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‘Cinema-Spiritualism’ in Southeast Asia and Beyond

Encounters with Ghosts in the 21st Century

Peter J. Bräunlein

[final draft version]

Introduction

Within the diverse and colorful cultural landscape of Southeast Asia, ghosts and spirits have not been relegated to the pre-modern past; rather, they continue to play an important role in the post-colonial present. In rapidly transforming societies such as Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Singapore, Cambodia, Indonesia and Myanmar, spirits of the departed remain ubiquitous. Indeed, they are both visible and audible in shrines and temples—through trance mediums and by the means of ritual performance—and in television series, blockbuster cinema, cartoons, tabloids, and other forms of mass media.

Ghosts were, of course, always protagonists in literature and film in East and Southeast Asia. However, in the middle of the Asian crisis in the late 1990s, ghost-movies became major box-office hits. The emergence of the phenomenally popular ‘J-Horror’ (Japanese horror) genre inspired ghost-movie productions in Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Singapore in unprecedented ways. Most often located in contemporary urban settings, these films feature frenzy, ghastly homicides, terror attacks, communication with the unredeemed (un)dead, and vengeful (female) ghosts with a terrifying grip on the living: features that have since become part of the mainstream television and film entertainment narrative pool.

The various manifestations of spirits and ghosts in ancestor veneration, possession cults, popular rituals, and the mass media in different parts of East and Southeast Asia have revealed that they are thoroughly modern manifestations of the uncertainties, moral disquiet, unequal rewards and aspirations of the contemporary moment (e.g. Fieldstad and Thi Hien, 2006; Kwon Heonik, 2006, 2008, 2010; Endres, 2011; Endres and Lauser, 2011; McDaniel, 2011; Johnson, 2014). It is precisely the increasing (re)emergence of ghosts and spirits in the public sphere as a means of engaging with the complexities and ambiguities of the contemporary world that has led scholars to call for a (re)conceptualization of beliefs in spirits and accompanying practices as something eminently modern (Bräunlein, 2014).

Ghosts and the Biases of a Master Narrative

The effort to take ghosts and spirits seriously in the academic world is a provocative one. This is particularly true in the Western academia, where a strategy of ironic distancing is relatively common whenever ghosts and spirits are mentioned as subjects of scholarly investigation (with the honorable exception of anthropologists, I hasten to add). However, my conversations with scholars in Southeast Asia have conveyed a different impression. There, it seems that the study of ghosts and spirits, either in the cinema or during trance rituals, has never been questioned or commented on with tongue in cheek. Ghosts and spirits are treated as serious subjects in every respect. Conversations about ghosts and spirits, so I learnt, reveal a sort of West-East contrast which is reflected in the (still) dominant master narrative on modernity.

The topic of ghosts and spirits serves as a versatile gauge that distinguishes not only between reason and superstition, authentic religion and folk-religion, but also between the educated elite and the poorly-educated masses, highbrow and lowbrow culture, good and bad taste. Publicly expressed disdain for ghostly matters is common not only in academia but also in the feuilleton of the bourgeois media. Everyone knows that ghosts and spirits are not a suitable topic for a careerist. There are, of course, anthropologists, folklorists, film and cultural studies scholars striving for recognition of the subject matter. However, such scholars are concerned, it is commonly assumed, with the ‘primitive mind’, with pre-industrial societies or the lower depths of society. In this way the mainstream consensus is reaffirmed.

The prevalent discourse on ghosts and spirits is part of a wider discourse of modernity. Modernity is considered rational and secular, and this basic assumption carries with it a fundamental divide between the ‘us’ of reason and progress and the ‘them’ of irrational beliefs and ‘not-yetness’ (Chakrabarty, 2000: 8, 249f.).

In other words, modernity as a master narrative not only transmits interpretive patterns and a value system, but also works as an ideological force. Modernization theory, especially in its classical variants which regard the Western path to modernity as unilineal and exemplary, is affected by this ideological subtext. Discontent with and critique of such convergent theoretical assumptions has prompted scholars to look for alternative concepts which accentuate the inherent diversity of developmental paths (Wagner, 2001; Knöbl, 2007, 2015). The debate over ‘multiple modernities’, suggested by Shmuel Eisenstadt (2000), is one prominent example. Another noteworthy approach emphasizes ‘multiple secularities’ (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, 2012).

Historically seen, however, the fascination with the uncanny is a characteristic of Western modernity, which began in the 18th century through literature. Horace Walpole (1717-1797), Gottfried August Bürger (1747-1794) or Mary Shelley (1797-1851), to mention but a few authors, initiated the enduring and distinctly modern genre of gothic and horror, which would remain popular throughout the 19th century (Wolfreys, 2001). Pleasure in anxiety and enjoyment of fear were and are part of the emotional makeup of the modern individual. The literary aestheticization of the uncanny was thus a reaction to the demand of the reading public, especially the educated middle classes. Around the 1850s, this class was fascinated by the spiritualist movement in the US and Europe, which has been re-evaluated in the recent past (e.g. Barrow, 1986; Garoutte, 1992; Treitel, 2004; Tromp, 2006; McGarry, 2008; Monroe, 2008). These historians no longer regard ritual communication with the spirits of the deceased to be a relic of pre-modernity or a superstitious folly, but as a genuine component of modernity. Spiritualism had become, in fact, “the religion of the modern man” (Hochgeschwender, 2011). Another aspect was the discovery of an inner relationship between spirit media and technological media (Sconce, 2000): spiritual telegraphy was one telling example of that connection (Noakes, 1999), spirit photography was another (e.g. Chéroux, 2005; Harvey, 2007).

Aside from the (re)discovery of the fantastic and spectral imaginary in the history of Western modernity, awareness is growing that modernity itself is somehow ‘uncanny’. In his “Specters of Marx” (1994), Jacques Derrida lists the ten plagues of the global capital system, thereby introducing the term ‘hauntology’. Fascinated by the essential feature of the specter, the simultaneity of presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, Derrida argues that the logic of haunting is more powerful than ontology and a thinking of Being. Hauntology harbors eschatology and teleology within itself (Derrida, 1994: 10). After the frequently invoked ‘end of history’, the past is an essential constituent of the present. It is the ghosts of the past, especially the specters of communism that haunt us. From that perspective, ghosts are not terrifying revenants, but manifest “as welcome, if disquieting spurs to consciousness and calls for political action” (Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015: 191). Through Derrida the reference to haunting, ghosts and spectrality became an accepted, even fashionable trope in the academia. He initiated, probably unintentionally, a ‘spectral turn’ which gained ground in the ‘uncanny nineties’ (Jay, 1998). While the ‘spectral turn’ has undoubtedly inspired contemporary cultural theory and the arts, it has also been heavily criticized (Luckhurst, 2002; Blanco and Peeren, 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015; Leeder, 2015b).

Ghosts and Movies in Southeast Asia *and Beyond*

Despite such a ‘spectral turn’, in the Western academia the topic of ghosts and spirits invariably invokes debates about modernity, reason and unreason, belief and knowledge, religion and science, ‘we’ and ‘other’. In accordance with these conceptions, a world populated by ghosts and/or animated by spirits belongs to a worldview that some evolutionists labeled ‘animism’ in the 19th century. Animism in this sense

operated as *mirror* and a *negative horizon*: it established a limit and created an outside, a negative, from which modernity derived its own positivity. In this negative image, modernity affirms itself *as* modern, by constructing its constitutive alterity. To be modern meant to leave the confused magic world of animism behind and to separate the world along the rationale of the great Cartesian divides. Unlike animists, moderns have replaced mere subjective belief with objective knowledge, and they have established the distinction proper between imagination and reality, mind and matter, self and world. Becoming modern meant to extirpate oneself from the world of animism, in which all those fundamental divides appear as inextricably fused. (Franke, 2011: 169)

This 19th century mirror and negative horizon is still in operation. To argue as a film studies scholar, a sociologist or a media anthropologist is to proceed from a different perspective than that of a horror-movie fan or a client of a trance-medium. In academia, conventions, tacit agreements, and even taboos are observed. The ontological status of ghosts is a sensitive issue in that regard. Even if the scholar subscribes to a methodological agnosticism, ghosts and spirits are commonly discussed against the background of ‘belief’ and ‘knowledge’: *they* still believe in ghosts—we do not. ‘Belief’ and ‘believing’, however, are contested terms in the study of religion (Bell, 2002: 2008), and are carefully scrutinized concepts in philosophy and sociology of knowledge (Mannheim, 1936; Macintosh, 1994). In short, analytical instruments entail biases and cultural partialities, and explications of these are indispensable to making known the position from which we investigate ghosts and movies in Southeast Asia.

Precisely because spirits are a provocative antithesis to enlightened reason and the promises of modernity, they make a highly interesting leitmotif in studies seeking to gain insight into social transformation processes in Southeast Asia. Indeed, this leitmotif also provides insights into cultural peculiarities of Western modernity: looking from the ‘periphery’ to the West is revealing. Consequently, the ‘beyond’ in the volume’s title refers to a specific reflective perspective that contrasts the East and Southeast Asian ghost-movie genre with its appearance and popularity in the West. The global success of the genre can only be understood by reflecting on the importance and various meanings of ghost discourses and the uncanny in Western and Eastern societies. This comparative perspective has been chosen as an antidote to the stereotypical juxtaposition of Asian audiences as ‘ghost-believers’ and Western audiences as apparently ‘rational’ and ‘skeptical’.

Film and the black box called cinema are inseparable concomitants of modernity. The medium adds a new dimension to what the modern man considers the realm of the 'real'. Cinema generates and distributes influential narratives and imaginations that constitute, at least to some extent, the social imaginary of the global mediascape. Amongst the different "technologies of the imagination" (Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen, 2009), the moving image of film has to be considered a powerful, if not the most powerful, technology in this regard. Hereby, the importance of imagination and the imaginary have to be re-evaluated, as proposed by Arjun Appadurai:

The image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice*. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is somewhere else), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. This unleashing of the imagination links the play of pastiche (in some settings) to the terror and coercion of states and their competitors. The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order. (Appadurai, 1996: 31)

Appadurai teaches us that imagination can be understood "as the mechanism by which 'modernity' is made 'multiple' in different social and cultural contexts" (Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen, 2009: 6). Most likely, Appadurai did not have spectral images in mind when he wrote these lines. For our purpose, however, his ideas are highly stimulating. To link ghost narratives to the social world of the audience, to its desires and subjectivities, and to its work of imagination is one aim of this volume. Choosing and being entertained by the genre of ghost movies is part of social practice, as the spectator is neither a passive recipient nor a mere object of ideological subjugation by the cinematic 'apparatus'. Ghost movies are embedded and reflected in national as well as transnational cultures and politics, in narrative traditions, in the social worlds of the audience, and in the perceptual experience of each individual. Ghost movies are entertainment, narratives, cultural events, and they have a life beyond the screen. Therefore, the value of studying film as social practice is self-evident, as Graeme Turner suggests (2006).

Thus, the contributors to this volume share the conviction that imagination and the imaginary are powerful forces in the human lifeworld. Blockbuster movies are imagination machines which work as 'models *of*' the state of things as well as 'models *for*' the way things ought to be, to borrow Clifford Geertz' famous phrase (Geertz, 1973: 93). Moving stories, regardless of whether they are told by the bonfire, or through literature or film, reflect *and* reshape the world. Both aspects are of equal importance. To analyze ghost movies in so far as

they are a form of textual representation or discourse container is a widely accepted but, in itself, insufficient as an approach.

These assumptions underlie the analytical perspectives of all contributors. Nevertheless, as this volume is the result of a multi-disciplinary endeavor, the contributors' methods and theoretical perspectives vary. We consider this fact to be the strength of our efforts: underscoring the multifacetedness of the ghost movie genre by constituting a kaleidoscopic approach. A kaleidoscope is based on the principle of multiple reflection, allowing the user to view numerous different, surprising and colorful patterns by a slight turn of the mirrors. This analogy is helpful to elucidate our intention of scrutinizing ghost movies from different viewing angles. The heuristic ambition of multifaceted awareness can be summarized in the words of Friedrich Nietzsche:

There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity', be. (Nietzsche, 1989: 119)

In the following, I outline some perspectives that illustrate the promising potential of dealing with ghosts in movies.

Cinema Spiritualism

The term spiritualism refers to a period of rapid transformation in the West when spirits of the dead were evoked through trance-mediums and new media such as photography, telegraphy and radio. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, spirit séances were a complex event that straddled ritual, stage magic, entertaining spectacle, and scientific experiment. Such staged trance performances polarized the audience, provoking in equal measure accusations of fraudulent behavior, and fascination with the possibility of communication with the departed. Likewise, photographic images of spirits were "believed to be real manifestations of the existence of spirits and ghosts, at times debunked as a photographic trick, at times used for their entertaining and spectacular effect", as Simone Natale states (2012: 126; see also Natale, 2011).

Media practices of evoking ghosts obviously responded to a certain cognitive and emotional fascination amidst the growing middle class. The concurrent emergence of trance media and new media stirred public debates on deception, superstition, and occultism on the one hand, and reason, progress and a new science of the otherworld on the other. At the time, it was the latent suspicion of a close relationship between magic and modernity, or better, the notion of a magical quality of modern communication technology that simultaneously irritated and stimulated. The grand narrative of progress and reason considered magic to be the quin-

tessential ‘other’ of modernity. Whereas some thinkers, such as Sigmund Freud, Ruth Benedict and Bronislaw Malinowski acknowledged the existence of magic *in* modernity, they did not elaborate their arguments in theory (Pels, 2003: 3). The spiritualism/anti-spiritualism controversy took place against this background, a debate in which diverse kinds of media played an important role (e.g. Noakes, 1999; Sconce, 2000; Thurschwell, 2001; Chéroux, 2005). “All media have their spectral dimensions”, film historian Murray Leeder (2015b: 3) maintains. Likewise, media historian John Durham Peters states that “[e]very new medium is a machine for the production of ghosts” (Peters, 2000: 139). Apart from recalling spirit appearances as media effects of the first modernity, we might also recall the fact that cinema, the art of projecting shadows, has from its beginning been the epitome of magic in and of modernity (Gunning, 1995; Douglas and Eamon, 2009; North, 2001; Leeder, 2015c).

The mediation of ghosts has been constantly renewed in the course of over 150 years of media history. At this point we might wonder, together with Rosalind Morris,

whether the fantastical and increasingly elaborate forms in which these figures are realized cinematically are related as much to the fact that the form is constantly threatened by exhaustion as to the technological invention of new representational possibilities. (Morris, 2008: 237)

In fact, 100 years after the heyday of spiritualism, and particularly since the turn of the 21st century, ghosts have once again become prevalent across a diverse range of media, including films, television series, and video games.

This sort of ghostly presence polarizes anew. The public debate on the effects of the seemingly inferior products of the culture industry is also a debate on media and modernity, on the human mind and its manipulation. One faction implicates mass media, especially the new media, as instruments of controlling and dulling the mind, whereas the opposing faction cherishes advanced media technologies as instruments of brightening the mind and opening up new realms of hitherto unknown experiences.

Early on, film theorists discussed the mind-altering capacities of the cinema, which was seen as an intrinsic characteristic of the technology. The film scholars Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener speak of a ‘trance-like state’ in which the spectators are transposed in front of the screen.

In the cinema, the specific set-up of projection, screen and audience, together with the ‘centering’ effect of optical perspective and the focalizing strategies of filmic narration, all ensure or conspire to transfix but also to transpose the spectator into a trance-like state in which it becomes difficult to distinguish between the ‘out-there’ and the ‘in-here’. (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 68)

Trance-cults and trance-techniques, we might note, had been a disputed topic 100 years ago. In this dispute, conflicting ideas about the modernity or backwardness of trance-techniques and its media were subject to fierce debate (Hahn and Schüttpeitz, 2009: 9). Assessments of

the trance-like states of cinema audiences continue to differ. Jean-Louis Baudry, for example, by referring to Plato's cave parable, sees the ominous and fatal effects of cinematic apparatus upon spectators:

It is therefore their motor paralysis, the impossibility to go away from where they find themselves, that makes a reality check impossible in their case, thereby beautifying their misapprehension and causing them to confuse the representational for the real [...]. (Baudry, 1986: 303)

Baudry describes the audience's state of mind as diminished vigilance, dream-like, as paralysis or regression, always at risk of confusing the fictitious with the factual. Critics of Baudry object that, unlike the prisoners in Plato's cave, audience members are cognizant that they are in a cinema house and voluntarily enter into the experience.

With these remarks on spiritualism and trance, I do not want to maintain that today's ghost movie fans can be simply equated with the spiritualists of 100 years ago. In no way do I suggest that a naive audience is so mesmerized by mediatized ghosts that they mistake screen reality for that outside the cinema.

Nevertheless, the reference to historic spiritualism calls attention to some common aspects. From early on, Murray Leeder asserts, "the cinema has been described as haunted or ghostly medium. [...] Deliberately or accidentally, it has become a storehouse for our dead" (Leeder, 2015b: 3). Indeed, in recent years, the idea of cinema as ghostly has been reinvigorated under the influence of Derrida's hauntology.

Media, cinematic technology in this case, create an experiential realm which facilitates the encounter with otherwise invisible beings. The creation of this inner realm is, to a certain extent, based on altered states of consciousness and the willingness of the individual to immerse herself in this imaginary space. In his theory of fiction as a game of make-believe, augmented by his concept of 'mental simulation', the philosopher Kendall Walton argues that make-believe has to be regarded as the fundamental world-making activity (Walton, 1990). The human capacity of world-making through fiction is based on the poetics of immersion, as Marie-Laure Ryan coined it. Temporal and emotional immersion always requires "an active engagement [...] and a demanding act of imagining" (Ryan, 2001: 15).

The spiritualist's stage performances as well as the cinematic performances of ghost movies offer a space for such acts of imagining, in which 'what if's', or skeptical popular subjunctivity, can be tested (Koch and Voss, 2009). The main hypothesis being tested is the question of whether ghosts exist or not, whether there is 'existence' after life or not.

Are Movie Ghosts Gothic, Religious or Banal?

Unavoidably, the human quest for existential meaning queries the unknown: death and what comes after death. What form of existence can be expected after death? This question belongs to the spectrum of existential questions for which religions traditionally provide ultimate answers (Cowan, 2011: 405, 2008: 126–133). Religious experts, theologians, priests, and ascetics claim interpretive authority about the afterlife, and dare to explicate redemption and damnation, heaven and hell, purgatory and rebirth. In the course of modernity, Eastern and Western alike, religions as meaning-giving systems compete with other authorities: political ideologies, philosophy, science, art, and literature. In the quest for meaning, the individual is overloaded with a great variety of alternatives, and is thereby compelled to choose and refuse, to examine, to reassess, to decide, to search anew. Although in disguise, although playful, popular culture serves as a valuable resource in this quest for meaning.

Without a doubt, most ghost-movie fans would flatly deny that, for example, *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998) or *The Grudge/Ju-On* (dir. Takashi Shimizu, 2002) are movies about religion or religious movies. Likewise, most film historians and scholars of cultural studies do not detect any religion in ghost movies at all. Instead they use the label ‘gothic’; a term invented in literary studies which functions as an aesthetic, pop-cultural category (e.g. Wheatley, 2006).

In contrast, media scholar Stig Hjarvard helpfully applies the analytical category ‘banal religion’ in his “theory of the media as agents of religious change”. By ‘banal religion’, Hjarvard considers

the fact that both individual faith and collective religious imagination are created and maintained by a series of experiences and representations that may have no, or only a limited, relationship with the institutionalized religions. (Hjarvard, 2008: 15)

Such experiences and representations are not only to be found in urban legends, folk traditions, and fairy tales, but are also in soap operas, tabloids, comic books and, of course, blockbuster movies.

Hjarvard emphasizes that the label ‘banal’ does not imply that banal religious representations are less important or irrelevant.

On the contrary, they are primary and fundamental in the production of religious thoughts and feelings, and they are also banal in the sense that their religious meanings may travel unnoticed and can be evoked independently of larger religious texts or institutions. (Hjarvard, 2008: 15)

Methodologically, and in accordance with Thomas Csordas, we should consider “religion, popular culture, politics, and economics as necessarily coeval and intertwined, as they are in the lives of actors” (Csordas, 2009: 3).

No matter how useful the category ‘banal religion’ is, we have to recognize that pop-cultural ghosts refer to multiple relationships between religion, media, and the public sphere (Meyer and Moors, 2006: 3). The boundaries between entertainment and religion are blurred, as was already illustrated by the example of the Western spiritualism around 1900. Or, in the words of Stewart M. Hoover: “An effect of the mediated public sphere [...] is the destabilization of the category of ‘the religious’ in media audience terms” (Hoover, 2008: 43).

“What if you were already dead?” Post-Mortem Cinema and Identity Crisis

As products of popular culture, ghost movies unfold affection and attraction in the border zone between amusement and thrill, secular and religious worldviews, trivial and existential questions, angst and existential dread. This makes the genre interesting not only for sociologists, anthropologists, media and film scholars, but also for scholars of religion. The appearances of ghosts on television and in cinema provide some sort of information about afterlife. The common fear of death, of dying badly and of not remaining dead is linked to concepts of condemnation and redemption, which fall in the fields of traditional religious competence, but are reflected in the products of entertainment industries.

Against this background, I want to refer to the prominent, invented genre label ‘post-mortem cinema’. In their introduction to film theory, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener identify this new genre, which has flourished since the 1990s, as a recent development of Hollywood film. The authors do not exclusively deal with ghost movies. Rather, the term ‘post-mortem cinema’ has a broader scope. The authors point to movies such as *Forrest Gump* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1994), *Lost Highway* (dir. David Lynch, 1997), *The Sixth Sense* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), *American Beauty* (dir. Sam Mendes, 1999), *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher, 1999), *Memento* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2000), *Mulholland Drive* (dir. David Lynch, 2001), *Donnie Darko* (dir. Richard Kelly, 2001), *Vanilla Sky* (dir. Cameron Crowe, 2001), *The Others* (dir. Alejandro Amenábar, 2001), and *Volver* (dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 2006).

One of the key questions of this genre is: “What if you were already dead?” The narrations, including *how* the story is narrated, have their own characteristics. Elsaesser argues that many mainstream Hollywood films deal with after-life, survival, parallel lives, and simultaneously with memory, memorization, and trauma. Coming to terms with the past and the preservation/reconstruction of history, either collective or personal, is central to this genre.

[W]hile the body is (un)dead, the brain goes on living and leads an afterlife of sorts or finds different—ghostly, but also banal, mundane—forms of embodiment. (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 165)

The linking motif of these films refers to the limits of classical identity formation:

where we assure ourselves of who we are through memory, perception and bodily self-presence. When these indices of identity fail, or are temporarily disabled, as in conditions of trauma, amnesia or sensory overload, it challenges the idea of a unified, self-identical and rationally motivated individual, assumed and presupposed by humanist philosophy. Not only posthumanist philosophies, such as those of Deleuze and Foucault, but popular films and mainstream cinema, too, register this crisis in our ideas of identity. (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 155–156)

Southeast Asian ghost movies fit in a very literal sense to the label ‘post-mortem cinema’, because these movies explore and depict forms of postmortem existence in various ways. But they also fit the label as specifically elaborated by Elsaesser and Hagener. Southeast Asian ghost movies reflect upon the identity crises and trauma of the living as well as of the dead. The impositions of modernity, individualization, growing violence, new gender-relations, and the need to re-invent and adapt the self to the demands of modern life, take their toll. Ghost movies mirror a changing understanding of the self, haunted by new anxieties and new kinds of spirits. In many such movies both the living as well as the dead are portrayed as confused and in need of psychological and religious guidance. Precariousness, insecurity, and even chaos are parameters of the present. Naming chaos and taming unpredictability by spirit rituals and narratives of ghostly intrusions are strategies to cope with the effects of urban modernization (Johnson, 2012).

Ghost movies of the early 21st century are located in an urban and middle class ambience. Ghosts most often utilize information and communication technologies to intrude and threaten. The ghosts in such films never transform into protective forces. They stage a melodramatic tribunal by their own rules. Ridden by insatiable anger, they cannot be appeased. There are no heroes and no happy endings—the invasion of ghosts is enduring. Ghost movies of this kind belong to the horror genre and they are about fear. The study of ghost movies provides insights into the cultural construction of fear, but also into the shortcomings of modernity and their frightening effects. Pattana Kitiarsa says in relation to Thai horror films:

modernity intensifies violation, violence, and the haunting of the dead. These films have undressed modernity and revealed its naked truth. They mirror(ed) modernity’s ironies. [...] Thailand is haunted by the shortcomings of modernity: it seems to promise many things, but cannot always deliver on what it promises; the process of modernization has created as much as it has destroyed. In the Thai context, horror films reveal the dark side of urban modernization. (Pattana Kitiarsa, 2011: 216)

In fact, it is the trope of trauma and identity crisis that unites Western and Asian ghost movies. There are links between spirits and changing conceptions of self in a global world, as Nils Bubandt argues, comparing Indonesian spirit cults with popular US-American television series such as *Ghost Whisperers* (dir. John Gray, 2005–2010), *Medium* (dir. Glenn Gordon Caron, 2005–2011), *Supernatural* (dir. Eric Kripke, 2005–present) and Hollywood movies such as *The Sixth Sense* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 1999):

In Indonesia, ghosts are becoming traumatised, while in the West spirits increasingly struggle with emotional problems. In different ways, [...] spirits are becoming implicated in the globalisation of an interiorised and psychological understanding of what it means to be human. As humans are encouraged to think of themselves as psychological beings, human spirits and ghosts are reinvented in a variety of ways—East and West. (Bubandt, 2012: 1)

Encountering Cinematic Ghosts: Beneath the Skin

The way in which Pattana Kitiarsa and Nils Bubandt decode ghost films works on a meta-level of observation and analysis. The scholarly perspective operates with abstract concepts and tools such as discourse, representation, modernization, society, trauma, the self, or even spectrality. Scholars learn and teach something about culture and society by watching ghost films.

The audience's perspective in front of the screen is necessarily different. The average spectator's decoding is anything but abstract and analytical. Since the ghost movie genre deals with the otherwise invisible, the viewers have to be convinced of the otherworldly reality depicted on screen. Ghost movies always play with and dislodge the audience's reality concepts and expectations. In the end, however, the plot and clues of the story, as well as its enactment, must be comprehensible and persuasive. Filmic post-mortem scenarios and encounters with ghosts implicate a sort of plausibility test.

This test, however, does not work exclusively through cognitive considerations of argumentative pros and cons. This plausibility check works in a playful mode. It is not the analytical mind that is addressed in the first place but rather bodily sensations: thrill, shiver, shock, terror, creeping horror, attacks of sweating, goose bumps, elevated blood pressure, hairs standing on end, and so on. It is this kind of body language and knowledge which make ghosts real and plausible, for an intense moment at least. Shiver and thrill are also intrinsic emotions in the spiritualist's séances, and demonstrate equal results in testing the plausibility of the spirits' presence.

Ghost movies operate most effectively by arousing 'somatic modes of attention', or more precisely, "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Csordas, 1993: 138). Those 'others' include, in our case, ghosts and spirits. Recent attempts by film scholars to investigate the ways in which the cinema unfolds its persuasive power therefore scrutinize the various dimensions of the bodily sensorium. Vivian Sobchack argues that the

cinema [...] transposes what would otherwise be the invisible, individual and intrasubjective privacy of direct experience as it is embodied into the visible, public and intersubjective sociality of a language of direct embodied experience. (Sobchack, 1992: 42)

Jennifer M. Barker (2009) points in a similar direction, arguing that

the experience of cinema can be understood as deeply tactile—a sensuous exchange between film and viewer that goes beyond the visual and aural, gets beneath the skin, and reverberates in the body. (Barker, 2009, blurb)

Similarly, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener conceptualized their book on film theory throughout as an “Introduction through the Senses” (2010).

This growing analytical awareness of the spectator’s body is clearly a reaction to theoretical positions that reduce film watching to a disembodied, mainly cognitive activity (e.g. de Saussure, Lacan, Althusser, Barthes). Without discussing film theory in further detail, one factor is worth noting. The ghost movie audience is seeking a peculiar (and paradoxical) *experience*, the rendering palpable of the invisible and immaterial. That is, the audience demands an encounter with the scary and invisible, namely ghosts and spirits. At issue here is the paradoxical desire of ‘fearing fictions’ (Carroll, 1990: 60–63). The quality of a good ghost movie is measured against the intensity of its corporeal effects.

Film theories that deliberately oppose the body/mind split are helpful in this regard. As long as a “theory’s task is less to discourse about films, but to speak with (and through) films” (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010: 49), one may become productively inspired. Anna Powell, in her book “Deleuze and Horror Film”, points out:

[w]e cannot maintain the distanced gaze of subjective spectator at objective spectacle, but respond corporeally to sensory stimuli and dynamics of motion. Fantasy is an embodied event. (Powell, 2005: 205)

It is exactly the embodied event of ghost movie watching that effects the perception of reality or, better, stimulates play with multiple realities, or possible worlds. Thus, the cinema of ghosts creates a space for ‘the sense of possibilities’. Every film, but especially the ghost film, offers an “experimental form of attention in which possibilities are explored in correspondence with ever new and surprising ways in which they are set free” (Largier, 2008: 749).

The palpability of ghosts in movies is generated through cinematic techniques of verisimilitude. This, however, is not achieved by the maneuver of simply overwhelming a defenseless and somewhat naïve viewer. Moreover, the actual verisimilitude of ghosts has nothing to do with a presupposed *belief* in ghosts, because, as Noël Carroll rightly remarks, “if one really believed that the theater were beset by lethal shape changers, demons, intergalactic cannibals, or toxic zombies, one would hardly sit by for long” (Carroll, 1990: 63).

Instead, we have to reckon with what Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined “the willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge, 1951: 264, after Carroll, 1990: 64). Coleridge developed this idea in the context of supernatural fiction. Importantly, Coleridge’s concept unquestionably ascribes agency to the recipient. Likewise, horror fans are anything but victims of illusion:

they are willing and well prepared to enjoy ghost movies intellectually as ‘mind game films’ (Elsaesser, 2009), and emotionally as a ritual of learning how to fear.

Learning to Fear: Catharsis by Dark Play

Film historian Georg Seeßlen, commenting on the attraction of the horror genre, states that classical horror narratives show how the normal becomes uncanny, whereas contemporary horror narratives tell us about the challenge of fear through the hero’s quest for horror and fear. The hero has to cross the underworld and face terror without hesitation. After this cathartic moment, life is less frightening. The Grimm Brother’s fairy tale “The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was” (Grimm and Grimm, 1972, No 4) is an apt illustration of Seeßlen’s thesis.¹ Ghost movie lovers set out to learn to fear. Learning to fear, Seeßlen maintains, is as important as learning to love, to die, and to exercise power (Seeßlen and Jung, 2006: 16).

Playing with multiple realities and fears, testing out ‘the sense of possibilities’, presupposes deliberate decision-making, passion, and fun. Such ‘mind games’ as well as ritualized experiments with angst take place in spaces that Victor Turner would call ‘liminoid’ (Turner, 1982). Liminoid phenomena, provided by theatre, music, performance art, and film, are characterized as experimental, individualistic, marginal, idiosyncratic, as well as socio-critical (Turner, 1982: 54). In such a liminoid space the experience of ‘pure potentiality’ is possible, “when the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun” (Turner, 1982: 44). Turner’s concept of liminoid space resembles Winnicott’s psychological concept of the ‘potential space’ where the activity of playing suspends inner psychic realities and the actual (outer) world. Play/playing opens up a third indeterminate space where imagination generates new realities (Winnicott, 1991: 53).

When we look for the playful side of the modern individual, and consider cinema as a liminoid space, we soon recognize that there are more than just ‘funny games’. There is ‘dark play’ which, according to Richard Schechner,

involves fantasy, luck, daring, intervention, and deception. [...] Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, and breaks its own rules—so much so that playing itself is in danger of being destroyed. (Schechner, 2002: 119)

¹ The tale tells the story of a young man who suffers from his inability to fear. On his quest of learning what fear is, he meets many individuals who try to teach him this human sensation. Though he encounters numerous frightening situations, involving a cemetery and a haunted castle, a hanged man on the gallows, a (feigned) ghost, beasts and monsters, he never experiences fear. Eventually the fearless young man marries a princess who soon gets tired of her husband’s complaints of being unable to shudder. She douses him with freezing water and small fishes. This sensation makes him shudder, though not from fear.

Schechner points to an observable propensity for dark play and a desire for transgression which can easily be related to horror as a genre, and therefore to ghost movies. Transgression not only violates and infringes the limits of law and convention but also announces and even lauds laws, commandments and conventions, as Chris Jenks states: “Transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation” (Jenks, 2003: 2). Schechner’s explanations of play reveal the transgressive ‘other side’ of the *homo ludens*, as well as the dystopian potentials of imaginative engagement. Imagination and terror are closely linked, not only in the realm of cinema but also in ‘real’ life scenarios, as the contributors to “Terror and Violence: Imagination and the Unimaginable” (Strathern, Stewart and Whitehead, 2006) so impressively illustrate (see also Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen, 2009: 10).

One possible approach to the ghost film genre is to analyze it as a ritual of fear which seems to be thrilling and cathartic for many people. Here, relevant parameters include the phenomenal experience, darkness, spatial and mental closeness, repeat viewing and the reactivation of emotions, and interest in others’ reactions (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011: 18). This view helps one to understand the (sometimes subcultural) appeal of ghost movies as cult films and the fandom that accompanies them (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011; Czarnecka-Palka, 2012; O’Toole, 2008; Telotte, 1991). Understood as such, ghost movie watching either in cinema or at home belongs to various rites of transgression and subversion which are part of popular culture (Gournelos and Gunkel, 2011; Cieslak and Rasmus, 2012; Mathijs and Sexton, 2011: 97–108).

Why, then, do people like to be scared and why do they pay for this experience? Forms of transgressive pleasure as well as the passion for violence, horror, and terror are commonly explained by Aristotelian catharsis and/or the Freudian return-of-the-repressed thesis. Subversive, anti-structural and anti-normative tendencies are characteristics of ghost movie narratives which fit both readings. As a rule, ghosts represent the moral and manifest as a result of norm violations (rape, torture, murder, suicide). The blatant filmic enactment of amoral behavior attracts the Mr Hyde in us and invites identification. By acting out anti-social impulses through the work of imagination, we acknowledge that amorality is part of us. This acceptance leads to the experience of cathartic moments. It facilitates temporary release from the constraints of structure that arise from biography, gender, society, and culture. In the end, of course, the vengeful ghost makes the destructive effects of anti-social behavior abundantly clear, and corrects amoral disorder. Dr Jekyll retains sovereignty: we can leave the cinema strengthened. Or, seen from another perspective, violence and death, as well as sex, elicit attraction and anxiety in equal proportion. Emotional and imaginary immersion in the realm of

fear teaches us something about what is meant to be human. At least, this is the general concept of the catharsis thesis.

Whatever explanation or theoretical argument we apply, imaginative effects and affects generated by film-technology cannot be completely determined. Imagination “is *defined* by its essential indeterminacy”, as Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen (2009: 24) emphasize. Indeterminacy has a constitutive role in people’s lives, and technologies of imagination offer potentialities to live out (in safety) and handle this indeterminacy. For methodological reasons, Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen propose that, if the

place of the imagination [...] is the space of indeterminacy in social and cultural life [...], it can be empirically identified and ethnographically explored with reference to the processes or technologies that open it up. (Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen, 2009: 24)

For the study of ghost movies, this statement reiterates the importance of audience research, which will be outlined in more detail below.

Subversive Ghosts and the Return of the Traumatic Past

The return-of-the-repressed thesis, applied to ghost movies, partly overlaps with the catharsis thesis. Set in spaces for “experimental forms of attention”, cinematic visions of the otherworldly have a subversive potential, as some authors affirm. Media scholar Kevin Glynn asserts:

Rationalist certitudes dissolve into indeterminacy. The maelstrom of demonic horror and dark fantasies supposedly dispelled in the triumph of reason and modernist enlightenment returns with the full force of its nightmarish fury. The supernatural seduces the quotidian through ironic reversals. (Glynn, 2003: 430)

Thus, the magic realism of ghost movies acts as a counterforce to scientific realism. The supernatural, mediated by television and movies, exerts a power of seduction targeting “the presumptive unities that constitute both the subjects and the objects of modernist truth and knowledge” (Glynn, 2003: 425). Ghosts subvert official truth regimes and tell their own truth, which is always a reminder of past injustice, dark legacies and hidden secrets. Accordingly, Avery F. Gordon (2006) refers to ‘haunting’ as “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely”. By ‘haunting’ she describes

those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. (Gordon, 2006: xvi)

This approach coalesces with Derrida's 'hauntology' (Derrida, 1994). Derrida argues that our perception of the world is haunted by both the instability of the once taken for granted and the impossibility of ever having had such certainty (Johnson, 2014: 6).

Ghost movies, seen through the lenses of Derrida or Gordon, not only reflect traumatic events of the past, but can also be analyzed as instruments of social criticism, ironic or moral comments, or as validation of magical machinations beneath a mundane surface. Ghosts appear as the unwanted reminder of family secrets, of moral lapse, of collective guilt, of forgotten relationships. Movies ghosts are "relentlessly reflexive, telling us at least as much about ourselves as they do anything else [...]. They demonstrate those aspects of ourselves we would far rather forget" as Douglas E. Cowan states (Cowan, 2001: 403). Intruding ghosts embody the past. But they exist not only in an indefinite spatiality between death and life, but also in an indefinite temporality. This is a main characteristic of ghost narratives. Ghosts destabilize chronology, the known, the homely, the foundation of our expectations. Suddenly, the promises of modernity and progress appear to be hollow. This is subversively uncanny.

Mediated Ghosts: Southeast Asia's Haunted Modernity

The observations and explanations thus far have dealt with more general questions and theoretical concepts concerning the spectral qualities of technical media, the attractiveness and psychological function of the horror film genre, emotions and bodily affects aroused by cinematic ghosts, configurations of imagination, entertainment and the dark side of modernity. In this section, I direct our attention to ghosts, politics and the media in Southeast Asia's modernity. This modernity can be characterized as an 'alternative' or 'vernacular' modernity in contrast to a 'universal', and implicitly self-proclaimed, Western modernity (Englund and Leach, 2000; Knauff, 2002; Bubandt, 2004).

In recent years, a number of scholars, primarily anthropologists, have investigated and theorized the persistent presence and agency of invisible forces and supernatural agents in Southeast Asia. The scholarly interest in ghosts and the occult is not driven by a curiosity about folk-traditions or popular religiosity but rather the potential links between the (re)emergence of the supernatural and the visible ruins of progress (Johnson, 2014), the destructive effects of neoliberal politics, bursts of state violence, the erosion of communal cohesion, financial crises, and the growing sense of individual insecurity in daily life.

The uncanny moments of everyday life (and politics) are intensified by media of various kinds. In reference to disordered postcolonial states, Jean and John Comaroff argue that media

open an uncertain space between signifiers, be they omens or banknotes, and what it is they signify: a space of mystery, magic, and uncanny productivity wherein witches, Satan, and prosperity prophets ply an avid trade [...]. Under such conditions, signs take on an occult life of their own, being capable of generating great riches. (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006: 15)

Such an ‘occult economy’, as characterized by the Comaroffs, is one facet of modern Southeast Asia. Another facet is communication with the spirits. Indeed, the relation between traditional (spirit) mediums and the new (mass) media, to which we now turn our attention, is particularly revealing.

Rosalind C. Morris (2000a) investigates the transformations of spirit possession performances in Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand. The discourse on authentic Thai culture, its places of origins, and the radical changes of past and present are linked with dramatic episodes of the failed 1973–1976 democratic revolution and the 1992 democracy protests. Thai modernity, the author argues, is troubled by a sense of loss. The deeply-felt absence of origins, homesickness, and longing for return to a homelike past are painfully affecting social and personal identity. For nationalist historiography, spirit mediums are emblematic for Northern Thai culture, with spirit possession serving as an icon of alterity, of history and authenticity. Therefore, the examination of how the mediums’ traditional representational practices “are encompassed by the technologies of mass mediation and the economies of exchange” (Morris, 2000a: 14) provides a deeper understanding of mediums and modernity. Communication with spirits is in no way a relic of a traditional past refurbished by modern translational and representational techniques, rather it is intrinsically modern. Morris’ work throws great light on the transformations of contemporary Thai spirit possession, the embodiment of spirits and its mediation by modernity’s media, such as video and television, as well as the ambitions of mediums to reflect critically on spirit possession and to make the occult transparent (see Morris, 2000b, 2002).

In “Funeral Casino” (2002), Alan Klima describes pro-democracy activism in Thailand in the 1990s, the ensuing military massacres and the subsequent exchange with the dead. It is the power of corpses, mediated by photos and films, which conveyed cathartic effects on politics. The images of ‘cadavers’, interpreted as sacrifices of the movement, became powerful mediums of resistance. Klima emphasizes the significance of the gift of death, our obligations to death, and the ethical potential behind the symbolic exchange with the dead.

In his film *Ghosts and Numbers* (2010), Klima meditates on the devastating effects of the currency crash in 1997. Following the daily life of a migrant lottery seller, we enter ruined buildings in Bangkok, and listen to stories of ghosts and haunting. The Asian monetary crisis reverberated in Thai people’s obsession with (lucky) numbers and the spirit world, as Klima illustrates in a filmic narrative interspersed with dream-like elements and spectral sequences.

In his book “Naming the Witch” (2006), James Siegel deals less with spirits and ghostliness, instead analyzing the uncanny forces of destructive violence inherent in the social, through a focus on ‘witchcraft’. The author starts with an outbreak of killings of alleged sorcerers in East Java between 1998 and 2000. These witch hunt incidents coincided with the attenuation of state authority, triggered by the resignation of President Suharto in May 1998. Throughout his authoritarian regime, which started with a series of massacres in 1965–1966, Suharto’s New Order government had differentiated between good and therefore privileged citizens (connected to the state apparatus), and suspect ‘others’ who were seen as a potential threat to political order and social harmony. The diminution of state authority ended state surveillance and its verified classifications. It facilitated a climate of general suspicion,

first of all of oneself. Someone else knows one better than one does oneself. When this agent of recognition disappears, the reassurance it gives of one’s innocence goes with it. It is possible that one is guilty. Guilty of what is now the first question. Guilty of being a witch, meaning that one has a capacity for hatred and that one might have done anything. (Siegel, 2006: 160)

To fight off self-accusation, it was necessary to find someone else responsible.

‘Witch’ rather than ‘Communist’ or ‘Criminal’ was the form that accusation took. [...] Seen from the place of those possessed or obsessed by feelings of overwhelming catastrophe, those closest were the unrecognizable face of malevolence. ‘Witch’, with the subsequent witch hunt, offered a means for local control of general—or national—malevolence when state control failed. (Siegel, 2006: 160f.)

Witchcraft accusations in Java, Siegel argues, were attempts to reassert control over phantasms and fears caused by the vanishing state order. Such phantasms, however, were and are part of Indonesian nationalism and not particularities of the Javanese spirit world. The traces of these phantasms and phantoms point back to the hundreds of thousands Communists massacred in the 1960s. It was feared, and the fear was nourished by government propaganda, that they could return “through some unknown process, meaning without formal organization, but saying, also, ‘bodiless’, just as specters lack bodies. This myth was widely subscribed to”, Siegel maintains (2006: 163).

In their works, Morris, Klima and Siegel depict the dark side of Southeast Asian modernity, reflected in the mirror of fantasies, specters, and phantasms. Authoritarian rule, state violence, massacres, and war are the driving forces which bring ghosts into play. “Wherever there is violence in Southeast Asia [...] there are ghosts”, Morris (2008: 230) asserts. Premature, violent death generates a restless ghost as well as trauma among the survivors, and the obligation to conciliate the desolate angry specter.

The ubiquity of ghosts explains the attraction of Derrida’s ‘hauntology’ for many scholars working on politics, religion, media and modernity in Southeast Asia. Derrida’s concern with apparitions, visions, and representations that mediate the sensuous and the non-sensuous, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, and his idea concerning ghosts are based on a

single literary source: Act I of Shakespeare's "Hamlet", as Martha and Bruce Lincoln (2015: 192) critically note. Through Derrida, specters and spectrality became manifold applicable metaphors to reflect on suffering, injustice, gendered violence, paramilitary terror, trauma, the dead, and other affective figures of the imaginary. But what about the ghost, not as a conceptual metaphor but as actuality? (Blanco and Peeren, 2013b: 2–10). What about the agency of intangibles (Blanes and Espírito Santo, 2014b)? What if ghosts are "slamming doors, cracking branches, causing illness, and demanding clothes and cigarettes"? (Langford, 2013: 15). 'Hauntology' denies ghosts' ontological status, translating specters into textual tropes, rationalizing and distorting irritating aspects of the phenomenon. To overcome this theoretical shortcoming in a Southeast Asian environment, Martha and Bruce Lincoln (2015) conceptualize a 'critical hauntology'. For heuristic reasons they differentiate between primary and secondary haunting. Primary haunting is based on the recognition of the reality and autonomy of metaphysical entities by the afflicted individuals. Secondary haunting refers to such entities

in the sedimented textual residues of horrific historic events or, alternatively, as tropes for collective intrapsychic states and experiences, including trauma, grief, regret, repression, guilt, and a sense of responsibility for the wrongs suffered by victims whose memory pains—or ought to pain—their survivors. (Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015: 200)

To re-theorize haunting and to link primary and secondary haunting, they refer to the example of Ba Chúc, a Vietnamese Mekong Delta village, in which Khmer Rouge soldiers massacred over 3000 civilians on 18 April 1978 (during the Vietnam-Cambodia border conflicts). The official memorial, where the victims' remains are presented, and the political call to remember can easily be related to secondary haunting. Primary haunting, however, is a matter of fact for the village residents. The spirits associated with the victims of the mass execution still reside in the 'grievous' banyan tree at Ba Chúc, where the worst atrocities happened. Today, these ghosts continue to suffer disquiet and anguish. Such haunting follows a metaphysical logic according to which the soul of the victim of a tragic death is held captive to the place of death. The post-mortem prisoner has to repeat the tragic history of his or her own death by causing fatal (road) accidents, resulting in more fateful inmates at the site (Kwon Heonik, 2008: 128, after Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015: 209).

In their efforts toward a critical hauntology, Martha and Bruce Lincoln hint at common features shared by primary and secondary haunting, namely

their use of ghosts (whether in metaphoric generality or semi-concrete individuality) to arouse strong emotions (terror, dread, shame, and remorse) and reconnect the living and the dead, while advancing ends that are personal and social, political and moral, analytic and pragmatic. (Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015: 211)

It is the social lives of spirits and their power to compel mourning, humility, and compassion among the living that is addressed by the Lincolns' critical hauntology. They, in accordance

with the above mentioned authors, underscore the importance of ghosts in the collective memory, the public sphere, and the political arena of contemporary Southeast Asia. Politics, as Nils Bubandt (2014a: 120) rightly maintains, “is always haunted by those phenomena that it seeks to repress but which return as ghosts”. In the case of Indonesia, such spectral phenomena include homosexuality, the notion of the ‘masses’, the memory of the 1965/1966 killings, fraud and corruption.

Modern media amplify this kind of haunting, because the media is, according to Derrida (1994: 63), “neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes”. Bubandt (2014a: 121) adds that the “media is itself a spectre that helps the conjuring act of making ghosts”. As an anthropologist, Bubandt employs Derrida’s notion of hauntology (in the same vein as the Lincolns) refusing its abstract, metaphorical and deconstructivist usage.

There is nothing academic, theoretical, rhetorical or metaphorical about the haunting that characterises politics in Indonesia. Spirits have a reality in Indonesian society that makes this haunting acutely anxiety-provoking and directly visceral. What one might call ‘political hauntology’ in Indonesia is saturated by spiritual entities—*jins*, vampires, Draculas, ninjas, witches—that are acutely real at the same time as they are intensely embarrassing because they question ‘the limit that would permit one to identify the political’ [Derrida 1994: 63]. (Bubandt, 2014a: 121)

Ghosts always cross borders of time and space, past and presence, but as Bubandt cum Derrida argue, they also dissolve the separating lines of politics, religion, economy, and popular culture. The presence of ghosts in the realm of politics is inseparable from their appearance in the cinema or on television. It is not accidental that horror movies are the most common genre in Indonesia. The history of the genre, known as *film mistik*, and particularly the portrayal of ghosts and representatives of Islam therein, reflect the country’s political history, as Katinka van Heeren (2012) has shown.

The grand narrative of progress and enlightenment links modernity and democracy with rationality and transparency. On first sight, the persistent presence of spirits and the occult contradicts that dominant pattern: the intimate relation of spirits with modernity and democracy has to be denied. Spirits are embarrassing and unwanted in the narrative of modernity. However, according to Bruno Latour (1993), modernity is characterized by a double process of ‘purification’ and of ‘translation’. That means, Nils Bubandt concludes, that the domains of ‘culture’ and ‘nature’, or in this case, ‘politics’ and ‘spirits’ are ideologically separated,

even while they are constantly churned up and mixed up in practice [...]. In that sense, the denied complicity between the normative orders of the spirit world, modern secularism, and democratic politics is not a phenomenon that is peculiar to Indonesian modernity. On the contrary: it is a global phenomenon. (Bubandt, 2014b: 63; see also Bubandt and van Beek, 2011)

Mary Steedly shows how both the aspiration of transparency as well as the dynamics of concealment and the obscure are not only part of the popular perception of politics (such as the life and death of President Suharto), but also of popular culture, such as horror films. In her

paper on “Transparency and Apparition: Media Ghosts of Post-New Order Indonesia”, she argues that

[d]reams of transparency and apparition are always necessarily incomplete, for both are predicated on a darkness to be illuminated, a secret to be revealed, a ghost to appear; they depend on the suspicion of secret working, whether of political conspiracy or occult forces. [...] Like crime, and corruption, like the numbers of the ‘unexplained dead’, ghosts are a kind of public secret. Everyone assumes that they exist, but no one can fully plumb their depths. (Steadly, 2013: 352, 372)

It is secrecy and secrets that boost communication, whether in the family or public sphere. The secret, however, “is a matter of form, not content, so it can never fully or finally be revealed”, the political scientist Jodi Dean (2002: 42) maintains. Steedly adds that “[g]hosts are too a matter of form and can never be fully revealed. There is always the possibility of a return, a sequel” (Steadly, 2013: 372).

Politics, the occult and ghosts depend on media and mediation to be communicated. Aesthetic forms and their techno-mediated characteristics are crucial: they make the invisible and unseen both plausible and efficacious. Karen Strassler provides an illustrative example of this by tracing the history of Javanese spirit Ratu Kidul’s image in paint, photography, television, film, and online. In doing so, Strassler shows how this mythical spirit queen of the unseen world came to be such a visible feature of the postcolonial landscape. It is obvious that religion and politics, the banal and the spiritual, the occult and the public, are inseparable. Moreover, pondering modernity’s disenchantment or re-enchantment is futile, because

the history of Ratu Kidul’s mediation as image conforms to neither a narrative of modern disenchantment nor one of technological re-enchantment. Rather, as Ratu Kidul’s image circulates within Indonesia’s heterogeneous and complexly mediated contemporary public sphere, it elicits both banal and spiritually efficacious engagements that coexist and at times jostle uneasily against each other. (Strassler, 2014: 127)

The media-anthropological approach, as the examples show, offers fieldwork based insights into the dynamics of Southeast Asia’s haunted modernity by correlating ghosts, politics and the media.

Film studies scholars investigating horror movies inevitably encounter ghosts and take up impulses of Derrida’s hauntology, either critically or without reservation. Murray Leeder’s edited volume on “Cinematic Ghosts” (2015a), for example, unfolds the history of haunting and spectrality from silent cinema to the digital era, primarily focusing on Western film history but also with some excursions to East Asia and Thailand. In her book on Asian, especially Filipino horror movies and US remakes of East Asian ghosts movies (*Ju-On/The Grudge* [dir. Takashi Shimizu, 2002], *A Tale of Two Sisters* [dir. Jee-woon Kim, 2003]), Bliss Cua Lim (2009) employs Derrida’s stimuli to develop a critique of homogenous time. Lim considers the ghost film an historical allegory and the specter a provocative agent, because he/she con-

stantly brings the traumatic past back to the present and stubbornly demands not to be forgotten.

[T]he ghostly return of traumatic events precisely troubles the boundaries of past, present, and future, and cannot be written back to the complacency of a homogeneous, empty time. [...] [H]aunting as ghostly return precisely refuses the idea that things are just 'left behind,' that the past is inert and the present uniform. Put simply, the ghost forces the point of nonsynchronism. It is this challenge to received ideas of time that makes the specter a particularly provocative figure for the claims of history. (Bliss Cua Lim, 2001: 287, 288)

In his attempt to develop a particular cinematic paradigm to answer the question “What is Asian Cinema?”, film scholar Stephen Teo focuses on the experience of watching and analyzing Asian film as a cumulative whole. In Teo’s book “The Asian Cinema Experience” (2013), one section is devoted to “Asian horror and the ghost-story style”. The horror genre as such, he argues, is transnational, and the horrifying thrills and excitement of the horror narratives can be experienced without any knowledge of cultural signs and motifs (Teo, 2013: 92). Despite the transnationalism of horror, there is nevertheless something distinct in Asian horror movies. It is “the sociality of spirits [that] sets Asian horror apart from a mere genre of horror affect”, Teo (2013: 94) maintains, pointing to a specific Asian ghost-story style rooted in folklore, legend and oral tradition, *and* in the socio-cultural experience of ghostly horror. Teo identifies the figure of the ‘Asian monstrous feminine’, being both abject and heroic, as emblematic of the Asian ghost film and the tensions and anxieties it generates (see the contributions of Scherer, Platt, Wilger, and Baumann in this volume).

The authors in this volume share with Teo, and many of the other scholars whose work I have drawn on in this section, a focus on exploring Asian cinema as experience, utilizing emotion and bodily affects as theorizing factors, and linking ghost movies to the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) of the movie-audience.

The Audience, Again ...

As discussed above, studying ghost movies from an interdisciplinary perspective implies the necessity to bring the audience into focus. The viewers’ perspective is of tremendous importance because it reveals something about emotions and affects, imaginations and worldviews, entertainment and identity, and, above all, the spectral side of modernity.

The audience, setting out to encounter ghosts, enters the cinematic world: be it in a theatre, at home alone, or with family, friends or neighbors. In doing so, the viewer implicitly agrees to accept filmic alternatives to so-called everyday reality and, most importantly, to accept the rules and conventions of the specific genre. Ghost movies do not affect everyone. On the contrary: the genre divides the audience into factions.

The penchant for certain film genres carries a value judgment that happens “against the background of the viewer’s own knowledge, education, culture, experience and taste” (Fourie, 2004: 282). Contemporary film scholars acknowledge that audiences “are self-conscious about their practices, and this self-consciousness plays an important role in modern identity formation” (Hoover, 2008: 38). For Walter Benjamin, the then new medium of film was a possibility to experience modernity in an unprecedented way (Hansen, 2012: 23–24). These ideas all suggest the analytical importance of looking at the ghost movie audience. The conception of an active audience leads to inquiries about its taste, motivations, meanings, and practices. Furthermore, as Hoover emphasizes, it is important

to make a distinction between intention and function in this regard. Regardless of what is intended by certain mediated texts and genres [by scriptwriters, directors, actors or film-studios, PJBr], what matters is what results from these expressions and their consumption. Thus, the question of who the audience are and what they do becomes the central one. (Hoover, 2008: 38)

An individual’s decision for or against a certain genre (be it comedy, romance or horror) has (and has had) reflexive potential. Even if one assumes that popular cinema is ‘only’ entertainment, without doubt it still constitutes a productive resource for cultural identity (Jackson, 2006). Identity in the postmodern world is not formed by a search for a solid, over-arching rational essence, but by exercising options. This is ‘identity as choice’, as Lash and Friedman put it (1992: 7). What fits best to me? What makes me distinctive? Such questions are highly relevant for the aspiring individual, as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) demonstrated. ‘Life-style’ and consumer orientation are in this way turned into major areas of social self-placement. Seen from the point of view of media anthropology and cultural studies, it becomes clear that humans do not only take upon themselves an active role in the production of goods, but also in their consumption. Consumption is the active generation of meanings (Hepp, 1999: 70). This insight throws light on the demand for ghost motifs in bestseller-books, comics, and films.

Ghost-movies offer valuable clues about the condition of modernity and the anxieties of its audience. To what emotional needs do ghost movies respond, and what peculiar sort of affects are aroused by the genre? To what extent do age, gender, and class effect the decoding of ghost films? How is entertainment related to individual worldviews and religious convictions? Are the products of the global film industry sources for the viewers’ sense-making, or do they simply produce forms of ‘banal religion’, as outlined above? Such far-reaching questions are central for the study of ghost movies but are rarely addressed, much less empirically researched. Indeed, audience reception in the fields of the controversial horror genre is surprisingly underdeveloped. If the relevance of such a research focus becomes plausible, one goal of this volume will have been accomplished.

Composition of the Volume

The contributions in the volume are based on presentations made at an international workshop held by the research network *Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia* (DORISEA) in Goettingen in October 2012, and on a follow-up panel at the EUROSEAS conference in Lisbon in July 2013. The idea of a kaleidoscopic approach that shows respect for the multifacetedness of ghost movies is reflected in the book's three sections. The sections focus on East and Southeast Asian ghost movie *narratives*, the *cultural contexts* of their origins, and *audience* reception respectively.

The 'NARRATIVES' section explicates characteristic motifs and ghostly figures which are rooted in local or national traditions. Ghosts and spirits are far less defined by liturgical texts (or other literary genres) than gods. Basically, they come into existence through popular narratives which are open to transformation, variation and alteration. Film serves as the most important modern medium of the *homo narrans* and facilitates the efficacy of former oral and/or literary narratives. It is of special interest to study how and why specific ghostly images are translatable to the pan-Asian or even international audience, and why other ghosts and spirits remain local.

The ontological status of ghosts and spirits in Southeast Asia is different from their position in the West. Ghostly apparitions are oftentimes sensed collectively and are a concomitant phenomenon of political turmoil or crisis. In the section on 'CULTURAL CONTEXTS' not only is the paradoxical ontic-hauntic character of ghostly beings investigated but also their socio-historical embeddedness, which is reflected in filmic narratives.

The contributions in the 'AUDIENCE' reception section focus on the cultural context of meaning and symbolism, shared imaginaries and the emotions of movie-goers. The general attraction of ghost movies rests primarily in the peculiar emotions audiences expect and hope they will arouse. Since film watching confronts one with fugitive images as well as fugitive emotions, this field of research has to cope with serious methodological problems by focusing on audience reaction.

In section 1, 'NARRATIVES', Vivian Lee's chapter "Ghost Movies in Southeast Asia: Universal Hybrids—The Trans/local Production of Pan-Asian Horror" seeks to understand how horror functions in pan-Asian co-productions. She questions if, and to what extent, culture-specific elements of horror are translated, adapted, and preserved in the generation of what the author calls 'universal hybrids' in pan-Asian horror films. Focusing on two popular pan-Asian horror films, *The Eye/Gin gwai* and *The Eye 2/Gin gwai 2* (dir. The Pang Brothers,

2002, 2004), this paper approaches pan-Asian horror from two angles: firstly, how transnational co-production has defined the parameters of filmmaking, and secondly, whether a film as the end product of a creative process subject to these corporate parameters encourages articulations of a trans/local awareness at different levels of self-consciousness, and by this very process also reveals the dynamics between local specificities in the creation of an ‘Asia imaginary’.

In “Well-Travelled Female Avengers: The Transcultural Potential of Japanese Ghosts”, Elisabeth Scherer investigates a certain type of Asian female ghosts which have become icons of a new Asian Horror Cinema. The figure of Sadako in Nakata Hideo’s film *Ringu* (1998) served as the prototype in the development of J-Horror (Japanese Horror) films at the end of the 20th century. Since then, J-Horror has set the style for an abundance of similar works—with cultural specificities—in South Korea, Hong Kong, Thailand, the U.S., and elsewhere.

Martin Platt’s “Telling Tales: Variety, Community, and Horror in Thailand” discusses three Thai horror stories, all of which are seen to have historical bases in the 19th or 20th centuries and are anchored in events, objects, and locations. The three stories illustrate the powerful, compelling, and enduring nature of such tales and some of the cultural values embodied in them. They are: 1) the story of ‘Mae Nak’ (or ‘Nang Nak’) of Phrakhanong, a woman whose spirit refused to abandon her husband even after her death; 2) ‘See Ui’, a man who was executed for killing and devouring children; and 3) ‘Nuanchawee’, a young nurse whose marriage to a doctor ended in her murder. These stories and their reinterpretations, Platt argues, reinforce awareness of a shared body of cultural knowledge and interpretation through which community is continually re-established and re-constituted.

In “‘Sundelbolong’ as a Mode of Femininity: Analysis of Popular Ghost Movies in Indonesia”, Maren Wilger analyzes the films *Sundelbolong* (dir. Sisworo Gautama Putra, 1981) and *Legenda Sundelbolong* (dir. Hanung Bramantyo, 2007), as well as the television production *Urban Legend Sundelbolong* (dir. Purnomo A. Chakill, 2009). In the 1981 film, the haunting protagonist Sundelbolong committed suicide, while in the two more recent versions, she was killed, also after being raped. She subsequently became a furious ghost with a hole in her back. Wilger underlines the changing representations of Sundelbolong’s ghostliness during the New Order, under the post-authoritarian regime, and in contemporary Indonesia.

In section 2, ‘CULTURAL CONTEXTS’, Katarzyna Ancuta uses the concept ‘Thai Supernaturalism’ to illuminate Thai horror cinema in the chapter “That’s the Spirit! Horror Films as an Extension of Thai Supernaturalism”. ‘Thai Supernaturalism’ refers to the hybridization, consumerization, and politicization of Thai popular religion and allows for both a met-

aphorical (modern) and literal (pre-modern) reading of ghost movies. The paper discusses examples of the mutual relationship between Thai horror movies and Thai spiritualism, suggesting a connection between the popular animistic, mediumistic, and religious practices of Thais, and their love of horror cinema.

In his paper “The Khmer Witch Project: Demonizing the Khmer by Khmerizing a Demon”, Benjamin Baumann focuses on ‘Phi Krasue’, one of the most iconic uncanny creatures of Thai horror cinema. Narratives of encounters with this uncanny being, a floating woman’s head with drawn out and bloody entrails dangling beneath it, are very common, as is the image’s presence in popular cultural media. Relating empirical data gathered during anthropological fieldwork in a rural community in Thailand’s lower north-east to the analysis of two Thai ghost movies, Baumann argues that knowledge of vernacular ghostlore is essential to decipher the cinematic representations’ full symbolism. Based on Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Baumann shows that Thai audiences continue to see Phi Krasue first and foremost as uncanny ‘matter out of place’.

In “Stepping Out from the Silver Screen and Into the Shadows: The Fearsome, Ephemeral Ninjas of Timor-Leste”, Henri Myrntinen traces the mysterious, shadowy, dangerous ‘ninja’ that entered the political imaginary of Indonesia and Timor-Leste some twenty years ago. U.S. and East Asian action movies played an important role in establishing that threatening imaginary. Myrntinen’s paper examines the history of how the image of the ninja ‘leaped’ into the lives of East Javanese and Timorese villagers and provides alternative readings of the panic it caused, both as an exercise in securitization and as a way of policing gender norms.

Section 3, ‘AUDIENCE’, opens with a chapter by Mary Ainslie entitled “The Supernatural and Post-War Thai Film: Traditional Monsters and Social Mobility”. Ainslie investigates the ‘16mm era’ of 1950s and 1960s Thailand, a series of mass-produced live-dubbed 16mm films that drew heavily upon the supernatural animist belief systems that organized Thai rural village life. She argues that these now-neglected films, and specifically their mythological supernatural subject matter, illustrate how post-war Thai cinema engaged with and negotiated the experiences of lower-class Thais, a position in stark contrast to the big budget New Thai industry of today and its urban multiplexes.

Natalie Boehler’s “Globalized Haunting: The Transnational Spectral in Apichatpong’s *Syndromes and a Century* and its Reception” discusses how the various ways in which the work of Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul is positioned come into existence through a multivocality inherent in the work itself, one that echoes various discourses and

displays multiple transcultural trajectories. It is this multivocality which allows for an openness that makes the work accessible to various, and sometimes very distinct, audiences.

In his paper “*Pencak Silat*, Ghosts, and (Inner) Power: Reception of Martial Arts Movies and Television Series amongst Young *Pencak Silat* Practitioners in Indonesia”, Patrick Keilbart employs a media-anthropological approach and focuses on the perspective of a particular audience, namely young *Pencak Silat* practitioners in Indonesia. The martial art *Pencak Silat* can be considered the Indonesian national sport and is intrinsically tied to the practice of supernatural powers and mysticism. It is hardly surprising that young practitioners represent a key target group for ‘television mysticism’ programs.

The final chapter “Ghost Movies, the Makers and their Audiences”, is an interview with filmmakers working in Southeast Asia. Kasia Ancuta and Solarsin Ngoenwichit in Thailand, and Mattie Do in Laos, are all involved in the production of ghost films. In their conversation with Andrea Lauser, they offer insights about ghost movie audiences’ expectations and cultural backgrounds.

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