Thai Horror Film in Malaysia: Urbanization, Cultural Proximity and a Southeast Asian Model

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This article examines Thai horror films as the most frequent and visible representation of Thai cultural products in Malaysia. It outlines the rise of Thai horror cinema internationally and its cultivation of a pan-Asian horrific image of urbanization appropriate to particular Malaysian viewers. Through a comparison with Malaysian horror film, it then proposes a degree of 'cultural proximity' between the horrific depictions of these two Southeast Asian industries which point to a particularly Southeast Asian brand of the horror film. Despite such similarity however, it also indicates that in the changing and problematic context of contemporary Malaysia, the 'trauma' that is given voice in these Thai films can potentially offer the new urban consumer an alternative depiction of and engagement with Southeast Asian modernity that is not addressed in Malaysian horror.

Keywords: *Thai Cinema, Malaysian Cinema, Horror, Southeast Asia*

Introduction

In recent years, increased attention has been paid to the movement of cultural products across national borders within the Asian region. Such a development is due in part to the success of East Asian popular culture, which has displaced the previous American cultural domination of the region. This began with Japanese cultural products in the late 1990s and is now arguably dominated by the ubiquitous "Korean Wave," which has received much academic attention and continues to be a source of much influence and enjoyment across Asia (see Cho, 2005, 2011; Chua, 2004; Huang, 2011; Kim, 2005; Onishi, 2006; Shim, 2006, 2008; Sung, 2008, 2010). With the rise and conglomeration of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Southeast Asian region is also increasingly the subject of inter-Asian cultural analysis. Inter-ASEAN cultural exchange is recognised as particularly important due to its role in creating and furthering much needed economic links and increasing cultural contact between countries in a region that where such links were previously noted as extremely weak

(see Ravenhill, 2008 for a full discussion of the economic agenda behind, and problems facing, ASEAN integration).

Very recent research indicates that ASEAN people do feel a strong cultural connection across the region, and believe that they share key values (JWT Asia Pacific, 2013). Despite this, awareness of cultural products and brands from other ASEAN countries is still relatively low, suggesting that these are not yet circulating across the wider region and are not yet connected to a distinct image of Southeast Asian-ness (JWT Asia Pacific, 2013). Building upon this, scholars note that there are two dominant regional circuits of cultural products within Southeast Asia: a northern corridor across Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and, to an extent, Myanmar, which is largely dominated by Thai cultural products such as soap operas (known as *lakorn*) and a southern circuit across the archipelagic region of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei that consists of Malay-language products (Chua, 2004; Jirattikorn, 2008).[1]

Yet while these two circuits may seem otherwise quite distinct (with exceptions due to niche fan communities and those with their own familial connections across such borders), there is another instance of cultural exchange within ASEAN and further across East Asia that must be added to such regional dynamics. This is the continuing popularity of Thai cinema across the region, which in its most visible and consistent form seems to comprise mainly of horror films and, to a lesser extent, romantic comedies. These dominate the cinema screens and DVD racks of Southeast Asia and seem to cross borders where other Thai cultural products do not otherwise flow, potentially bypassing and breaking down these two circuits.

Such is the case in Malaysia. While Thai pop music and TV-dramas are beginning to challenge the hegemony of the previous Japanese and Korean products and are gaining increasing popularity in the northern region of Southeast Asia and in China, these do not appear to have a substantial recognisable presence in Malaysia. Instead, Thai horror films are the most visible representation of Thai cultural products within this nation. Six out of seven Thai releases in the top 200 high grossing films in Malaysia for 2013 were horror films, and five out of six so far in 2014. Likewise, a substantial portion of the Thai DVDs available in Malaysian DVD stores such as "Speedy Video" are horror films, outnumbering romantic comedies and even the internationally renowned *Muay-Thai* boxing films.

Online Malaysian discussions indicate that Thai horror is highly regarded by consumers and has a clear reputation, something that runs contrary to the noted lack of awareness of other ASEAN cultural products and "brands" within this region. For instance, the popular Malaysian forum Lowyat.net, said to be Malaysia's largest online forum, has many discussion

threads which attest to the significant presence and popularity of Thai horror films among Malaysian viewers.[2] In a thread titled "What country punya horror movie gooding? [sic]", Thailand is mentioned again and again as having the best ghost stories: "Thailand has improved a lot and their horro [sic] movies are often creative and unique compared to the other countries [sic]" (para. 3) says one commentor (funnyTONE, 2013). The 2004 blockbuster *Shutter* (Sudsawad & Pisanthanakun, Wongpoom, 2004) is mentioned many times, and appears to be a dominant and significant text when posters describe the appeal of Thai horror. In a thread titled "Scariest horror movie you have watched", *Shutter* is the first entry and *Program nawinyanakat/Coming Soon* (Maligool, Soonthonsaratul, Thongkontoon, Tonsaithong, & Sakdaphisit, 2008) the second. Both are mentioned before any American or East Asian horror films (Scariest horror movie…, 2014). There is even a thread solely discussing recommended Thai Ghost Stories, with posters displaying an impressive amount of knowledge of Thai horror films, mentioning *Shutter* (Sudsawad, et al.), *Long Khong/Art of the Devil 2* (Iamphungporn, et al., 2005) series, *Nang Nak* (Nimibutr & Poolvoralaks, 1999), *Coming Soon*, *Long Tor Tai/The Coffin* (Hamilton, Kordestani, Ye, & Uekrongtham, 2008)[3], *Faed/Alone* (Sonakul, Sudsawad, Thongkongtoon, & Pisanthanakun, Wongpoom, 2007), *Dek Hen Pee/Colic* (Thammajira, 2006), *Si Phraeng/4bia* (Maligool et al., 2008), *Buppah Rahtree/Rahtree Flower of The Night* (Chanapai & Sippapak, 2003) and even older and more obscure films such as *303 Klua Kla Akhat/303 Fear Faith Revenge* (Poolvoralaks & Srisupap, 1998) ("Any recommended Thai…", 2013). In another thread that begins by listing "top asian horror films [sic]" for Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong, the first reply moves the discussion straight to Thailand, stating "I find Shutter from Thailand quite scary" (The Analyst, 2011, p. 1). The discussion then focuses almost entirely on Thai horror: posters discuss their favourite films and giving examples of scary scenes from *Shutter*, with one stating "thailand very pro in making horror movies [sic]" (Top asian horror films, 2011, para. 1).

In light of this popularity, this paper will examine the significant and continuing presence of Thai horror films in Malaysia. Despite its considerable growth since the late 1990s there is still very little academic analysis of Thai cinema, and even less attention on the recent exporting of Thai cultural products across Asia. Yet this increased international presence speaks of the recent rise in economic prominence of Southeast Asia and ASEAN as a future economic and cultural hub that is carving its own inter-Asian cultural flows, with the potential to challenge both the traditional Western and more recent East Asian dominance.

The paper will first address the rise of Thai horror cinema internationally and its cultivation of a pan-Asian image of urbanization that appears popular with and relevant to consumers from proximate nations. Through a comparison with Malaysian horror, it will then propose a degree of 'cultural proximity' between this genre in these two Southeast Asian nations, pointing to a particularly Southeast Asian brand of the horror film. Despite such similarity, however, it will then indicate that in the changing and problematic context of contemporary Malaysia, these films can potentially offer the urban consumer an alternative depiction of Southeast Asian modernity that is perhaps more appropriate than that represented in the dominant incarnations of Malaysian horror.

Overwhelmingly, any discussion of Thai-Malaysian relations inevitably points towards the "southern issue."[4] This dominates references to and representations of Malaysia in the Thai media. However, while the Thai construction of and attitude towards Malaysia has been analysed through this issue, there is very little research addressing attitudes in the other direction towards Thailand from Malaysia. While Malaysian interaction with Thailand has been much less problematic and challenging than its relationship with Indonesia and Singapore, these bilateral relations are currently still under-developed (Khalid & Yacob, 2012). These relations are also changing swiftly, due to increased ASEAN integration under the emerging ASEAN Economic Community (set to come into effect in 2015). Indeed, tourism from Malaysia to Thailand increased by 20 percent from 2010 to 2011, and the country is a major destination for Malaysian exports (Khalid & Yacob, 2012). This article will therefore contribute to a significantly under-researched geographical and inter-Asian cultural flow that is increasingly important in the contemporary age.

The International Growth and Urbanness of Thai Cinema

A study of the increased international presence of Thai horror and Thai film in general is ultimately a study of the changes that Thai cinema has undergone since the late 1990s. With products consumed across the globe, Thai cinema is set very much apart from other Southeast Asian film industries. Since the late 1990s and the birth of what has been called "New Thai Cinema," Thai film has moved away from its former position as a predominantly lower-class and provincial entertainment and is now a firm fixture in Bangkok multiplexes and in festivals worldwide. Through deploying lavish depictions of 'old Thailand,' new big budget productions—such as *2499 Antapan Krong Muang* [*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters*] (Nimibutr, 1997), *Nang Nak* (Poolvoralaks & Nimibutr, 1999), and *Bang Rajan* (Nimibutr, Wattaleela, & Jitnukul, 2000)—were able to capitalise upon the growth of cinemas in

urban areas in the previous decade that made Thai cinema accessible to the more respectable swathe of urban middle-class consumers. Horror played a notable role in this significant change: the 1999 film *Nang Nak* was the most successful Thai film made thus far, and forged a definite turning point in the development of Thai cinema. It was also one of the first Thai films to achieve widespread international acclaim, winning twelve awards at a variety of international festivals. Moreover, the film had much higher production values than previous Thai horror films, which largely catered to rural and provincial viewers outside the usual audience targeted by sophisticated Hollywood productions (see Knee, 2005; Ingawanij, 2006; Chaiworaporn & Knee, 2006 for in-depth accounts of this change).

In the contemporary age, the increased experience of Thai filmmakers and the decreasing price of film equipment has enabled Thai filmmaking to become both better organised as an industry and more profitable as an enterprise (Ancuta, 2011). Filmmakers now work within a well-organised, streamlined oligopoly, similar to a classical Hollywood-style production system that is increasingly functioning as an international hub for filmmaking, with facilities often hired by lower-cost foreign companies, often Chinese. This is evident in the formation of the major Thai film studios (many of which are conglomerations of previous smaller companies), including GMM Tai Hub (GTH), Five Star Production, Phranakorn Film, Sahamongkol Film International, and Kantana Group. Filmmakers, producers, performers and writers exist under the same roof within a company that is also involved in distribution.

The slick depictions in contemporary Thai productions now reflect this combination of a more efficient business model, increasingly experienced filmmakers and the targeting of a modern urban consumer. Notably, the subject matter and *mise-en-scène* of Thai cinema is definitively urban and follows the environment and lifestyle of its new primary audience. This depiction shifted from both the earlier provincial village setting evident in pre-90s productions as well as the heritage aesthetic that had kick-started the late-90s industry. Films represent and engage with the lives, lifestyles, and environment of urban professional characters, who—through the network of urban multiplexes—are now the primary audience of Thai cinema. This change in audience represents the corresponding economic changes that Thailand and other East and Southeast Asian countries have experienced since the 1980s and early 1990s, including the movement of rural workers to the cities, the creation of suburban living and the rise of the Thai middle-classes who became the new urban elite (Siriyuvasak, 2000).

As well as representing general social changes within Thailand and the Asia region, addressing and depicting the urban professional was also

part of the successful incorporation of East Asian aesthetics into Thai cultural products. East Asian TV dramas and films had long targeted the middle-class Asian consumer and found success in Southeast Asia, due to the growing economic proximity of the East and Southeast Asian nations. Many such products are part of the much studied "Korean Wave": the exporting of Korean TV dramas, films, pop music and stars throughout the region during the mid to late 2000s, replacing the previously dominant Japanese cultural products. Although such products may be most well-known through historical dramas such as the phenomenally successful *Dae Jung Geum* [*Jewel in the Palace*] (Jo & Lee, 2003-2004) series, these texts also place a very strong emphasis upon depictions of metropolitan life, an urban *mise-en-scène* of coffee shops and offices as well as professional competitive characters and, most significantly perhaps, the depiction of a new metrosexualised Asian masculinity that has led to much analysis of changing masculine and feminine depictions across East and Southeast Asia (see Thu Ha Ngo, 2015, for more discussion of this). This has likewise impacted upon Thai cultural products, which have also changed to depict such subject matter in terms of plots and *mise-en-scène*.[5]

This change in depiction is most evident in Thai horror movies and romantic comedies, the contemporary incarnation of which are notably urban-based and deal with issues facing city residents. Romantic comedies such as *30+ Soht On Sale* [*30+ Single On Sale*] (Sodsee & Na-Sakonnakorn, 2011), *ATM: Er Rak Error* [*ATM*] (Tharatorn, 2012) and *Rot Fai Fa Ma Ha Na Thoe* [*Bangkok Traffic Love Story*] (Maligool, Pongsittisak, Soonthonsaratul, Techasupinan, & Tresirikasem, 2009) are set largely within a city environment (most often Bangkok) and address urban-based issues. In particular we see a new emphasis on the urban-professional young woman, who is now sexually active, goes on many dates with men, and struggles to make relationships work while searching for a partner who is faithful, considerate and compatible. Large parts of the dramas take place in the workplace, with the heroine struggling to hold down a full time job and trying to succeed in a business world.

The horror genre has also carved a very successful regional market and international presence, cultivating a recognisable image through which it can promote future productions. Similar to the contemporary romantic comedies these films are set in urban areas and address issues relevant to the city-dweller: protagonists live in apartment blocks, must work or study hard and worry about how to pay the rent. The subject matter also addresses the inherent frustrations and unfairness of city life and, in particular, the hidden underside of exploitation and oppression that horror can address so well. Notably, productions are marketed clearly as Thai and are connected

to other Thai horror films. They are advertised through their filmmakers' and studios' connection to previous Thai horror films, evident in in the international posters for films such as *4bia* and *The Swimmers*.

Blake (2008) and Lowenstein (2005) interpret the horror genre through a branch of theory known as Trauma Studies, which can explain the concentration of Thai horror upon the difficulties of urban existence. Due to their disturbing and disruptive nature, horror texts are crucially able to engage with traumatic events that are otherwise suppressed and so function as a means to mediate traumatic social events and upheaval for viewers. Blake (2008) posits that horror films are able to engage with and reopen what she calls 'wounds' that are otherwise sealed and suppressed by the process of 'nation building' which seeks to erase any conflict and resistance in its quest for homogeneity and conformity. For instance, a recurring theme in contemporary Thai horror is the return of an abused young woman who takes revenge upon her male tormentors, a characteristic that can be attributed to the abuse suffered by Thai women, rural dwellers and the lower-classes as part of the Thai economic boom and bust in the late 20th century (Ainslie, 2011). This is evident in films such as *Buppah Rahtree* [*Rahtree: Flower of the Night*] (Chanapai &Sippapak, 2003), *Shutter* (Sudsawad, et al., 2004), *Body* and *Fak Wai Nai Kai Ther* [*The Swimmers*] (Sukdapisit, 2014). However, Ancuta (2014) also notes another shift in the development of Thai horror as contemporary productions reconfigure the formula of the Thai ghost story to incorporate and respond to the difficulties and contradictions of being part of the growing middle-class in contemporary Thailand. In films such as *Laddaland* (Maligool, Pongsittisak, Soonthonsaratul, & Sakdaphisit, 2011), characters are trapped within "the temporality of a dream of social mobility and economic success" (p. 239) as horror is brought much closer to home in its depiction of Thai suburbia and the middle-classes.

Such a depiction can be recognised in Thai horror films such as *The Swimmers* (Sukdapisit, 2014), *4bia* (Maligool, et al., 2008), *OT (Overtime)* (Nadee, 2014), *Rak Luang Lon* [*The Couple*] (Towira, 2014), *Kon Hen Pee* [*The Eyes diary*] (Techaratanaprasert & Sakveerakul, 2014), *Chit samphat* [*The Second Sight*] (Iamphungporn, Nildum, Pongwarangkul & Hongrattanaporn, 2013) and *Laddaland* (Maligool, et al., 2011), all of which are engage with the difficulties of urban and middle-class protagonists in their depictions. Yet it can also be recognised in films such Banjong Pisanthanakun's blockbuster success of the well-known and often remade ghost story *Phi Mak Phra Khanong* [*Pee Mak*] (Pongsitiisak, Soonthonsaratul, Techasupinum & Pisanthanakun, 2013), which would seem to run counter to this depiction in its focus upon a rural scenario and situation. While *Pee Mak* may not seem to embrace the "urbanness" inherent in the *mise-en-scène* of other

Thai horror films, it is still decidedly within this depiction. This is most evident in its radical difference to Nonzee Nimibutr's previous 1999 heritage film. While Nonzee's *mise-en-scène* is one of desolate rice -paddies and his characters sport the blackened teeth and helmet hairstyle of Thai peasants, the long hair and perfect skin of Banjong's characters attaches them very much to a modern and urban Asian aesthetic and distances them from previous versions.

Again similar to romantic comedies, these urban Thai horror films also display stylistic influences connected to a particularly East Asian brand of horror recognised in well-known international successes such as *Ringu* [*Ring*] (Ichise, Kawai, Sento & Nakata, 1998), *Ju-on: The Grudge* (Ichise, Kawakami, Kumazawa & Shimizu, 2002) and *Janghwa, Hongryeon* [*A Tale of Two Sisters*] (Oh, Oh & Kim, 2003). It is particularly evident in the blockbuster 2004 success *Shutter*, which is still lauded today (both inside and outside of Thailand) as the 'scariest' Thai movie, yet is also often mistaken for a Japanese film by non-Asian viewers and is very different to the aesthetic 'look' and narrative structure of previous other recent Thai horror films (Ainslie, 2011). With its long-black-haired and white-faced vengeful female ghost, the film fits with the East Asian horror aesthetic recognisable in films such as *Ringu* [*Ring*](Ichise, et al., 1998), an aesthetic which has had a substantial influence upon the development of Thai horror (Ancuta, 2015).

Thai horror in Malaysia –
Cultural Proximity and a Southeast Asia model of horror?

This image of Asian modernity and urbanity in Thai horror appears to contribute towards the popularity of these products in Malaysia. Studying horror films in Thailand and Malaysia indicates that there are particular commonalities between these films that engender Thai horror films to a Southeast Asian, and specifically Malaysian, audience and context. Certainly, both the high quality 'global' aesthetics and the pan-Asian urbanness of Thai horror seem particularly relevant to the social experience in fellow ASEAN nations such as Malaysia. Similar to Thailand, the urban Malaysian population has been increasing substantially since the 1970s and rose quickly throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The rate of urbanization and consumption is very high, and the population fairly young, with an extremely high rate of social media use (JWT Asia Pacific and A. T. Kearney, 2013). As in Thailand, Malaysia also boasts a thriving and successful film industry that has grown significantly in the 21st century and in which horror films are very popular. Writing in 2012, *Free Malaysia* Today website states "Three of Malaysia's six top-grossing films are fright flicks made in the past two years, and the genre

made up more than a third of domestic movies in 2011" ("Horror films rise from the dead in Malaysia," 2012).

The 2004 production *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* [*Fragrant Night Vampire*] (Baba, 2004) depicts a murdered woman seeking revenge as a *Pontianak* ghost/spirit/vampire. This high grossing film demonstrated the financial success of this genre, winning several awards and ushering in a "new era" for Malaysian horror (Amerowolf, 2013). The horror production *Jangan Pandang Belakang* [*Don't Look Back*] (Teo & Idham, 2007) then held the record for the highest-grossing Malaysian film for three years. *Congkak* (Idham, 2008) did similarly well, reaching number 30 on the 2008 box office chart and, notably, out-grossing *Twilight* (Godfrey, Mooradian, Morgan &Hardwicke, 2008). Capitalising upon the success of these previous two films, the same director then released *Jangan Pandang Belakang Congkak* [*Don't look back*], *Congkak* (Idham, 2009) (a comedy horror spoof of the earlier successful horror films *Jangan Pandang Belakang* [*Don't Look Behind*] and *Congkak* which then became the highest grossing Malaysian film ever up to 2009. In 2010 *Hantu kak limah balik rumah* [*Kak Limah's Ghost Has Gone Home*] (Pillai & Khalid, 2010), a sequel to the smaller *Zombi kampong Pisang* [*Zombies from Banana Village*] (Khalid, 2008), won several Malaysian awards and is included in lists of the top ten highest grossing Malaysian films. *Ngangkung* (Teo & Hasim, 2010) is then cited as the highest grossing film of 2010 and *Hantu Bonceng* (Idham, 2011) holds the title of Malaysia's highest grossing horror movie at the time (and its third highest grossing overall) while *Khurafat: Perjanjian syaitan* (Haslam & Yusof, 2011), about a community practicing black magic for their own gain, was also very successful. Shariman (2010)notes how horror films are now a particularly important source of revenue in the Malaysian film industry, stating, "Even a poorly made horror movie can make lots of money if properly promoted. One good example was the recent low-budget *Momok The Movie* (Jamil, 2009). It made RM2.1 million [approx. 600,000USD]" (para. 3).

Analysis then indicates that there is a possible degree of 'cultural proximity' between the entertainment products of these two nations. 'Cultural proximity' is a complex and controversial concept, often used to explain the reasons behind the success of the Korean Wave across East Asia. Scholars point to the shared Confucian values, urban setting and Pan-Asian depictions in these texts, all of which are common to East Asian societies (which is the overwhelming market for these products), as a significant part of their pan-Asian appeal (see Shim, 2008; Korea Foundation, 2011). However, others indicate that such conclusions do not account for the attraction of "difference" within this equation or the popularity of such products across other more culturally and geographically distant nations

(Chua, 2004). The application of this concept to Southeast Asia is likewise complex: Southeast Asianness does not yet constitute a popular or political category through which a cultural representation can be constructed. Yet close analysis of Thai and Malaysian horror films indicates that both models of horror contain very similar depictions of the supernatural and begins to suggest a possible framework for the constitution of a Southeast Asian model of horror.

Certainly, the *mise-en-scène* and subject matter of successful Thai and Malaysian horror films is decidedly Southeast Asian, with tropical foliage, beaches, wet markets, motorbikes, street vendors and characters wearing loose-fitting clothing and sandals, even when such productions are decidedly urban-based. Alongside this, Thai and Malaysian horror films contain depictions of the supernatural that are in keeping with Southeast Asian belief systems in both Thailand and Malaysia and may be representative of the wider cultural position and development of the supernatural in this region.

Beliefs in various animistic spirits and their supernatural powers are common across Southeast Asia and these share many characteristics across Malaysia and Thailand in terms of both the spirits themselves and their social effects (See Århem & Sprenger (2015) for a full discussion of this). Such spirits and their influence are often represented in Thai and Malaysian horror films. In Malaysia, numerous horror films depict the well-known *Hantu* [an evil spirit or demon] and *Pontianak* [a kind of vampire ghost often associated with women who have died in childbirth] Malay spirits while Thai films such as *Nang Nak* (Poolvoralaks & Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999), *Krasue Valentine* [*Ghost of Valentine*] (Sippapak, 2006) and *Baan Phii Pop 2008* [*The House of Ghost Pop 2008*] (Taitanabul, 2008) depict spirits that are familiar and recognisable across the country. Such spirits exist alongside dominant Islamic and Buddhist beliefs in each country, with religious figures and places of worship significantly featured as characters try to rid themselves of these beings. Thai films such as *Shutter* (Sudsawad, et al., 2004) and *Nang Nak* [*translation*] (Poolvoralaks & Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999) will use Buddhist monks and their chants to pacify spirits, while Malaysian films such as *Jangan Pandang Belakang* [*Don't Look Back*] (Teo & Idham, 200) and *Hantu Bonceng* [Ghost ride on a Bike] (Idham, 2011) use Islamic holy men for exorcisms and have protagonists chant verses from the Quran for protection.

Yet rather than seeking similarity through depictions of spirits, which change radically over the decades and often have very different social functions in films, the most concrete example of cultural proximity seems evident in the proliferation of films that can be described as "horror-comedy,"

a sub-genre that is very frequent in both Thai and Malaysian filmmaking. Other than the exception of Hong Kong, such blending is not generally evident in mainstream Western or Eastern filmmaking. In Malaysia, films such as *Hantu Bonceng* [*Ghost Ride on a Bike*] (Idham, 2011), *Ngangkung* (Teo & Hasim, 2010) and *Hantu Kak Limah Balik Rumah* [*Kak Limah's Ghost Has Gone Home*] (Pillai and Khalid, 2010) include many instances of very physical slapstick comedy and often mix these with graphic horror. Filmmaker Shuhaimi Baba recognises that there is something distinctive about horror in Malaysia due to this sub-genre—"Our local horror films are mainly comedy horrors anyway… Real horror films don't do well at the Malaysian box office" (Randhawa, 2011, para. 9).

While it may seem to have derogatory connotations, this distinction between Malaysian horror and what Baba calls "real horror" (as quoted in Randhawa, 2011, para. p) nevertheless suggests that filmmakers recognise this as a significant characteristic of Malaysian cinema.

In Thai cinema, this combination tends to be most evident in productions that do not travel widely outside of the country and which still depict rural village life, such as *Wor Mah Ba Mahasanook* [*The Funny Mad Dog*] (Sinthanamongkolkul, 2008) and *Baan Phii Pop 2008* [*The House of Ghost Pop 2008*] (Taitanabul, 2008). Yet high-grossing films such as *Buppah Rahtree*, *Khunkrabiihiiroh* [*Sars Wars*] (Kim, Maneeploypech & Wantha, 2004), *Mo 6/5 pak ma tha phi* [*Make Me Shudder*] (Arnon, 2013), *Mathayompak ma tha Mae Nak* [*Make Me Shudder 2: Shudder Me Mae Nak*] (Arnon, 2014) and *Pee Mak* (Pongsitiisak, et al., 2013), all of which have been successful at the Malaysia box office, can also be described as horror-comedy. Even *Shutter* (Sunsawad, et al., 2004), a film which seems to leave 'local' characteristics behind in its decidedly East Asian *mise-en-scène*, still contains a very unexpected scene depicting a ladyboy joking about sex and defecation, indicating how comedy can be inserted very liberally within this genre despite its seeming movement beyond a Southeast Asian aesthetic depiction.

Further connecting these two styles of filmmaking, Malaysian comments around *Pee Mak* (Pongsitiisak, et al., 2013) (which was extremely successful in Malaysia) focus upon lauding the nature of this film as both a comedy and a horror film. One blogger's review stresses the mix of comedy and horror as a major part of its appeal:

> It's quite impressive how they mesh the horror and romantic comedy genres in a movie. They use the story of Nang Nak (a Thai tale of horror) as the base of the horror part while the buffoonery of Nak's four best friends are the core of

comedy. Every scene in the movie is so damn funny. (Pee Mak, 2013, para. 2)

This emphasis problematizes the existence of a horror genre in Southeast Asia as defined by both Euro-American and East Asian models of horror. Such films use narrative suspense as a primary means to generate fear and disgust. These emotional effects are heavily entwined with the definition of this genre (Carroll, 1990). Inserting slapstick comedy into such films requires rethinking their generic definition. Neale (2000) posits that answering much of the confusion and dispute over genre as a term and set of categories requires that "thinking of genres as ubiquitous, multifaceted phenomena rather than as one-dimensional entities to be found only within the realms of Hollywood cinema or of commercial popular culture" (p. 28).

This is particularly appropriate when considering both the function and composition of horror films in Southeast Asia. This region may represent a new dimension to the horror film, examination of which, Blake argues, can tell us a great deal about the culture from which such arguments or readings emerged (Blake, 2008).

Indeed, analysis suggests that the historical development of entertainment within this region may offer an example of and source for the proliferation of horror-comedy in both nations. Ironically, it may be the diversity itself that is the main characteristic of living in the Southeast Asian region. Many of the ASEAN nations such as Thailand and Malaysia are divided by borders that have only recently been established. The countries themselves consist of diverse ethnic groups, all of which possess their own distinct languages, cultures and religions. In their early development, cultural products across the region were faced with the problem of overcoming internal differences and bridging cultural barriers in order to become financially viable. Visual entertainment therefore adapted to cater for the many diverse consumers within these nations and can be distinguished by such characteristics. These include the existence of a 'blended' narrative which incorporates elements from many different genres within a single text and an increased emphasis upon visual display as a source of stimulation.

Characteristics associated with the horror genre are therefore mixed with elements from slapstick comedy, romance, action and other similarly visceral genres. Such characteristics are able to bridge linguistic and cultural barriers and overcome divisions that may otherwise problematize wide appeal in diverse nations such as Thailand and Malaysia. They also function well in a rowdy upcountry communal viewing scenario, which does not engender the close relationship between the viewer and text that is part of following a complex suspense-based narrative.[6] This blended narrative

is particularly evident in the number of "horror-comedies" produced, with their consistent melding of graphic horror and slapstick comedy. This suggests that due to the development of film within this region there may be a discernible Southeast Asian model of horror that stretches across these two countries and contributes towards the particular success of Thai horror in Malaysia.

Difference as Attraction

Along with a degree of "cultural proximity," however, the appeal of Thai horror is also perhaps aided by its difference to local Malaysian horror films. Despite the similar historical context and economic experience in both of these ASEAN nations, the social depictions and subject matter of high-grossing Malaysian horror films are nevertheless very different from that of popular Thai horror films. A close examination and comparison suggests that Thai horror may offer an alternative depiction of Southeast Asia for a viewer who is perhaps not adequately represented by the depictions that dominate Malaysian horror films.

In contrast to the international and pan-Asian depictions of Thai horror, high grossing Malaysian horror films such as *Hantu kak limah balik rumah* [*Kak Limah's Ghost Has Gone Home*] (Pillai & Khalid, 2010), *Jangan Pandang Belakang* [*Don't Look Back*] (Teo & Idham, 2007) and *Hantu Bonceng* [*Ghost Ride on a Bike*] (Idham, 2011) seem to portray a situation that is much less "international" in terms of its subject matter and far more "localized" in terms of its depiction of a particular social group and situation. Around 60% of citizens in Malaysia are of Malay ethnicity, with the other percentage consisting mostly of large Indian and Chinese populations. Media products in Malaysia are generally produced and marketed through racial demographics, and Malaysian citizens tend to refer to themselves through such racial and cultural markers, rather than as one collective singular race. Modern Malaysian products are therefore often designed to attract specific social and linguistic groups (see Wang, 2010 and Lim, 2015).

In this multi-racial and multi-cultural nation, the subject matter of high-grossing contemporary Malaysian horror films overwhelmingly concentrates upon what Zulkifli et al (2012) call "Malay-centric" issues, with a focus upon "Malay language, characters and narratives" (p. 175). These depictions then construct quite a problematic image of Malaysia, potentially excluding the very large non-Malay percentage of the population for whom Malay may not be a preferred or primary language. This focus upon a particular dominant ethnic and cultural depiction may then explain the popularity of the earlier discussed depictions in Thai horror. Analysis of very successful Korean popular culture in Malaysia indicates that one major appeal of these

products is their ability to cross such ethnic and linguistic boundaries and undercut officially sanctified nationalistic concepts (Pak, 2012; Lim, 2015; Wang, 2010). For Malaysian consumers, engagement with this pan-Asian form of popular culture allows the reconstructing and reimagining of both Asianness and Malaysianness, in a way that Malaysian products cannot and do not (Lim, 2015). In its similar focus upon an urbanized pan-Asian existence and its associated anxieties, Thai horror also appears to address issues of relevance to the Malaysian consumer and lacks the ethnic and linguistic divisions associated with Malaysian horror. Unlike East Asian products, these films then also retain the Southeast Asian *mise-en-scène* and blended narrative that is common to both countries.

Likewise, the subject matter of these Malay-centric films contains very little overt reference to the stresses of city living, something we see referenced with abundance in Thai films. The definition of what constitutes 'urban' in Malaysia may explain the differences between filmic depictions from these two nations. Unlike Thailand, the Malaysian population is not concentrated within one or two urban centres, but instead is much more evenly distributed spatially across the country, with smaller urban towns scattered around territories such as Selangor and Johor (Jaafar, 2004). Such towns are well-connected (by road) to city centres, and many citizens travel in to cities such as Kuala Lumpur for work and to visit malls at the weekend. Urban amenities, such as cinemas, are also much more accessible to the general population, many of whom live in situations that could be called suburban rather than urban, and are more spread across the states. In contrast, Thai cinemas and their audiences are overwhelmingly concentrated within urban cities such as Bangkok (Ancuta, 2011).

If, as Trauma theory suggests, horror functions to mediate and engage with suppressed traumatic social events and upheaval, then Malaysian horror would seem to be engaging primarily with the issues and contradictions associated with contemporary Malay suburban and village life and community. Many high-grossing Malaysian horror films tend to focus upon *kampong* [village] life and this suburban Malay environment, rather than the isolating condos and gated communities of Thai horror. The stories involve defeating threats to a community and maintaining the status quo, so reaffirming *kampong* life against the increasing fragmentation that is associated with the urbanisation of Malaysia and, in particular, the Malay community (the urban Malay population has been increasing dramatically over the past twenty years, see Usman et al.: 2012). For instance, the high-grossing 2010 comedy-horror *Hantu kak limah balik rumah* [*Kak Limah's Ghost Has Gone Home*] (Pillai & Khaild, 2010) is set in the village *kampong Pisang* [*Banana Village*] in which the protagonist Husin returns to his

village from working in Singapore and tries to find out what happened to his neighbour. Such a depiction contrasts with recent Thai horror films in which the 'wounds' addressed are those associated with the pressures of existing in urban middle-class Thailand.[7]

This *kampong* concentration is also evident in critiques from Malaysian authorities who seem to interpret such depictions as somehow low in quality due to their "localized" depiction. The former prime minister (and still very influential figure) Mahathir Mohamad criticised Malaysian horror films in 2011 when asked about a recent instance of hysteria in a group of female students (Jamin, 2011). Mahathir described the depiction of ghosts and spirits in Malaysian films as "counter-productive" to building a society predicated upon science, suggesting that there is something "backwards" about films set in a rural context which engage with traditional spirits and beliefs (Jamin, 2011). Norman Yusoff (2012) relates Mahathir's concerns to his modernisation policy, arguing that horror films do not adhere to, and even potentially undermine, the "nation-building" values that Mahathir wishes to see as dominant. Yusoff interprets this as the recognition of a possible critique of modernity that Malaysian horror films can potentially offer. These depictions reinforce suburban and rural life in a nation which places emphasis upon urbanization as part of a modernizing forward direction, perhaps providing much relief from such official discourses for the large rural and suburban-based Malay viewer.

Yet Mahathir's comments also appear indicative of a wider sense of dissatisfaction in Malaysia towards such "local" entertainment products. Next to the urbanized depictions of Thai horror, the staple Malay *kampong* depictions of Malaysian horror are embarrassing to some and online commentators express frustration at what they see as being the inferior and less advanced nature of Malaysian films. Malaysian IMDB reviews of the 2010 film *Hantu kak limah balik rumah* [*Kak Limah's Ghost Has Gone Home*] (Pillai & Khalid, 2010) are split between lauding the 'localized' nature of this film (particularly its jokes) and also expressing anger at the low-budget and low-quality special-effects which seem to be a source of embarrassment for some viewers ("Reviews and Ratings for *Hantu kak limah balik rumah*," 2011). In a thread on lowyat.net discussing the best country for horror movies, one poster referring to Malaysian horror films states:

> There are still some decent ones but most of them are just stupid horror comedic/romantic types with cheesy scripts and poor quality directors. Pontianak Harum SM had some great story despite mediocre scare factor, Jangam Pandang Belakang kind of a big change in our horror industry with

its good use of sound effect and gloomy scenes, after that, its all rehashes of the same thing [sic]. (funnyTONE, 2013, para. 2)

Moving beyond horror, one blogger (writing in 2008) directly contrasts the Thai and Malaysian industries, appearing to express a degree of frustration as well as anger at the state of the Malaysian film industry in a review of the historical fantasy *Puenyaijom salad* [*Queens of Langkasuka*] (Nimibutr, 2008) (a story which they claim is Malaysian rather than Southern Thai):

> Sadly it is not a Malaysian movie - it is a Thai movie… When will we be able to produce an epic like this? No, please do not compare this movie with Putri Gunung Ledang as doing so would insult the Langkasuka movie. Sad that we are more interested in trying to make movies about drifting automobiles and mutant human cicaks, than something like this which really catches the eye of world cinema. (Anak Wayang, 2008 para. 6)

A comment on the blog then agrees, stating "yes I'm embarrassed that we wasted so much money utilising CGI on movies with shit concepts like Brainscan and Cicakman" (Anak Wayang, 2008, para. 2). Prominent Malaysian filmmaker James Lee also laments the state of Malaysian filmmaking (Segay, 2007).[8] Notably, while seeming to critique what he sees as the lack of originality of Thai film, he also expresses frustration at how Malaysian films cannot yet stand alongside East Asian productions, indicating that he does view this international pan-Asian construction as desirable:

> When I go to Hong-Kong Filmart and see Thai films, HK films and Korean films, they all look alike. If you take the poster of a Thai film and change the title into Korean, it could become a Korean film. Same with Japanese films, they all look alike. Malaysia is worse. We haven't even reached the point where we have good mainstream cinema." (Segay, 2007, para. 1).

Likewise, in a lowyat.net thread discussing which horror film someone should watch, one poster states

> Well for horror genre, i will go for Thai cause more surprise and plot twist, Malaysia horror film tend to be more straightforward and predictable but as Malaysian, i will ask you to support local horror film. (Ironmaid89, 2014, para. 1).

A later post in the thread then states "Malaysia horror film lack those scary and eerie atmosphere which we always see in Thai and Japan horror" (Ironmaid89, 2014, para. 1).

Clearly, however, the high-grossing nature of these Malaysian films indicates that despite such internal critique they are still successful and, in some cases, can stand alongside major Hollywood productions at the box office. Indeed, as this article has shown, there is certainly a high degree of stylistic "cultural proximity" between Thai and Malaysian horror films despite their varying subject matter. Criticism of Malaysian horror can therefore be connected to their "local" nature and *kampong* subject matter which places these products at the bottom of a hierarchy that favours the urbanized protagonists associated with East Asian popular culture, rather than any inherent inferior quality.

Likewise, quotes indicate that despite the huge popularity of imported movies and TV dramas, there is nevertheless a significant and profitable market for such "local" depictions within Malaysia and the rest of the Malay world, demonstrating that these are not "inferior" to the pan-Asian depictions of Thai horror, and are actually very successful. Veteran Malaysian filmmaker Shuhaimi Baba understands that "Malaysians prefer to watch Malay horror movies because the stories are localized, so the audience can easily relate to them" (Looi, 2011). When reviewing *Hantu kak limah balik rumah* [*Kak Limah's Ghost Has Gone Home*] (Pillai & Khalid, 2010), one Malaysian blogger states

> Story wise, the movie is filled with funny takes on the administrations, the people and the Malay culture itself. This is something that had rarely been done since the era of P. Ramlee's movies and it felt refreshing to see something like this appeared on movie screens once more. (Zainal, 2011, para. 4).

The reviewer evidently likes the way these films place emphasis upon Malay culture and *Kampong* life, especially within the increasingly globalised world in which pan-Asian products (such as the Korean dramas that Malaysian is bombarded with) can be overwhelming, it is easy to understand how such localized depictions can be very appealing. An online

article quotes the director of the 2011 high-grossing *Hantu Bonceng* [*Ghost Ride on a Bike*] (Idham, 2011) who cites this depiction as a major source of appeal behind these films: "Horror films have struck a chord because they reflect the country's village culture and the traditional superstitions that trouble Malay hearts… Horror movies are the type that will be close to our culture" ("Horror films rise…," 2012, para. 9).

Censorship

The difference between these two national models of horror is also exacerbated by the particular restrictions endured by the Malaysian film industry and, specifically, Malaysian horror films. The contemporary Malaysian authorities curtail this genre and its filmmakers in ways that would make it difficult for films to cultivate the international Pan-Asian image that is so successful in Thai and East Asian horror. This suggests that Thai horror may potentially be able to engage with subject matter and situations that could be much more problematic for Malaysian filmmakers.

As a genre concerned with the supernatural, Malaysian horror—which occupies a particularly sensitive position within current religious, political and ethnic discourses—has had a problematic recent history. While Thai film has historically always been subject to political censorship under laws that can be very draconian (such as the current controversial and extremely strict lese-majesty laws), the depiction of ghosts and spirits has never really been cause for authoritarian concern and such beliefs appear to exist quite comfortably alongside dominant Buddhist discourses. This is also true in Malaysia: older animist discourses have always existed alongside Malay Islam (which became the majority religion in the country around the 16th century) in the form of particular ghosts and spirits as well as *bomohs* [witch-doctors], all of which are an important part of social life and the organisation of society.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, however, such beliefs and practices have been targeted for being anti-Islamic. This has also affected horror films. While a new social space of liberal expression emerged in the mid-2000s, this also spawned a background of increasing political instability in which the dominance of Malay-centric political organizations was perceived to be under threat. Partly in response to this, racist and nationalistic voices appeared that reinvigorated and reinforced the concept of *ketuanan Melayu* [Malay supremacy], an agenda that is supported by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). This is a nationalist Malay party which often calls for Malay Muslims to 'unite,' and positioning itself as a protector of the "sanctity of Islam" *and* the "Malay agenda" (Ding & Surin, 2011, p. 107), both of which are intimately entwined, as it is a constitutional

requirement that all Malays are Muslim. In this current climate, targeting the depiction of ghosts, spirits, monsters and other supernatural constructions in popular media can be used to display pro-Islamic credentials. Constructing horror films as anti-Islamic, despite the long relationship between Islam and animist beliefs as well as the popularity of such Malay-centric films in Malaysia, is another means by which to reinforce such an agenda. This is part of an advance in state Islam that is "performative" and is part of the process of "making Islam obvious and overwhelming" (Mohamad, 2009, p. 7), in Malaysian public life. While Malaysian films (and foreign imports) are therefore heavily restricted in terms of sex and nudity as well as attitudes towards and depictions of Islam, horror films are particularly problematic.

The genre itself was cut short in the mid-1990s when, in 1994, the horror film *Fantasi* (Osman, 1994) was initially banned, then altered substantially and eventually released. Interpreted as the result of the rise in "islamic sentiments" since the 1970s, this was the beginning of a climate in which "censors stopped approving scary movies" and Malaysian horror films were "effectively banned" for "celebrating the other-worldly in violation of Islamic teachings" ("Horror films rise…," 2012, para. 2). This ban was effectively lifted in 2004 with the success of *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* [*Fragrant Night Vampire*] (Baba, 2004), a shift which was in keeping with the more relaxed authoritarian attitude to popular culture at the end of Mahathir's rule and the new liberal space for expression that opened up after the 2003 Prime Ministership of Abdullah Badawi. Locally made horror movies then re-emerged as a genre and became very successful, very quickly.

However, in recent years Malaysian horror has again been targeted by religious authorities, indicating the difficulties that this genre and its filmmakers face in the contemporary context. Following Mahathir's widely-reported comments about the "counter-productive" nature of horror films, UMNO called for the government to empower JAKIM (*Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia*, the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia) to ban both the production and importing of "horror, mystical and superstitious" films, claiming "such films can weaken the faith of Muslims in the country" and "do not carry any positive message, but instead may destroy the faith" ("Puteri wants ban…," 2009, para. 4)

Such controversies have had an impact on filmmakers' readiness to engage with this subject matter in a way that filmmakers of Thai horror have not had to contend with. Notably, the Film Censorship Board of Malaysia (LPF) must approve all movies and in particular horror films must be seen to have "Islam winning out in the end over the supernatural" ("Horror films rise…," 2012). Viewers are aware of this situation: one comment upon the earlier blog post reviewing *The Legend of Langkasuka* [*The Tsunami*

Warrior](Nimitbutr, 2008) states "I have a feeling that if we ever produce something like this, the censorship board wouldn't allow it to be released. For they need to keep the illusion that melayu = Islam even if that means rejecting our rich legend and folklore" (Anak Wayang, 2008, para. 3). With regards to horror, one article states that pressure from the censorship board "stunts a promising homegrown genre that faces competition from imported Hollywood and other foreign blockbusters, and shackles directors who need to 'think beyond' the conventional to expand their art" ("Horror films rise…," 2012, para. 28). This illustrates how filmmakers are aware of their own difficult position and will engage in a degree of 'self-censorship' of the horror genre in a way that is not practiced by Thai filmmakers. For instance, the recent Mahathir and UNMO targeting was evidently of such concern that the Malaysian Film Producers Association (PFM) held a press conference to reply in which filmmaker Shuhaimi Baba stated that "there are attempts by several 'powerful groups' who are eyeing to sanction horror films in Malaysia" (Randhawa, 2011, para. 7). While no guidelines from JAKIM were forthcoming (even with pressure from UNMO) and the call to ban horror movies was met with widespread ridicule and no real support, the incident serves as a very real reminder that horror films are still controversial in Malaysia.

Conclusion

Malaysian horror does not enjoy the same level of internationalisation as Thai horror, which now reflects the pan-Asian urban depictions common to East Asian popular culture and engenders these films across boundaries that are not usually breached by other cultural products. With its focus upon the pressures of urban living, Thai horror appears to fill a niche for contemporary consumers whom Malaysian films do not adequately represent or engage with. What is more, internal pressures and sensitivities within Malaysia also impact upon filmmakers' willingness to innovate and explore the horror genre, leading to a degree of frustration and criticism within the country.

However, close examination indicates that there are many similarities between the cultural products of these two nations. In particular, the frequency of comedy-horror films across Southeast Asia invites further analysis as a possible version of horror that is particularly appropriate to this region. This sets these films apart from the more internationally dominant East Asian model and suggests that the horror genre could represent a very specific form of cultural proximity in the products of Malaysia and Thailand.

As Thai horror appears to be the dominant representation of Thai

popular culture in Malaysia, its reception deserves much more in-depth examination as an example of cultural exchange that has significant potential to shape relations between these two countries. Research must move beyond purely online sources that can be unreliable and difficult to verify. Empirical research must assess the relationship between Thai and Malaysian consumers during a period when this becomes ever more significant, due to the economic changes throughout this region. Indeed, assessing the relationship between cultural products and consumer perceptions may prove to be a significant means by which to document the changes currently sweeping the ASEAN region.

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Notes

1   Products from the Philippines appear present in both circuits to an extent, while Vietnam and Singapore enjoy a much closer cultural relationship to China. Alongside this, South Asian and Chinese products also still circuit, catering to substantial Indian and Chinese diasporic communities across the region.

2   Such threads are largely in English and are written in local colloquial dialects.

3   While this is actually a South Korea-Thailand-Singapore-USA coproduction, commentators notably refer to it purely as Thai, demonstrating that this connection displaces any other association in both its marketing and reception.

4   This is the difficult situation of the southern Thai provinces which border Malaysia. In contrast to the majority of Thailand, provinces such as Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat are overwhelmingly ethnically Malay and Muslim, placing them in a difficult position next to the dominant state-defined Buddhist-led discourses of *Thainess*. There is a small separatist movement in the South which wishes to break away from Thailand, and many acts of violence have been committed in response to an, at times, quite a violent process of suppression of internal cultural difference. While this situation is complex, scholars understand economic disadvantage to be a major motivator of such a movement and continuing anger at perceived discrimination and human rights abuses. Thai politicians and journalists have often blamed Malaysia for instigating or supporting potential secession, yet there is little reference to or interest in what is considered an internal Thai problem from within Malaysia itself, other than warning potential tourists when violence flares up.

5   This impact can be very direct one: the popular Thai films *Kuan Meun Ho/Hello Stranger* (Banjong Pisanthanakun, 2010) and *Love Sud Jin Fin Sugoi* (Thanwarin Sukhaphisit, 2014) both depict protagonists who are obsessed with East Asian pop culture, even travelling to South Korea and Japan respectively to indulge their fantasies. Such films illustrate how Southeast Asian producers

actively respond to and incorporate such signifiers into their own products (see Liew Kai Khiun (2015) for further discussion of these films).

6   While Thai cinema may seem to have left such a context far behind in its urban-audience and multiplexes, this informal viewing context still continues, evident in the amount of talking, eating and walking around that still takes placed in an urban Thai cinema.

7   In keeping with these 'local' depictions, Malaysian films do not have an established presence internationally beyond Indonesia, Brunei, Philippines and Singapore (in the latter, it caters largely to the Malay community; and in the former two, it can rely upon linguistic and cultural similarities comparable to the relationship between Thailand, Laos and Cambodia). There are generally no Malaysian films available on the European and American DVD racks upon which Thai cinema has carved a place. Few festivals host Malaysian films beyond the niche independent and art cinema from celebrated auteurs such as the late Yasmin Ahmad.

8   James Lee is a prolific and highly-awarded Malaysian filmmaker who has been involved in both avante-garde art productions and more general mass-released films. He has directed Malaysian horror films *Histeria* (James Lee, 2008), *Claypot Curry Killers* (James Lee, 2013) and *Tolong, Awek Aku Pontianak* (James Lee, 2011).

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