

# Asian Ghost Film vs. Western Horror Movie: *Feng Shui*

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In this essay I will examine the question to what extent the Philippine production *Feng Shui* (Roño, 2004) is a horror film according to the well-established (Western) definitions of the genre. This seems to be a pertinent question as many Filipino horror films are based on ghost stories and folklore from the archipelago, that are often a lived reality and believed in by many people in the Philippines. The fact that *Feng Shui* as well as other horror films from Southeast Asia are produced for an audience that actually believes in ghosts seems to me to be very relevant for the analysis of these films. I will argue that *Feng Shui* shares a good number of traits with other Asian ghost films, but that it also features “the return of the repressed” that according to the late film critic Robin Wood is one of the defining features of Western horror movies.

**Keywords:** *Feng Shui*, Philippine horror movies, anti-patriarchy

After relocating from Germany to Manila in 2004, I was eager to get to know the film culture of a country that I was not familiar with at all. Shortly after settling in my new environment, I started to watch almost every Filipino movie that was on. The first one I watched happened to be Chito S. Roño’s *Feng Shui* (2004).

I had not read any reviews nor did I know anything about the film, and my command of Tagalog was nil. But still, I felt richly rewarded watching *Feng Shui* at the SM North cinema, though not in the way I might have expected. It was a memorable experience not only because I got to see my first film from the country I would live in for the next five years but more so because it was a first-hand lesson in the kind of film culture that I had previously only heard about—primarily from my parents whenever they would recall going to the movies in Germany in the Fifties—or that I had only read about from accounts of film screenings in Hong Kong in the 1970s and 80s where the audience identified so strongly with what was happening

on the screen that it talked back to the actors, yelled during exciting scenes, and got up when the action got really exciting.

During the screening of *Feng Shui* that I attended, similar scenes transpired. During scary scenes, people covered their eyes with their hands, jumped from their seats, and screamed to warn Kris Aquino of the White Lady that was hovering around outside of her house. Any of the good number of killings in the film caused a collective outcry that seemed to come from one common throat. Maybe my memory is deceiving me here, but I even seem to remember the non-stop beeping of cell phones keys, as if people were constantly texting their friends about what they saw. (*Feng Shui* turned out to be among the most successful local films of 2004, and in 2015 a sequel was produced that did equally well at the box office.)

I did not know anything about Philippine cinema at that time, or about Philippine culture, for that matter. I did not know that Kris Aquino used to be the “scream queen” in nasty massacre films by *komiks* [comics] artist Carlo J. Caparas a decade earlier—in fact, I did not even know what *komiks* were. I was not aware of the fact that she had become a beloved star who successfully hosted game and talk shows on television. I also did not know that she was the youngest daughter of former Philippine senator and prominent dissident Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. and former president Corazon Aquino. And I did not get the subtext about Chinese and Philippine traditions at all. Maybe the most important lesson I learned during the following years was that there was no such thing as anything 100-percent authentically Filipino, that the culture of the country was and is an amalgam of strong local cultures and foreign influences that have become important elements of the present culture of my temporary home. And without understanding this, there is little chance of understanding the significance of the story that *Feng Shui*—the title of the film itself, of course, a reference to Chinese-style geomancy—tells.

But let me return to the strong and heartfelt audience reaction to the movie in question. As I have indicated already, this was nothing like I had experienced during screenings of horror films in Germany. The reaction that even the most gruesome, violent and nauseating horror flicks produced in cinemas in Berlin seemed, in comparison, tame, lacklustre and jaded. In the secular and disenchanting culture I grew up in, the ultra-violence that had become a fixture in Western horror cinema had never elicited the kind of reaction that I experienced the time I watched *Feng Shui*. Despite its comparatively low-budget and easily spotted special effects, the audience was driven into a frenzy of fear. Here was an audience so wrapped into the narrative that it literally jumped out of its seats at every scare. Compared to American horror films—especially the genre of “torture porn” (movies

like the *Saw*-franchise or Eli Roth's *Hostel* [2005]) that would be forced onto the world by Hollywood studios around the same time—the violence in *Feng Shui* was mild. If the audience reacted strongly, it was not because of the gruesomeness of the things depicted on screen—in fact, I have sat through much more brutal films in the Philippines among an audience that did not seem to pay any mind to the graphic violence they saw. It took some time (and closer familiarity with Philippine culture) to help me understand at least one of the reasons why the audience of *Feng Shui* did sit on the edge of their cushioned seats and watched a good part of the film through their fingers. The film touched the audience in a way that I, as a newcomer and outsider to the Philippines, just did not get. What I failed to understand was that, quite simply, a large part of the audience actually believed in the kind of ghosts in the film.<sup>1</sup>

Gunning (2009) has coined the term “Aesthetics of Astonishment” for this type of movie viewing experience: the naive, unmediated reaction towards a movie by an audience that has preserved the ability to accept what is going on the screen as real, and is interacting with it accordingly. Maybe my excitement about the fact that I saw my first Filipino film with a Filipino audience got the better of me, but I don't seem to remember any other audience reaction for a local film that was as forceful as the one at this screening of *Feng Shui*. (One of the few other times I observed a Filipino audience raising the same kind of ruckus during a film screening was with the supernatural thriller *Constantine* (2005) that starred Keanu Reeves—a mostly unremarkable film that, however, featured some very graphic depictions of hell, which drove the audience into a frenzy.)

These viewing experiences—and the questions that these experiences bring up—are at the heart of this essay on a film that most scholars of Philippine cinema will find neglectable. I will examine to what extent *Feng Shui* actually is a horror film, and will argue that a large number of fantastic films from the Philippines are actually not horror films in the sense that the genre is usually defined. That is not to say that there are no horror films from the Philippines—after all, the first sound film in the country was the vampire movie *Ang Aswang* (1933). But this film, as well as many of the other classics of the same kind, are actually based on Filipino ghost stories and folklore. I will unpack the difference between horror films and films based on local spooky lore further in this essay.

For the purpose of this essay, I will take the presence of ghosts in contemporary Southeast Asia—in the movies, in places of worship, in supposedly “haunted places,” and in other instances of everyday life—as a given. I will argue that in Western modernity, creatures such as Frankenstein, Dracula, and zombies in literature or cinema are the inventions of European

bourgeois novelists or film scriptwriters, fashioned out of folk beliefs to symbolize the anxieties of modern man. The ghosts in horror films from Southeast Asia, on the other hand, are not primarily literary inventions, representations and metaphors, but are part and parcel of a mythology that is still very much taken for granted by many people in the region. This argument has important consequences in the interpretation of ghost movies not just from the Philippines but from the whole region. Moreover, it leads to the concepts of modernity, rationality, and irrationality having very distinctive cultural features.

Interestingly, none of the canonical books on Philippine cinema include extended discussions or essays on Philippine horror films. The first two *Urian* Anthologies (Tiongson, 1983; Tiongson, 2001) do not even include the genre. The *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art* (Tiongson, 1994) does have an entry on horror films, although brief, and the essay on popular film genres of Philippine cinema until the 1960 in the same volume does not mention horror films at all. It does, however, include a discussion of films based on fairy tales or folk tales as well as fantasy movies like the *Dyesebel* and *Darna* films. Many of these films are lost, but the summaries already make clear that many of them actually wrap socio-political issues in fantastic form, or, as Sotto (1994) himself points out, “dramatize the frustrations and heartbreaks of living in an oppressive environment” (p. 38). A fascinating overview on Filipino Fantasy-Adventure films was published by Campos (2009). However, while these films can address contemporary issues in mythological disguise, they are not horror films in the sense that is discussed in this essay.

I think that *Feng Shui* asks important questions that are not only relevant to this particular movie. The fact that a large number of viewers of horror films in the Philippines—and the same can be said about the audience in other countries in Southeast Asia as well—actually believe in ghosts need to have an impact on the way these films are discussed and analyzed. It strikes me as one of the most significant shortcomings in the scholarly literature on Southeast Asian horror films that the supernatural occurrences in these movies are typically read as metaphors, as representative of something else, and not as an element of shared beliefs among the viewers of these films.

My *Feng Shui* experience described above is the reason why I have a soft spot for this movie that most Filipino cineastes will think little of. This anecdote serves as an excuse for my decision a decade later to write for an academic journal in my former host country and try make sense out of a movie that nobody—myself included—would consider a milestone in Filipino filmmaking. I will try to show that the film, despite its relatively conventional trappings, is actually an interesting and unusual hybrid

between Western horror cinema and the type of Asian ghost movie of that time, that its uncanny story conceals some rather sharp observations about class and gender relationships that are typically not addressed in mainstream films from the Philippines. I will argue that while *Feng Shui* (Roño, 2004) is a rather traditional ghost film, it shares a good number of traits with and had been obviously influenced by other Asian ghost films from that same period. At the same time, it can serve as an example of “the return of the repressed” that, according to the late film critic Robin Wood (1986), is one of the defining features of Western horror movies. Wood developed his critical terminology out of ideas by Freud and Marcuse, and this could be useful in distinguishing what sets much of contemporary Western horror cinema apart from the Asian ghost films that have been internationally successful at the beginning of the 21st century.

Lim (2009) has argued in her book *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* that horror films are a form of temporal translation, where multiple “immiscible” times strain against the idea of a homogeneous time that dominates our present thinking. In what follows, I will stress another aspect of the cinema of the uncanny: its ability to address uncomfortable and marginalized socio-political issues in an indirect, metaphorical fashion that allows us to read horror films as movies that are about more than just delivering scares, thrills, and shocks.

Wood (1986) reads the American horror cinema as a dramatization of the fictionalized return of what has successfully been repressed by society. Famously, Freud (2002) argued in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that the functioning of Western society is based on a suppression of our atavistic instincts and drives. These primitive impulses, of which sexual desire is the strongest, are sublimated or “diverted” towards other goals that are socially acceptable. However, these repressed impulses and instincts are so powerful that, Freud argued, they found ways to return, for instance in our dreams which were the most direct link to our subconscious. “Freudian slips,” the slips of the tongue that bring out in the open something that the speaker does not want to share, also provide insights into the functioning of the unconscious. Freud regarded the possibility of a return of repressed instincts and desire with suspicion and as a potential danger to civilization. For him, repression, alienation, hierarchy, and fear were intrinsic elements of any society. Marcuse (1987) took his cue from Freud but did not share his pessimism about our basic impulses. As a Marxist, he argued that the continuum of repression and unhappiness—that from his point of view was caused by capitalism—needed to be broken and that once that had happened, the pleasure principle could be re-instated in order to turn human freedom and happiness into the dominant force of human life.

From this line of thinking, Wood (1986) developed his own approach towards horror movies. For him, the horror film is to cinema, what the dream is to human culture: the prime way for the unconscious and the repressed to make itself heard. Horror movies, then, are not just about providing shocks and thrills but are actually an authentic articulation of the anxieties and problems of the society in which they were produced. That which cannot be talked about, which is swept under the rug and declared taboo for public discussion is precisely what the horror film brings back, translated into a fantastic and horrifying form—into the discourse. The monsters, the disasters, and the bloodshed are really a carnivalesque version of the deepest and most-repressed fears of the society.

Wood (1986) discusses movies from all periods of American cinema since the silent era in his writing on horror cinema. But he particularly focuses on the American horror cinema of the 1970s with its boom of ultra-violent splatter movies and cheaply made exploitation nasties such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Dawn of the Dead* or *Last House on the Left*. For him, the emergence of the undead in George Romero's zombie movies or serial killers like Leatherface in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* during that time are a symbolic return of an Other that contemporary society has stashed away into its shadowiest nether regions. "One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression" (Wood, p. 75). (Former humanities professor Wes Craven would turn this cultural studies concept into a plot idea, when, in his movie *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and its numerous sequels, villain Freddy Krueger would emerge right out of the dreams of his victims.) Taking Wood's point of view, these films then could be read as commentaries on the socio-political malaise of the US in the 1970s: the paranoia of post-Watergate politics, the senseless violence of the lost war in Vietnam, the disillusionment of the lofty hippie ideals of love, peace and brotherhood, the all-encompassing consumerism. At the same time, the most ruthless monsters could be read as a foreshadowing of the neo-liberal dog-eat-dog-society that Ronald Reagan would begin to establish after his election in 1981.

*Feng Shui* (Roño, 2004) is not a cheap horror film as the movies that Wood writes about. It provides relatively high production values, is directed by a well-established director, and stars two actors who at that time were among the most bankable in the Philippines: Kris Aquino and Jay Manalo. As an entry to the Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF), it was made to compete with other quality films that the Philippine film industry produced

for that occasion. The cinematography is lush and elaborate, and the film does not contain the type of graphic violence that the US horror films from the 1970s is notorious for. And, probably most importantly for my argument, the film is often regarded as a Filipino version of the ghost films from Japan, Korea and Thailand of that time: movies like *The Grudge*, *The Ring*, *Dark Waters*, *The Eye* or *A Tale of Two Sisters*, that at that time fascinated both the local and international audiences, so much so that some of them were remade by US studios. (A discussion of the differences between horror films from Southeast Asia and the rest of Asia is beyond the scope of this essay. It would be a worthwhile undertaking though, especially taking into consideration that some (East-)Asian countries—such as Japan, Hong Kong or Korea—have a rich heritage of ghost movies, while other Asian countries—such as India and China (where ghost movies have been outlawed by the Communist party)—do not have such a large body of ghost films.)

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ghosts, witches, haunted houses, and the revenge of the undead were one of the cornerstones of the entertainment industry of much of Asia. These films typically were based on local lore and ghost stories, but these narratives had been adapted to a modern world full of urban alienation, modern telecommunications, and lost traditional moral (family) values. While we could read the ghosts in these stories as a “return of the repressed” that are embodiments of contemporary social ills and socio-political problems, these films also have elements of the traditional ghost films. The socio-political subtext is treated lightly, and the ghosts are mostly ghosts in the traditional sense: haunting creatures that come back to seek revenge or to undo an injustice that was done to them. (I would actually posit that the US versions of successful Japanese horror films, for instance, have typically focused to a higher degree on socio-political motivations than the originals. The horror in the US remakes often seem to stem directly out of the uninhabitable and alienating environment where protagonists encounter ghosts. Think of the estrangement and culture conflict that expat Jennifer (Sarah Michelle Gellar) suffers after relocating to Tokyo in Takashi Shimizu’s 2004 US remake of his own movie *Ju-on: The Grudge* (2002). In Walter Salles’ 2005 remake of Hideo Nakata’s *Dark Waters* (2002), the bitter custody battle between the parents of protagonist Cecilia that evokes a sense of failure of the concept of the bourgeoisie family, and the financial dire straits that are a consequence of the break-up seem much more important than in the Japanese film.)

*Feng Shui* (Roño, 2004) is in line with this “Asian” approach towards horror: The White Lady that terrorized our protagonists is a common trope in Philippine superstitions, as is the *bagua*, the Chinese mirror that brings fortune as well as misfortune to the Ramirez family. However, while the

White Lady might be a well-established motive in Philippine ghost lore, the setting in which she starts to haunt is decidedly contemporary and addresses the deep-rooted fears of the Philippine middle class: the fear of social descent, the collapse of the family, and the onslaught of the lower depths that the Philippine middle class had tried to safeguard itself against through gated communities, SUVs, and air-conditioned and heavily guarded shopping malls.

This theme is introduced even before the narrative begins: In the opening credits we see a whirlwind collage of shots of street scenes, most likely taken in Binondo, the Chinatown of Manila. At first these shots are in black and white and warped to mimic the hexagonal shape of the *bagua* mirror. This creates the impression that we see the world from the point of view of the haunted mirror. Once this perspective has been established, we are presented with street scenes in downtown Manila: We see street vendors peddling their wares on busy streets full of chaotic traffic, homeless people sleeping and cooking on sidewalks, ragged children playing among the trash or sleeping under make-shift tents. These are combined with shots that stress the exotic, bizarre quality of this environment: colourful jeepney and shop signs, shop windows full of Jesus sculptures wrapped in cellophane. Frequently, shots of Christian and Chinese religious symbols are juxtaposed. This whole title sequence is saturated in bright colours with a strong tint of orange, probably to indicate the tropical heat that prevails in these streets. This opening sequence serves both as an introduction to the “alien” nature of the mirror and as an index of the urban environment that the middle class of the Philippines prefers to avoid but that will come back to haunt them.

The first scenes of the narrative introduce protagonist Joy Ramirez (Kris Aquino) as a member of the struggling middle class. Joy finds the *bagua* in a bag left by a man (Emil Sandoval) on the bus she takes back home from work. She has to take public transportation to work rather than her own car (the family car is used only by her husband to commute, indicating male privilege in a patriarchal society). Her home is a new house full of packing cases in a half-finished, desolate and remote subdivision full of empty houses and fallow lots. (There are repeated references to the fact that her “house is hard to find.”) Her neighbours make a living by selling pirated DVDs, her son’s new friend grows up without his parents. When she returns from work, she has to do household chores like cooking and doing the laundry, as she has—though somewhat implausible for a middle class family in the Philippines—no household help.

Her children, especially her daughter Ingrid (Julianne Gomez), are unhappy with the new house, with its insects and lizards, and we soon learn

that the family has moved there because of Joy's insistence to leave the home of her husband's family, where she did not get along with her overbearing mother-in-law. ("Nobody meddles," she tells her colleague Alice [Lotlot de Leon], when asked if she doesn't mind the fact that she is now a long way from work after relocating to her new house.) In a marked departure from the conventions of international horror films, the cinematography shows the scenes in the house—especially the night scenes—bathed in very bright Candy-color-type hues that give *Feng Shui* (Roño, 2004) a completely unique look.

Joy clearly struggles to get along with her family after moving to this new home with her husband Inton (Jay Manalo) and their children Ingrid and Denton (John Vladimir Manalo). The *bagua* is therefore welcomed, because, as Aling Biring (Luz Fernandez) at the local sari-sari store tells her, it will drive away evil spirits and bring good luck. The many scenes in which the spiritual significance of the mirror is discussed clearly indicate that the movie refers to superstitious beliefs that are part of popular lore; however, they are not of the traditions of our protagonists. It might be an over-interpretation to see these debates as an expression of Filipino fears of foreign dominance in general and the influence of the Chinese in particular. But the characters in the film do not simply become subject to forces that are beyond their control—they get subjected to a belief system that they are not particularly familiar with, as a number of scenes show when Chinese astrology and the significance of the zodiac are discussed in great detail.

In one scene, Joy and Alice visit a Chinese temple to learn more about the *bagua* from a priest (Joonee Gamboa), signifying that the revengeful ghost that kills family member and acquaintances alike cannot be appeased with the methods that come to the mind to a Roman Catholic like Joy. A can of sacrificed sardines are just not good enough to pacify the Chinese "Lotus Lady" (a ghost imported from Shanghai, as we learn), who has a deadly grudge that cannot be undone by praying (the Christian method) or through offerings (in accordance to half-remembered animistic practices). Is this film then an expression of the Philippine trauma of not being master of one's own (national) destiny, of the fear of being lorded over by some alien force? (All this gets further complicated by the fact that actress Kris Aquino herself is of Chinese descent).

At first, the luck promised by the mirror seems to have arrived: Once Joy places the *bagua* mirror over her door, she gets a promotion and wins the grand prize at the grocery store. However, she also learns that Evert, the stranger who left the mirror on the bus, was ran over by another bus. Joy reads in the newspaper that the man was born in the year of the Rabbit, according to the traditional Chinese zodiac, and that he was run over by a

Rabbit Liner bus. On the same day, Joy finds out that the sari-sari owner Aling Biring had died from leptospirosis that morning. It turns out that Biring was born on the year of the Rat, and that she contracted the disease through rats. Thus, a pattern is established: Whenever Joy is particularly lucky, one of her acquaintances dies, and the cause of death has a connection to the Chinese zodiac sign under which the person was born.

It is important to point out that most of the people who die in the film are from the “masa,” the members of the D and the E classes. After Aling Biring, the next victim of Joy’s success is the tricycle driver Mang Nestor, who picks her up every morning to take her to work. Other victims include one of the village guards and her son’s friend, who grew up at the house of the DVD pirates. When her friend Alice gets killed by a drunk from her neighbourhood, we learn that she was on her way to work in the US when her killer shouts “You arrogant bitch. Just because you are going abroad!” before pushing her from her balcony. Allusions to class and class privilege are constant companions to the many deaths in this film.

Class differences also color her interactions with people such as Aling Biring or Nestor. In one drawn-out scene where she observes through the window of her taxi street vendors that are trying to sell their wares, the confrontation between rich and poor is expressed in striking visual compositions of Joy’s thoughtful facial expression overlaid with reflections of the vendors. This class conflict also motivates some of the scariest scenes in the movie. When the dead guard rises again and comes after Joy’s children, a deep-seated fear is turned into a visual metaphor: What if the many, many serviceable, but poorly paid domestics who make the life of the Philippine middle and upper classes so comfortable turn against them? What if the typically amicable *yayas* [baby sitter], maids, cooks, drivers, and guards all of a sudden decide to take revenge for their continued exploitation? The scenes where Joy is haunted by the ghosts of tricycle drivers, street vendors, and guards reek of a revolution of the proles that make up the majority of the Filipinos. Scenes like these justify for me to speak about a “return of the repressed” in *Feng Shui*. Class relations and the exploitation of the lower classes are subjects that are rarely addressed in the majority of mainstream movies from the Philippines. But in the guise of ghosts in a horror film, those who are typically excluded from playing a relevant part in Philippine cinema are allowed to at least symbolically express their plight.

In a latter scene, Joy visits Lily (Cherry Pie Picache), Evert’s widow. It was Lily who had found the *bagua* in an old house when she was working as a real estate agent. As with Joy, the mirror brought her good luck but also at the cost of deaths, including that of her husband. Yet, she urges Joy to give the mirror back, but Joy refuses and leaves her luxurious house.

Interestingly, the film does not make much out of the fact that Joy does not try to get rid of the mirror and that she, in her greed for materialistic gain, risks the death of others. But it is not that kind of simplistic moral—a protagonist being punished for her insatiability—that the film seems to be interested in. It is instructive to pay attention to the fact that the curse of the *bagua* mirror itself is associated both with issues of not just with class but with gender. As Joy and her friends Alice and Thelma (Ilonah Jean) learn from priest Hsui Liao, the mirror was once owned by a rich Chinese family from Shanghai. Because of civil war the family left the country, but left foot-bounded sister Lotus Feet behind. The traditional mutilation of the feet of young girls by binding them with strong bandages for aesthetic reasons leads not only to her being left behind as a burden, but also to her eventual death. Her servants betray her and burn her in her mansion. But before she dies, she places a curse on the mirror: that she will take the soul of anyone who looks into the mirror. Hence, the curse of the *bagua* is connected both with her being mutilated because of the beauty ideals of Chinese patriarchy and with the betrayal of her servants.

It is worth stressing here that both the protagonist of *Feng-Shui* (Roño, 2004) and the ghost are female. One could read anti-patriarchy into this aspect of the film. The ghost seems to want revenge for a fate that was bestowed upon her because she was a woman. After being physically handicapped because of patriarchal tradition (i.e., the binding of her feet), she is left behind as burden by her very family who crippled her in the first place. Joy, on the other hand, is subject to a different type of patriarchy. Not only is she in charge of raising her kids and running the household on top of her full-time job. She finds out by accident that her husband has been cheating on her, and when confronted, he makes clear that he sees it as his male privilege to keep a “second wife.” She is haunted by a woman ghost, whose attacks seem to highlight her own ordeal and the mysteries of her life: the loveless marriage, the unfaithful husband, the fact that not only household (including traditionally “male” tasks as repairs and other handiwork) but also reproductive duties seem to be her responsibility.

The scenes where the exploited and marginalized rise might not have been the reason why the audience in whose company I watched *Feng Shui* reacted so strongly. I can only speculate here, but I assume much of the horror for this audience came from the fact that ghosts from Philippine lore were depicted in great detail in this film. However, what sets the film apart from many other ghost films from the Philippines, including later films like *Sukob* (2006) and *Dalaw* (2010) that tried to latch on to the success of *Feng Shui*, is the fact that it hints towards socio-political issues that typically do not play a relevant part in Philippine mainstream movies. It does so in the

symbolic form that is more characteristic of Western horror movies than of the Asian ghost movies that inspired *Feng Shui*, and that makes the movie an interesting hybrid of these two different cinematic approaches towards the uncanny.

“The disenchantment of the world means the extirpation of animism,” wrote Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002, p. 2). The goal during the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world, the dissolution of myths, and the substitution of knowledge for fancy. Matter would at last be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent powers, of hidden qualities. The type of Western modernity that developed during those times created its own monsters to help express and channel the fears and anxieties that became part and parcel of this modernity. There was the monster that was Frankenstein, a metaphor for the godless hubris of modern men and the industrial revolution he brought about as a result of enlightened thought. The vampire Dracula in Bram Stoker’s novel was called to Western Europe with the help of the then latest tools of international telecommunication and logistics—the train, the steamship, the telegraph—that ultimately, were also instrumental in his end. There was the zombie, too, which served as a potent metaphor for brainless greed, selfish consumerism, and dull herd instinct. These creatures accompanied (or were the dialectical anti-thesis of) what was supposedly a passage from the darkness of superstition into the light of reason. In modern society they have replaced the traditional ghosts that gave substance to the fears of nature, the unknown, and the dark in traditional, pre-industrial times. What is unique about *Feng Shui* is how it cross-breeds the traditional ghosts that expressed the fears of what man does not understand or is not able to control with the monsters of contemporary horror that give metaphorical essence to the anxieties of modern man.

When the dead village guard in *Feng Shui* (Roño, 2004) rises after being killed and goes after Joy’s children, he seems to be both age-old fiend (a ‘la traditional ghost story) and modern-day zombie (a ‘la contemporary horror film monster). In this sense, *Feng Shui* also makes a statement about the modern-day Philippines with its often confusing, hybrid combination of modern attitudes and traditional beliefs—like a *bagua* mirror over the door of an apartment in a newly-erected building, like an Chinese altar in an air-conditioned bar in Makati.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Despite my best efforts, I was not able to come up with any numbers to qualify this statement. I did not find any statistics or academic studies that provided some data on the belief in ghosts and other supernatural phenomena in the Philippines. I therefore have to take the claim that a large majority of Filipinos believes in ghosts as a given. In lieu of any data, all I can offer is an anecdote about a guest student from the Philippines that is currently staying with us: When I asked her to watch *Feng Shui* with me, she, an otherwise very helpful and forth-coming person, steadfastly refused. She would watch any other horror film with me, she said, but not one from the Philippines, as the ghosts in these films were “too real.” For extensive descriptions of folk beliefs in the Philippines, see Ramos (1971), Pertierra (1983), and Romana-Cruz (1996).

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