

Locating Southeast Asian Horror Cinema

The unprecedented success of Japanese and Korean horror cinemas on international markets in the early 2000s not only increased the demand for the genre from the region, but also set the standard against which new productions were judged. Encouraged by the enthusiastic reception of the problematically labeled but widely accepted category of “Asian Horror” by film critics and the global fan community alike, Southeast Asian national cinemas began to revitalize their local horror genres, eventually attracting the attention of international distributors and film festivals.

Contemporary Southeast Asian horror, though, proved to be quite diverse, ranging from films that adopted the same strategy that made J- and K-horror into a global phenomenon, to productions that resisted simple mimicry and spawned its own hybrid formulas. Many of these films turned to indigenous modes of narration such as the blending of comedy with horror, introduced stories of supernatural creatures incompatible with the generic hordes of universally accepted ghosts and monsters, and employed an aesthetics different from the one usually associated with either Western or East Asian horror film. Much is to be said, therefore, about Southeast Asian horror, yet there have only been a few sustained efforts at considering this undeniable regional development. This special issue of *Plaridel* is an attempt to address this oversight.

Horror is a staple of Southeast Asian cinematic repertoire. As a genre, it abounds with supernatural elements. This is not surprising, given the region’s rich traditions in various religions, supernatural beliefs, shamanic rituals, and

animistic practices. While there is no denying that, to a certain extent, it has been influenced by foreign genre productions, we cannot underestimate the importance of the particular politics, local cultures and indigenous art forms that contributed to its making. With all these in mind, this special issue aims to address a number of questions: Does Southeast Asian horror exist as a separate, recognizable category? How is Southeast Asian horror different from Western or East Asian horror genres? What are the particular political and cultural characteristics of horror films in the context of Southeast Asia? Are there any similarities among the films across the region that could help define what “Southeast Asian horror” means? What is the current reach of Southeast Asian horror in terms of viewership? What are the modes of receiving and appreciating Southeast Asian horror?

In *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noël Carroll (1990) proposed that the horror genre be defined with respect to its ability to elicit a specific affect. He wrote: “The cross-art, cross-media genre of horror takes its title from the emotion it characteristically or rather ideally promotes; this emotion constitutes the identifying mark of horror” (p. 14). In contrast to genres such as science fiction, crime story, or western which are defined by their settings or narrative contents, horror films aim to produce a specific emotional response (Grant, 2010, p. 3) which translates into a physiological reaction of the body. Linda Williams (1991) suggested that horror be evaluated in terms of a “body genre,” privileging the sensational and focusing on the experience of ecstatic excesses of “the body ‘beside itself’ with . . . fear and terror” (p. 4), where the success of individual films is measured “in terms of screams, fainting, and heart attacks in the audience” (p. 5).

More recent approaches to the genre investigate horror through a combination of the affect theory and psychoanalysis. Bruce Kawin (2012), in *Horror and the Horror Film*, described horror as “a compound of terror and revulsion” (p. 2), pointing to the term’s etymology as encompassing a whole range of physical reactions, from trembling to nausea (p. 3). But he also insisted that the purpose of horror film is to conceptualize and address the evil and fears present in our lives (p. 2). These fears, argued Grant (2010), drawing upon the work of Barbara Creed and Julia Kristeva, take the form of transgressed boundaries playing out the idea of abjection (pp. 4-5), with the monsters representing the return of the repressed. The psychoanalytic reading evoked by this comparison becomes crucial for the other significant trajectory taken by horror studies, which rejects the sensation/affect-based approaches in favor of an exploration of the genre’s potential to address “not only the desires, quandaries and anxieties of the psychological unconscious, but those of the political unconscious that underpins them” (Blake, 2012, p. 6). Informed largely by late twentieth-century theories of Trauma Studies which recognize traumatic

historical events as “wounds” in the cultural memory and by the assumption that horror films “reflect the values and ideology of the culture that produced them” (Grant, p. 6), this second approach incorporates the Freudian concept of mourning but more importantly attempts to resolve trauma by remembering and externalizing the loss through repetition.

While both of these approaches have been used to analyze Southeast Asian horror films, the West-centrism of the methodologies they rely on has rarely been questioned. Fear and revulsion may be described as universal human emotions, but this does not change the fact that these emotions are responses to a variety of culturally specific and not necessarily universally shared stimuli. Similarly, psychoanalytic readings should be approached with caution when applied to non-Western cultural productions. Southeast Asian horror films have been known to confuse their non-Asian audiences who do not find them “horrifying” enough to be counted as part of the genre. And yet this is seldom the case with the local viewers whom these films seem to be primarily addressing. Thus, the horror genre in this region needs to be understood on its own terms and its unique qualities must be acknowledged.

Combining scholarship on visuality, philosophies of temporality, and postcolonial historiography, Bliss Cua Lim’s *Translating Time: Cinema, The Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (2009) breaks away from analyses based on affect and the unconscious and offers instead a new theory of horror cinema. Reading Asian American, Hong Kong, Philippine, Korean, and Hollywood remakes of Asian horror films, Lim argued that the fantastic is a form of translating the supernatural into secular time, in the process resisting and exceeding the totalizing and homogenizing temporality of empire and nation. Her work signals both the reinvigoration of thinking about horror and the renewed challenge of engaging in genre criticism that is attuned to heterogeneous histories that are threatened by “universal” valuations. This special issue of *Plaridel* may be appreciated in the same vein, for while it grapples with questions of repression and emotional responses, it also highlights the shared qualities of horror in the region, as well as the multiplicities of the cinemas, their producers, and their consumers.

Our exploration of this theme begins with the essay of Tilman Baumgärtel, who recollects his first encounter with the Philippine horror film and situates his reactions in the broader context of the Western reception of Southeast Asian horror cinema. Initially arguing that a large number of fantastic films based on Filipino ghost stories and folklore should not, in fact, be called horror films because they do not fit the usual definitions of the genre, he proceeds to analyze Chito S. Roño’s *Feng Shui* (2004) as exemplifying “the return of the repressed” and therefore bridging the gap between a traditional Asian ghost film and a horror film in the Western understanding of this term.

Alessandra Campoli continues the examination of regional horror cinema within the Euro-American psychoanalytical framework, as she invokes the familiar concepts of mourning, melancholy, haunting, and abjection in her analysis of post-1999 Thai horror films and reads their female ghostly heroines as local adaptations of “the monstrous feminine.” The essay then turns to a discussion of the Buddhist teachings on impermanence, desire, and the ephemeral to continue with her transcultural exploration of melancholy ghostliness and its representation in Thai cinema. Thai ghosts return in the fourth essay, haunting the national subconscious, as they invade “the village,” a romanticized space that has been appropriated in Thai nationalistic discourses to help imagine the nation and construct Thai socio-political identity. Arguing that the concept of the pure rustic village community untouched by foreign influences and the evils of modernity was constructed to enforce homogeneity, Chanokporn Chutikamoltham concludes that the discourse it entails creates cultural anxiety, which is reflected in many Thai horror films.

If Thai ghosts are said to haunt the rural periphery as a manifestation of Thai apprehension over the social effects of urbanization, Mary J. Ainslie argues that Thai horror films can also be seen in terms of cultural products that appeal to the new urban audiences in neighboring Malaysia. The two countries share a degree of “cultural proximity,” but Ainslie, reflecting on the fears and anxieties of the urban middle class and the traumas of modernization, argues that Thai horror films seem particularly attractive to contemporary Malaysian consumers who do not find themselves adequately represented in Malaysian films. Thai films are also often found to be more innovative than the local productions, which are frequently subject to severe censorship and internal pressures. On the other hand, the next essay in the collection offers a very different interpretation of Malaysian horror, challenging the mode of investigation of Malaysian cinema that privileges cultural representation. Bogna M. Konior takes us through a detailed reading of James Lee’s *Histeria* (2008). Informed by contemporary anthropological thought, she turns animism into an analytical instrument to interrogate the relational nature of horror and human/non-human interactions portrayed in the film.

The response to unresolved trauma and the return of the repressed is the underlying theme in Anton Sutandio’s analysis of Mantovani’s *Jelangkung* (2001), the first Indonesian horror film produced after the Reformation and often credited for resurrecting the genre in Indonesia. Sutandio argues that the film breaks away from the dominant pattern of earlier films in the genre, focusing on the youth as protagonists, dispensing with the patriarchal power in the narrative, providing no closure, and using the production as an allegory on the changing Indonesian youth. Young urban Indonesians are given a voice, too, in the following essay by Meghan Downes which, drawing on ethnographic audience research, examines their attitudes toward the Indonesian horror

genre, in particular their derision of the films and their attempts at distancing themselves from these films' imagined "mass audience." The article explores the audience's critical engagement with Indonesian horror and discusses their anti-horror sentiments in light of the anti-fandom theories popularized in American cultural studies.

While audience research draws our attention to subjective responses to horror films, the next essay shifts the discussion to Southeast Asian found footage horror and its place within the genre. Katarzyna Ancuta examines the application of the found footage stylistics in four Southeast Asian productions, which can be viewed as both representative of the genre in the region and alternative to the mainstream local offering. She argues that the films in question aim to induce fear through the effective authentication of the horror experience related to a heightened perception of realism and a feeling of perceptive subjectivity. The final essay deals with geopolitics and addresses the question of reciprocity of film influences in the larger Asian context by zeroing in on the spectral presence of the Filipino in an East Asian horror film. Discussing the difficulties experienced by domestic horror production in South Korea, Ju-Yong Ha and Joel David attribute the stabilization and mainstream acceptance of Korean horror to its hybridic relationship with other Asian cinemas, represented to a certain extent by the depictions of the abject aliens (whether migrants or visitors) in horror movies.

The special issue concludes with two interviews. In the first, Konior converses with Filipino horror director and film critic, Dodo Dayao, about contemporary Southeast Asian horror and Dayao's film, *Violator* (2014). In the second, Patrick F. Campos talks to Lao horror director, Mattie Do, about the state of cinema in Laos and Do's film, *Chanthalay* (2012).

As this collection of essays demonstrates, horror films have been on the rise in Southeast Asia. Although the essays focus only on five film industries in the region, horror films are being made in practically every Southeast Asian country. Even countries such as Vietnam, Laos, and Malaysia that, for religious or political reasons, enforced a ban on horror film productions at some point, are currently experiencing what can only be called a genre revival. While each of the films can be effectively evaluated within the boundaries of its respective national cinema, Southeast Asian horror films can also be seen as forming a distinct category. One thing that binds them together is a set of qualities that distinguishes them from both Western and East Asian productions: incompatible monsters that seem to exist almost exclusively within the region, fragmented linear narratives, hybrid horror-comedy formats, the focus on a group protagonist instead of an individual, the symbiotic relationship with local folklore, and a connection to indigenous theatrical forms and performance arts. While all of the above may render some conventional definitions of horror inapplicable, there is no denying that the films

in question successfully engage local representations of life's evils and the cultural anxieties surrounding them. It is also clear that studying them can not only enrich our understanding of Southeast Asian cinemas but also help identify promising new possibilities and future developments in the field of horror studies.



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