination was juxtaposed against themes that appealed to mainstream audiences: love and marriage, Buddhist spirituality, and otherworld mysteries. All themes were linked within a story that was both moving and unsettling (Williamson, 2005).

This same winning formula exemplified by *Nang Nak* and other Thai horror films' inclusion of "ghostly humanity" reinforced shared values and religious teachings, and represented horror in the female dimension. These films kept intact the humanity of its female characters while portraying both the power inherent in the emotional aspect of femininity and the subversive potential it represents in its survival of death, and in its ability to generate simultaneously repulsion and sympathy, horror and love, terror and melancholy, dread and desire. This pattern was unique to traditional Thai beliefs and folktales.

As popular values from the past entered the cinematographic dimension, film directors drew on the wealth of images of ghostly female presences traditionally belonging to Thai cultural heritage, which had for centuries been grounds for fear and terror. After *Nang Nak* (Nimibutr, 1999), *Tamnan Krasue* [*Demonic Beauty*] (Bin, 2002), and *Krasue Valentine* [*Ghost of Valentine*] (Yuthlert, 2006) drew on the myth of *krasue*; *Takien* (Chalerm, 2003) and *Tanee* (Pongsakong, 2007) narrated the story of two dangerous spirits of the forests; *Takien* (Saiyon, 2010) was inspired by the symbolic value of the sacred tree and by the *phi tai hong*s [ghosts that reside in tree]; lastly, *The Unborn* (Bhandit, 2003) featured the *kuman thong*, the spirit of an unborn child.

In these films, the horrific presences from supernatural stories become more complex characters with human feelings of love, despair, and anger, as well as human family values including loyalty and faith. Despite their humanity, these supernatural presences represent the horror of death, the undead, and the angry spirits. These images are also vehicles for Buddhist teachings relating to impermanence, the ephemeral, desire, and the melancholy pertaining to a deep sense of loss. These images also help differentiate horror films about female ghosts produced before and after the Thai New Wave. As for portrayals of Mae Nak, more recent films were no longer simple cinematographic representations of female ghosts or female monsters. Instead these films provide a more elaborate image of femininity

that inevitably and dramatically plunges into the monstrous, Barbara Creed called the “monstrous-feminine” (Creed, 1993, p. 1)⁴.

The term monstrous-feminine intentionally and specifically delineated the abject side of femininity that was usually represented in relation to feminine sexuality, mothering, and reproductive functions and evolved from dreams, myths, literature, and artistic practice in general. The abject represented what it is about women that is shocking, terrifying, and horrific, and highlighted how the monstrous feminine horrified audiences differently from the horror produced by male monsters. Monstrous Feminine defines the abject side of femininity that remained inseparable from its most human side.⁵

This shift towards acknowledging the monstrous-feminine was made possible by allowing female supernatural characters to speak the language of the myth to which they belong. Myths include ancient symbols that express philosophical and moral meanings, a kind of philosophy in the form of poetry and a sort of dramaturgy of the inner sphere (Lavedan, 1931; Diel, 1966).⁶ Drawing on this language, Thai monstrous-feminine images thus become the emblem of specific feelings—melancholy, sadness, loss—which, related to the human subconscious, can be understood only by moving in that repository of symbols and archetypal images.

As Rudolf Wittkover (1977) asserts in this context in the volume *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*:

Each generation not only interprets its own meaning into those older symbols to which it is drawn by affinity, but also creates new symbols by using, modifying and transforming those of the past... There exists something like a spontaneous rediscovery or remembrance of the original meaning of visual symbols. In fact, it occurs frequently and seems to be a prerogative of artists and poets. But in certain situations all of us rediscover the power of symbols, which have long receded into subconsciousness (pp. 184-186).

The female ghosts of Thai cinema derived from symbolic images and drew on the imaginative lexicon, making them emblems of a monstrous-feminine melancholy, which becomes accessible and understandable beyond any specific context⁷. Although this relationship to archetypal images characterizes all the previously-mentioned films of the Thai New Wave, the relationship was particularly vivid where female ghosts appeared as the keystone crucial to the unfolding of a story of melancholy, unrealizable

desires, and insuperable impermanence: *Nang Nak* (1999), *Takien* (2010), *The Unborn* (2003) and *Krasue Valentine* (2006).



Figure 1. Cinematic movie posters from *Nang Nak* (Nimibutr, 1999), *Takien* (Saiyon, 2010), *The Unborn* (Bhandit, 2003), and *Krasue Valentine* (Yuthlert, 2006). Images: photographs by Alessandra Campoli 2012.

Melancholic Monstrosity: Losing Love, Losing Self

Subversion and death, loss and mourning, desire and failure, cannibalism and black bile. All these terms are fundamental to defining melancholy through the centuries and cultures, and from the most disparate sources. All these terms can also be employed in describing the emotional state in which Nak in *Nang Nak*, Yaibua in *Takien* (2010), Mai in *The Unborn*, and Sao in *Krasue Valentine* led their haunting lives. Notwithstanding their ferocious irate natures and origin from a dark world of fearful ancient images, in contemporary visual culture they are emblems of melancholy regardless of whatever meaning we wish to attribute to the term. They represent *monh*

mai [Thai melancholy]: sad, sorrowful, gloomy and blue.⁸ They represent the ephemeral Buddhist melancholy of decaying bodies. They are also the Saturnine melancholy of coldness and subversion.⁹ They are, moreover, the melancholic “women of loss” of the most recent psychoanalytic melancholy as described in Freud (1917) and Kristeva (1989). Indeed, in all the female characters the monstrosity of their manifestation casts no shadow, instead cementing their position as iconic figures of loss—loss of themselves and loss of love—as touching presences capable of evoking in the spectator a feeling of familiarity from their unlucky lives, their death, and to their dangerous existence in the afterlife as revenants.

The Nak of *Nang Nak* is traditionally considered as the Thai icon of loss. She contains within herself unbearable pain for the loss of her beloved husband and unborn child. She also experiences a more inexplicable, indefinable, loss—exemplifying Freudian melancholy—the loss of self.

Dead but still alive, loving wife and mother, also a hungry spirit desired and at the same time repelled, Nak was a victim of an overwhelming disorientating feeling. She was unconsciously incapable of abandoning her former life because of love. Since her deeper nature identified with her lost love and her past self, she cannot adopt any new object of love to gain a new life. Thus she wanders as a restless spirit, taking refuge in an “ego” with which she wrongly identifies after death. She attempts everything possible to escape annihilation, to escape exorcism. Nak’s illusion of being still alive in the lost past was represented by her unchanging features and a normal daily existence.

In both aspects, nevertheless, something uncanny was hidden, accessible in the spell enveloping Nak and her family. This doesn’t allow Nak’s husband, Mak, to see her double aspect, to recognize her transformation as a nocturnal bearer of irrepressible violence, or to perceive her anger from fear of losing her enchanted and ephemeral world. The spell with which Nak binds herself and her husband devours reality. Nak’s spell was cannibalistic because Nak herself was the devourer: she metaphorically devours her husband’s life and imprisons him in a fictitious reality. Kristeva (1989) aligns this cannibalistic imagination with the general context of melancholy and defines it as a repudiation of the death and the reality of loss.

Through this devouring, Nak tries to resuscitate herself. But in vain, because the illusion of a normal life coexists in Nak with the subtle consciousness that she is both acting against the spontaneous cycle of birth and rebirth and violating the natural law of death. Such a violation can’t last forever and will cause unavoidable punishment, marking her with the sign of transgression and counting her among entities that populate the realm of subversion.

This last motif is central to the film. The image of “reversal” represents this metaphorical subversion. The change of perspective makes it possible to enter the forbidden world of spirits and to break down the border between dimensions that shouldn’t be merged. As the enlightened exorcist monk suggests to Mak, it is only by looking at what seems to be real from an upside-down position that we humans can see the truth concerning the line that separates the natural from the supernatural. By looking backward, upside-down between his legs, Mak becomes aware that he is living under a spell with the spirit of his wife. From the same position, he can see that his house, which seemed perfect to him and attended by a devoted wife, is nothing more than a hut destroyed by months of abandon. From the same position, he can see Nak’s arm extending abnormally, as no human being would be able to do. In a pivotal scene, Nak’s spirit appears with the baby in her arms in the temple where Mak had previously taken refuge. She stands upside down with her feet firmly rooted on the ceiling while drops of water mixed with tears rhythmically fall on the monks gathered to exorcise her. This overturning opens the demonic sphere, a universe that transcends the familiar laws of human reality and remains out-of-bounds as anti-nature par excellence.

Dead but still conscious, Nak best exemplified viewing subversion as remoteness by watching—like Saturn—her lost life from an isolated,



Figure 2. Scenes from *Nang Nak* showing images of Nak’s life. From left to right, top to bottom: The departure of Mak, Nak experiencing labour pains, an unhappy childbirth, the ghosts of Nak and her baby on Mak’s return, “Bend over to the front and look between your legs” (please add description), and seeing the upside-down dimension of spirits. Source: Film stills from DVD. Nimibutr, N. (Director). (1999). *Nang Nak* [Motion picture]. Thailand. Thai Entertainment.

upside-down, and hostile standpoint. Nak's ghostly presence exemplified subversion as materialization of the being suspended between life and death in a state impossible escape by going neither forward nor back. Nak also exemplified subversion as melancholic stillness generated by the clash of two contrasting forces: the desire to let go so as to follow the cycle of natural law and the desire to hold fast to her lost love and lost self.

In a very similar way, this desire to hold onto her lost life characterizes the figure of Yaibua, the young suicide *phi tai hong* of *Takien* (2010). In Yaibua's story this inner desire is reinforced by both an external desire for revenge and the evil spells cast on the corpse of the young woman during the funeral rite. Blessings to separate the spirit from its mortal body had been duly performed on Yaibua's corpse, but they were immediately nullified in secret by being recited backward. This broken, incomplete ritual prevents Yaibua's spirit from accomplishing the process of mourning and precipitates a Freudian labyrinthine state of mind in which the ego wanders around looking for its lost object, Yaibua's lover and life (Freud, 1917).

In this case, the upturning comes from outside: Yaibua trapped by the perverse desire of an unrequited love transformed into violence and desire for revenge. This love knowingly broke the law of life and death to bring chaos to the world of the living. Yaibua was bound to this dimension as the passive victim of a process of subversion performed on her to transform her into a negative character, and trap her in her desire for her lost love and lost self. In the process, Yaibua loses herself, the memory of her death, and the path she should follow. She identifies herself and her reason to exist with her lost love.

Just like Nak, Yaibua thus becomes a prisoner of the desire that causes her to live in a time bubble to which she clings tightly, but in which she is nothing but a hostile presence to be exorcised. Yaibua's time bubble disintegrates when she is exorcised, leaving her defenceless in a world that tries to repel, reject, and destroy her. Exorcism, the attempt to separate her subtle ego from her lost love, triggers a series of violent deeds recognized as "melancholic cannibalism" (Kristeva, 1989, p. 338).

The promise of meeting her love again in a next life persuades Yaibua to separate from her body, to leave, and to stop her haunting. As an unpacified *phi tai hong*, an angry and ferocious spirit, she secretly asks for certainty about the future meeting. However, certainty can only be guaranteed by the destruction of the love object and its introjection—a metaphorical act of devouring—of her death. In the last scene of the film, the two reborn young lovers meet again in the future and again fall in love at the feet of a giant golden statue of Buddha as the cadaver of a young man reappears. Hidden for years, lost, and forgotten, the corpse of Yaibua's lover lay under the floor

of the girl's house. He had been murdered by his dead lover who wanted to keep him with her and buried by the beautiful melancholic ghost that haunted the *takien* tree.

Whereas Nak and Yaibua live in a ghostly in-between state after their death, Sao—the young, thin, silent, and beautiful nurse of *Krasue Valentine*



Figure 3. Scenes from *Takien* (Chalerm, 2010) showing Yaibua's tragic destiny. From left to right, top to bottom: Yaibua's suicide, monks reciting *mantras* backwards, the exorcisms, and the next life's encounter in the temple and the contemporary discovery of the man's corpse. Source: Film stills from DVD. Chalerm, W. (Director). (2003). *Takien* [Motion picture]. Thailand: Mongkol Film Company..

(Yuthlert, 2006)—is not undead. She lives her earthly life haunted by a melancholic monstrosity made of unavoidable separations and lost memories hidden within her. These, in the film, take the shape of a series of losses that materialize without having ever been conscious possessions: the loss of herself, the loss of her love, and the loss of a normal human life.

In the film, the sense of loss is related, from a deeply Buddhist perspective, to atonement for sins, we discover in the unfolding of the plot, Sao committed in her past life: seeds of evil that inevitably blossom in the present. Objects of loss were thus old objects of love in her previous life. She recognized these objects only after their loss. Before that, Sao had vague memories that instilled a sense of constant sadness. This feeling was transformed into a monster every night when Sao, in a crescendo of feeling her loss, loses herself too. She becomes mired in a nightmarish dimension in which her awareness of horror coexists with her experiences. Sao's head detaches from her body and the young nurse becomes a fearful *krasue* [ghost] that flutters through the halls and gardens of the hospital to kill and devour.

Traditionally, the *krasue* kills to nourish itself by devouring human organs. However: Sao rejects the *krasue*'s bloody food; she vomits what is alien to her humanity the day after she feeds, purging what doesn't belong in the human dimension: blood and putrescent flesh. Sao is barely aware of the monstrosity of the previous night. Melancholy and abjection are both and simultaneously present in Sao-*krasue*: melancholy in the Saturnine separation, in the spasmodic devouring that precipitates humanity into a distant hostile dimension, and in the implacability of transformation; abjection—the abjection of Kristeva's *Power of Horror* (1982)—in the monstrous, “unclean body” that devours loathsome matter. The “unclean body” stands in sharp contrast to the “clean body” that expels the loathsome matter as part of a vital process to preserve its partial humanity. The space for the abject is outside the limits of human existence, at “the place where meaning collapses”, where “I am not”, and where “a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2).”

Although Sao nightly experiences an abject “vertical loss”, or loss of self, every day she experiences a “horizontal loss”, the undefined loss of a forgotten love that, the more frequently recalled, permits a consequent greater material loss. Sao is not alone in her punishment of a fragmented and incomplete body. Paoun, her lover in her past life, was employed as the hospital janitor. He lives imprisoned in a disabled body that becomes a silent prison when, after an accident, he is almost totally immobilized by a paralysis that allows him only to blink his eyes to communicate.

Sao and Paoun's rekindled romance initiates the loss of the present culminating in the apotheosis of a melancholic horror. The absence of a happy ending materializes in images of loss, violence, and sadness: while her head flies as a *krasue*, Sao's body is engulfed by flames; made aware of his lost past, Paoun waits in for his lover's head to unite with the corpse of a nurse he beheaded and injected with formalin; the lovely child in red, who has carried roses as she accompanied the lovers, is revealed to be the reincarnation of an old evil spirit from the past, come to brutally murder Paoun; the director of the hospital, with his shadows and memories of death and violence, dies stifled by the child's roses; finally, Sao-*krasue* appears hopelessly caught on a hook in a neglected depot. The film ends with an image of the ghostly child, Paoun's killer, playing amid red roses.

Nak and Yaibua appeared in their own lives as ghosts and Sao remained a living human being despite her monstrous aspects. On the other hand, Mai in *The Unborn* is dead. She takes the form of a decomposing corpse, appearing in the dimension of the living. She haunts Por, a pregnant drug



Figure 4. Scenes from *Krasue Valentine* (Yuthlert, 2006) showing Sao's melancholic monstrosity. From left to right, top to bottom: floating *krasue*, past sins of a past life, Sao vomiting the disgusting food eaten by *krasue*, the consciousness of abjection, the beheaded corpse of the dead nun in formalin, the lovely child transforming into a vengeful spirit from the past, and the unhappy end of Sao-*krasue*. Source: Film stills from DVD. Yuthlert, S. (Director). (2006). *Krasue Valentine* [Motion picture]. Thailand: Sahamongkol Film Internat

dealer who was recently abandoned by her lover. Mai was a beautiful young student and an orphan who was also abandoned and murdered because of her pregnancy. Their affinity in the pain of their loss generates a female relationship of fear and despair. Por becomes, for Mai, the only way to remedy her loss and free her spirit. Like Nak, Mai's spirit persists in the world of the living as a dreadful *phi tai hong klom*. Unlike Nak, Mai's lost love—the love tethering her to this dimension—was her love for the unborn child brutally pulled from her womb and transformed into a *kuman thong* [golden little boy].

Dead mother and child live unnaturally in a dimension Freud describes as the “memory-traces of things” (Freud, 1917, p. 256). Though memory belongs to the past, they generate the main conflict of melancholy, the conflict between love and hate. For Mai, maternity is veiled by dark shadows that overwhelm all other feelings: Mai and her baby occupy a Saturnine space, inverted, distant, gelid, and leaden, a space they can leave only after being reunited.

During their reunion, melancholy becomes mourning. No longer a desperate loss, undefined and indefinable that, without any possible exit, mourning leads to loss of self, straying into a sense of irreparability. Only the transformation of melancholy into mourning first allows the loss to evolve and, second, allows any possibility of continuing beyond. It is only after finding Mai's body, after finding the foetus-*kuman thong* and returning the baby corpse-spirit to Mai's corpse, that the woman can cease persecuting the living. After, Mai is transformed from a restless spirit into a guardian spirit. It is a grateful Mai who tries to alert Por to danger so as to avoid becoming a terrible and frightening *phi tai hong tong klom*.

When the haunting is over, the water that used to appear with every manifestation of Mai—an allusion to her death by drowning, and a symbol of the reversal of everyday space, the dimension of the living, into the terrifying space of ghosts—gives way to fire, the corpses of Mai and her baby cremated according to Buddhist tradition.



Figure 5. Scenes from *The Unborn* (Bhandit, 2003) showing Mai's haunting. From left to right, top to bottom: Watery apparitions of Mai (left) and Por (right); a ghostly pregnant Maia; Mai's cremation. Source: Film stills from DVD. Bhandit, T. (Director). (2003). *The Unborn* [Motion picture]. Thailand: Mongkol Film Company.

Just as religious ends *The Unborn*, fire is also the end in other previously-mentioned films. It is, emblematic of resolution; it represents the victory of the positive element of life that ends infestation.

The cremation fire of the Buddhist funeral—burning a body that should have been burnt long ago—introduces order into the temporary chaos created by spirits and the undead; it brings the subversive world of spirits into canonical religion. The fire visualizes temporal incongruity in which the spirits' desires end. What characterizes the time/space in which spirits haunt the living world is the temporal incongruity generated by their violation of the law of impermanence. This incongruity is terrifying for the living, but it is even more painful for female spirits. It is agonizing for those whose sole

aim is to prolong their love beyond death, for those whose love is directed toward living beings who cannot love them as ghosts inhabiting the same dimension. Female ghosts in this situation manage a present marked by a “non-contemporaneous contemporaneity” (Harootunian, 2007, p. 475).

Fire ends this state and regenerates the space as a homely space, the time as human time. Fire marked Nak, Yaibua, and Mai’s transition from the melancholic dimension of angry spirits to the sad and well-defined dimension of the dead. Fire also indicates the passing from restless melancholy to resigned mourning. For Sao-*krasue*, fire marks the last act of the story: her headless body is burnt in the night. Her head can no longer rejoin her body and she is, therefore, destined to be a *krasue* forever and Sao no more. For Sao, the fire means death in a life that has no final reconciliation, but which is nevertheless necessary to restore a final—albeit unhappy—order. For Sao, the monstrous-feminine can in no way be human. The human dimension has to be definitively detached. Sao’s human features were thus illusory, an illusion that fire erases. Erasing the illusion of the earthly body reaffirms the need to follow the unavoidable law of the ephemeral.

Meditating on Female Corpses, Representing Female Bodies

The concepts of the ephemeral and impermanence clearly define the peculiarity of Thai melancholy and its deep relation to Buddhist religion by delineating a specific approach to reality that melds beauty and decay together. This apparent contrast matches the precise aesthetics of decay present in Thailand in several layers. This aesthetic finds in the female body its maximum potential of expression as an object capable of generating desire and an object that can put an end to all desire. This last concept constitutes a key point in Theravada Buddhist teachings and meditation practices. It is also closely related to the practice of *ashubha kammatana* [meditation on impurity], the Buddhist meditation on corpses, which is supposed to develop in the practitioner awareness of the illusory nature of desire. As well as textual readings on the ephemeral nature of human beings, advanced training for experienced Theravada monks and practitioners comprises a protracted visual encounter with death, which takes the form of observing human corpses or images of human cadavers in various states of decomposition. Meditation on the decomposition of a corpse—bloated, discoloured, festering, gnawed, cut and dismembered, fissured, blood-stained, wormy, bony—leads to contemplation of the natural stages in the cycle of interminable change (Phillips, 1992), and aims to reinforce awareness of the immutable reality of the transient nature of existence.

This visual meditation is usually performed on female corpses with the aim of transforming what is considered to be the highest object of

desire into the most horrific image of impermanence. Yet horrific images with which the adept forms a deeply visual relationship are immediately understandable in reading about the different types of corpse used for this purpose. The *Dhammapada* (Norman, 2004), the collection of Buddhist teachings in verse form, lists these as:

1. A Bloated Corpse is a swollen corpse shortly after the day of death. After death, their body begins to decay. The body bloats from the pressure of internal gases.
2. A Bluish Corpse refers to the bluish-green tint the skin turns after death. The skin of the corpse turns different colours, such as blue, black, or purple. Usually, the body will turn green.
3. A Festering Corpse is when the corpse becomes pus-filled.
4. A Split Up or Cut Up Corpse is a corpse that has been dissected or cut into two pieces.
5. A Gnawed Corpse is a corpse whose parts have been eaten by wild animals such as dogs or vultures.
6. A Scattered or Mangled Corpse is a corpse whose extremities separate from the body.
7. A Hacked and Scattered Corpse has been cut up or chopped apart.
8. A Blood Stained or Bleeding Corpse is covered in blood or bleeding.
9. A Worm Infested Corpse is full of worms eating the flesh.
10. A Skeleton refers only to bones or cartilage. For this meditation, the meditator might need a piece of bone as the object of meditation (p. 41).

Whatever corpse a practitioner uses, he has to be careful neither to stand downwind, because he may not be able to stand the smell of the corpse blowing towards him, nor to stand too far away because he might not be able to see well. To stand too close was terrifying; to stand at the head or at the feet of the corpse did not afford a proper view of the body. After finding the right position, several features were examined: skin colour; age, shape, and bloating; body position and body parts; joints, gaps, curves, bulges; and, finally, the body as a whole.

Following this simple visual process of meditation, the body is turned horrific. The initial charm that a female body naturally provokes

is spontaneously transformed into repulsion and detachment to confer undisputable peace on the viewer. As Liz Wilson notes in *Charming Cadavers* (1996):

The charming but ultimately cadaverous female forms that serve as object lessons for lovelorn monks beckon one moment and repulse the next. As in aversion therapy, the lust of the male spectator is initially engaged but ultimately subverted as an alluring spectacle is transformed into a repulsive one (p. 86).

This transformation from eroticism to repulsion allows an encounter with the female corpse free from worldly illusions, with the awareness of the impermanence that is part of all phenomena, including those that may apparently be considered as most charming. Indeed

In the eyes of the renouncer, the conceits of poets and the yearning of lovers are ludicrous category mistakes; only fools mistake walking corpses for paragons of beauty (Wilson, 1996, p. 60).

The most horrific aspects of reality are thus hidden under apparent beauty. Such an approach to female corpses as a direct and tangible representation of impermanence—apart from belonging to the past—is still today part of contemporary Buddhist monastic training in Thailand. Due to the difficulty of finding corpses since charnel grounds no longer exist, the would-be meditator is directed to a hospital, morgues, or to funeral temples to observe corpses, or even to use a picture of a corpse for meditation. Buddhist bookstores attached to several temples in Bangkok, photographic images of female corpses are, in fact, available: cadavers in various states of decomposition, dead bodies of female car accident victims, parts of bodies, whole bodies, macabre details, faces with eyes censored. Horrific holy pictures remain accessible to anyone who wants to practice *ashubha kammatana* (Fuhrmann, 2008).

From those horrific holy images, decaying female bodies now populate contemporary Thai horror films and films focused on the unnatural and dangerous desires of female ghosts: *Nang Nak*, *Krasue Valentine*, *Takien* and *The Unborn*. No longer passively used as pedagogic images to reach a state of elevated awareness, female corpses in such films subvert and generate erotic desire for female bodies. To accomplish this is to magically

rewind the process of decay: to make corpses appear as the living women they once were.

As the object of desire and terror in films, the female body repeatedly moves back and forth between the dimension of love and the dimension of horror, between charm and decay. As in the popular imagination, onscreen film spirits usually appear in the shape of attractive women so stunningly beautiful as to exert an immediate and powerful fascination—in part sexual desire, unconditional admiration, and protective instinct—on the potential victim. This first manifestation alternates with the apparition of the monstrous body that belongs more to the realm of the dead than to the living. In the midst of this process of transformation from beauty to monstrosity, minor signs of violence or death appear on those same bodies and cast shadows on the illusion of female beauty.

Nimibutr's beautiful Nak in *Nang Nak* (1999) is, thus, also a long-buried cadaver. Her charming features silently change into that of melancholic terror as she combs her hair with the same comb that had been broken after her death—required by traditional funerary rituals—and a tuft of hair falls into her hands. This was *memento mori* [from Latin: “remember that you have to die”; an object kept as a reminder of the inevitability of death] reminding Nak and the spectator that Nak's buried body is decomposing somewhere else and that she is nothing but the *eidolon* [image, apparition, spectre] of herself. Like a powerless *eidolon*, she is obliged to attend, in despair, the disinterment of her buried corpse and the subsequent truculent exorcism performed on it, when a *mo phi*, a spirit doctor, repeatedly strikes her forehead with a stone. The inconsolable Mak tries to stop the ritual and embrace the decaying corpse of his wife while images of their happy life and of her living body appear in his memory, adding the pain of remembrance to the pain of horror.

The young Yaibua of *Takien* (Chalerm, 2003) simultaneously appears as a young woman in love, a hanged corpse, and a *phi tai hong*. The macabre images of her cadaver cleaned, dressed, tied, buried, unearthed, and eaten by worms are juxtaposed with the charming image of Yaibua's spirit manifest as she was alive. With a lovely smile, the spirit receives her beloved boyfriend and his friends. With that same smile, she is portrayed in bucolic scenes at religious festivals. But in the shadow of the forest she appears with unnaturally pale skin and rimmed eyes, carrying the rope that hanged her. She politely refuses the food she is offered, and secretly devours the offerings that have been left for her spirit by the villagers under the *takien* she haunts. In the alternation of these paratactic images, the beautiful spirit and the decaying corpse are subtly linked by barely perceptible scars, which remind Yaibua of her demonic status as the undead.

In *The Unborn* (Bhandit, 2003) images from a recent past reveal a beautiful young student with long, black hair, playing traditional Thai music. Images that shade into a present where that same young student appears as a ghostly, frightened mother hiding her face. Mercilessly drowned by her lover while pregnant, in the film, her manifestations are always accompanied by water. She appears as a corpse whose face has been partially devoured by fish, white flesh horribly sprinkled with purple spots, whose womb has been brutally torn open to remove the *kuman thong*. In the present, that corpse is no longer a body. It carries no signs of that secret, hidden past, a past that is no more than a memory and a photograph. She is just a frightening cadaver bringing with her the coldness of the darkness in which she exists.

Lastly, the young *krasue* of *Krasue Valentine* (Yuthlert, 2002) is a beautiful, silent, and timid girl who nightly transforms, overwhelmed by the horror that invests her monstrous body. Her head detaches from her body and starts flying around looking for bloody food. In the film, the process of detachment is shown with the details of all its terrible evolution: the body squirms in intense pain, tries to resist, every time losing the fight against the evil power whose roots go back to a past forgotten life. The severed head has to look down at her inanimate body lying on the bed until their next reunification: a severed corpse, bloody, still, rigid, and violated. Nothing changes in the body and nothing changes in the head: the monstrosity here



Figure 6. Nak in her grave as a beautiful woman and her decomposing corpse in the fire in *Nang Nak* (Nimbutr, 1999).



Figure 7. The double aspect of Yaibua spirit in *Takien* (Chalerm, 2003)



Figure 8. Mai as a music student and as a *phi tai hong tong klom* in *The Unborn* (Bhandit, 2003)



Figure 9. Sao's beautiful face and her monstrous fragmented body. In *Krasue Valentine* (Yuthlert, 2006)

lies in the fragmentation, the unnatural separation of what should be only seen as a whole. The monstrous lies in the display of the internal organs and in seeing the normal face that should be linked to a normal body but which is, on the contrary, inextricably linked to bloody entrails.

Conclusion

In all these images, the contrast between beauty—the beauty of Nak and Yaibua as spirits, of Mai before her death, of the *krasue's* head—and death is relentlessly repeated, sought, wanted, intentionally represented, and dwell on macabre details. The contrast is such that, as in meditation practices, in the end the contrast dissolves to let death prevail. The veil of beauty is always destined to slip away and discover reality that is never pleasant but whose discovery is necessary to restore order to the chaos caused by misunderstanding of death and beauty. The female corpses, like those of the pedagogic Buddhist images, have to return to their role. This is the only way the natural cycle can be restored. The attempt of the charming cinematographic ghosts driven beyond death by desire for love—maternal or feminine—is thus destined to fail. It must withdraw and to turn in on itself, revealing the absolute impossibility of overcoming the borders of the ephemeral. The physical process of decay is not reversible, just as death is not reversible. Desire has to die with the body, else the spirit's inability to understand its ephemeral nature and its immateriality result in hauntings.

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Notes

- 1 On controversial and ambivalent approaches to femininity in Thailand and the various regions of Southeast Asia see: Ong and Peletz, 1995.
- 2 After *Nang Nak* (1999), a series of successful horror films was produced and released: *Bangkok Haunted* (2001); *The Eye* (2002); *Three Extremes II* (2002); *Shutter* (2004); *Art of the Devil* (2004); *Narok* (2005). *The Eye* was shot partially in Thailand with a Thai crew while *Three Extremes II* was coproduced in Hong Kong, South Korea, and Thailand. The cinematographic industry's new vitality was reflected by the launch of the Bangkok Film Festival in 1998. In 2002, the festival was rebranded as the Bangkok International Film Festival.
- 3 On this specific topic, May Adadol Ingawanij in *Nang Nak: Thai Bourgeois Heritage Cinema* writes that jealousy is key motivation used in many film versions of the legend that preceded Nimbutr's. These films incorporated many comical set pieces in their narrative structures (Ingawanij, 2007, p. 186). Older versions include *Mae Nak Phrakhanong* with Surasith Satayawong and Pariya Rungrueang (1959), *Mae Nak Phrakhanong* with Sombat Methani and Pariya Rungrueang (1978), and *Mae Nak Khuen Chip* with Likhit Ekmongkhon and Chudapha Jankhed (1990).
- 4 Categories from Euro-American scholarship, including Creed's "monstrous feminine," and psychoanalytical theorists like Freud and Kristeva were used in this paper as an experimental lens with which to access and shape aspects of melancholy and hauntification that seem to emerge

from an iconographical analysis of the female characters of the horror films considered in this research. However, in order not to run the risk of considering the “Other as the Self-shadow” (Spivak, 1988, p. 24), we need to clarify that we do not intend to use such categories and theories to explain and define melancholy and the hauntological dimension of contemporary Thai visual culture in absolute terms. This is, rather, a transcultural exploration of melancholy and ghostliness—from psychoanalytical theories, eastern-western mythologies, to Buddhist reflections on corpses—that allow us to approach Thai female ghosts in contemporary horror films from different perspectives and open new potential frameworks of interpretation.

- 5 On the specific topic of “abjection” related to femininity, see: Kristeva (1982).
- 6 In the ethical-psychological interpretation of myth by Paul Diel (1966), for example, the most significant characters of Greek mythology each represent a different function of the psyche. Their relationships represent psychic relations between human beings. All aspects, positive or negative, of the psychic sphere thus find a figurative formulation and symbolic explication in myth.
- 7 The infinite shades of the term ‘melancholy’ have been widely explored by specific research and publications for centuries and are not the aim of this inquiry. What is required here, on the other hand, is to highlight those specific aspects of melancholy which, separated from their original context, are nevertheless fundamental to access and understand the meaning of the topics, images, and feelings recurring in this research, i.e. melancholy as loss, melancholy as reversal, melancholic cannibalism, and the melancholy of the ephemeral.

For an anthology of studies about melancholy, see: Radden, 2000. Preliminary research on melancholy and the ephemeral in Southeast Asia was presented in 2009 at ISEA and in 2010 at ACSA conference: Campoli A. (2009) *The Ephemeral Body in ISEA (International Symposium of Electronic Art)*. Belfast: 2009; Campoli, A. (2010) *Tropical Melancholy: the Ephemeral in Thai Visual Imagination in 4th Annual International ACSA Conference. The Visual Imagination Across Boundaries*. Bangkok: November 2010. Bangkok. English Department, Assumption University.

- 8 As translated by Macfarland (1944), in *Thai-English Dictionary*. London: Stanford University Press. For transcription from Thai to English, I used the Royal Thai Generic System of Transcription.
- 9 According to traditional mythology, Saturn was expelled from his throne and from the court of gods and relegated to rule Tartarus after eating his children. Exiled beneath the earth and the sea, the solitary god dwelt at the uttermost end of universe as king of the nether gods, of death and the dead, ruling the *imum caelo*, the “inner sky,” a space at the opposite end of the apex of the world’s axis and the foundations of universe (Hesiod, 1976, pp. 281-282). From this upside-down position he could see the world from an opposite perspective and thus from a hostile standpoint. From this isolated and solitary overturned position, Kronos-Saturn consequently became the Melancholic Saturn, the prototypical symbol of all phenomena linked to separation and the father of the old, sad, gloomy, and malevolent, as well as the progenitor of so-called “saturnine,” or melancholic people (Kilibansky, Panofsky, Saxl, 1964, p. 145).

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