

# **Monsters in Thai Horror Film from 2001 to 2008: A Reflection of Culture and Society**

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## **Abstract**

This article illustrates the characteristics of monsters as projected in Thai horror film from 2001 to 2008. A number of Thai horror films combine other genres, such as romance, comedy, and action, with horror as the most popular subgenre in Thailand. Since the early 2000s, Thai horror film has changed to become more variable in narrative style, and monsters in the films are more gruesome, gory, and fearful than in the previous periods due to the influence from other countries, especially Korean, Japanese, and Hong Kong horror films. Monsters that appear in Thai horror films are mostly ghosts, especially female ghosts, even if the ghost is a spirit of a tree, or water, or other things of nature. Monstrous females (whether ghost or human) in Thai horror films portray women's inferior status to men owing to the patriarchal nature of society and women's sexuality being more repressed by social norms based on Thai beliefs, including Buddhism. With regarding to the hypothesis of the monster as a social metaphor, and with respect to the "otherness" of Robin Wood, there are six types of monsters in Thai horror films analyzed in this article women, children, other culture, ethnic groups, homosexuality, and machine and new technology.

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## Introduction

We humans aren't the only beings roaming this world,  
but the spirits are also living among us.<sup>2</sup>

On the way to work on a hectic morning, it is quite a common sight in Thailand to see shops on the streets being open with shop owners preparing flowers, food and incenses to offer to spirit houses and Buddhist icons in front of the shops. The shop owners are praying for safety for that day and making offerings to their ancestors, the spirits of the terrain (*chao thi*) or, perhaps, their tutelary deities. Along the road in the countryside, one can see large trees tied up with colorful cloth along with various fruits and foods under the tree, which are offerings from villagers to the spirit of the old tree for the safety of the village. No matter where, in the city or country, Thais live together with unseen spirits everyday in this way in the animistic belief that every thing, even inanimate things, has its own spirit. This belief, along with the Buddhist belief in rebirth, is taken in stride in living with ghosts (*phi*) or spirits (*winyan*).

Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that the horror film genre has constantly enjoyed popularity among Thai moviegoers throughout Thai film history since the 1930s. In 1933, when Hollywood films came to Thailand in overwhelming numbers, *Frankenstein* made a successful debut as the first film of the horror genre released in Thailand.<sup>3</sup> In the same year, the first Thai horror movie, *Mae Nak Phrakhanong*, produced by *Hasadin Phaphayon*, was released to the public in 1933. It was adapted from the well-known Thai gothic myth of Nak, a female ghost who died during labor along with her unborn baby, but who refused to leave her beloved husband, Mak. Because this movie had a constant stream of attendance, *Mae*

<sup>2</sup> Quote from Pen-ek Ratanaruang in Kong Rithee, "The Call of the Wild," *Bangkok Post* 8 May 2009[0]: 14.

<sup>3</sup> Chamroenlak Thanawangnoi [จำเรียมลักษณ์ ธนวงษ์น้อย], *History of Thai Film from the Beginning Until the Second World War* [ประวัติศาสตร์ภาพยนตร์ไทย ตั้งแต่ต้นแรกเริ่มจนถึงสมัย สงครามโลกครั้งที่ 2] (สำนักพิมพ์มหาวิทยาลัยธรรมศาสตร์, พ.ศ. 2544 [2001]) 134. (In Thai)

*Nak Phrakhanong* was released for four years consecutive years. Furthermore, this story has been revived over 20 times for TV and the screen. The second ghost film, Sri Krung production's *Pu Som Fao Sap* based on Khunwijitramatra's short horror story, was released at *Sala Charlerm Krung* and *Phathanakarn* theaters. For better or worse, *Pu Som Fao Sap* and *Mae Nak Phrakhanong* broke new ground in the horror genre for Thai films.

During the past 80 years since the 1930s, Thai horror film has changed in narrative and filming technique; in particular, the films that have been produced since 1993 have been challenged by the emergence of modern movie houses equipped with the multiplex screening system pioneered by EGV in 1994. These modern movie theaters have led to a dramatic change in film style and narrative, as well as cinematic techniques. In 1999, *Nang Nak*, directed by Nonzee Nimibutr opened a new era of Thai horror film by earning 150 million baht at the box office, breaking the record for box office receipts in Thai film history. As a result of this film's huge success, the Thai film industry revived from the economic crisis of 1997 and, coming into the 2000s, Thai film, including Thai horror film, has had a 'second golden age' – probably started in 1997, when Nonzee Nimibutr's *2499 Antapan Krong Muang (Daeng Bailey and His Gangsters)* and *Fun Bar Karaoke* by Pen-ek Ratanaruang were released to commercial and critical success.

There have been approximately 70 Thai horror films produced from 2001 to 2008, most showing a significant development in filming technique and computer graphics. For example, ghosts in the films are now more realistic and powerful in visual effect, and, at the same time, the plots and storylines of Thai horror films have changed to be more fearful, gory, and gruesome than ever before. These changes in the narrative of Thai horror films are presumed to have been influenced by Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong films.<sup>4</sup>

The characteristics of Thai horror films in this period can be divided into four types: first, hybrid horror film, meaning horror mixed with comedy or romance or action, e.g. *Buppa Rahtree* (2003),

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Kamchon Luyyaphong in Alongkorn Parivudhiphongs, "What lurks beneath the horror?" *Bangkok Post* 24 August 2005.

*Variety Phi Chaluy* (Ghost Variety, 2005), *Koy Thur Yom* (See How They Run, 2006), *Phi Mai Jim Fan* (Vow of Death, 2007), *Ban Phi Pob* 2008; second, horror film adapted from old ghost stories or folktales, e.g. *Tamnan Krasue* (Demonic Beauty, 2002), *Takean* (2003), *Tukae Phi* (Lizard Woman, 2004), *Nak* (Ghost of Mae Nak, 2005); third, slasher film, which typically involves a psychopathic killer, set away from mainstream civilization or far from help and often involving sex, e.g. *Khon Len Khong* (Art of Devil, 2004), *Long Kong* (Art of Devil 2, 2005), *The Commitment* (2004); and fourth, psychological horror film, which relies on fears, guilt, beliefs, and the emotional instability of the characters to build tension and further the plot. In psychological horror films, the object of horror does not look like a monster, but rather a normal human being, whose horrific identity is often not revealed until the end of the story, e.g. *Dek Hur* (Dorm, 2007), *Alone* (2007), *The Body #19* (2007).

Comedy horror films are the most popular sub-genre of horror film in Thailand, and a characteristic that distinguishes Thai horror film from other countries, including Hollywood. Of course, the hybrid genre is a common phenomenon in the films of other countries, occurring for some cultural reasons, but mostly for commercial reasons. However, in the case of Thai horror film, while there must be some commercial reasons, the cultural reasons appear to have more of an impact. Peter Nellhaus introduced the Thai word ‘*sanoook*’, commonly translated as ‘fun’, as an important factor to be a successful film in Thailand.<sup>5</sup> ‘*Sanoook*’ is essential in virtually every aspect of being a Thai, both at work and leisure. The films that Thai audiences favor, naturally, must also be ‘*sanoook*’. In addition, Glen Lewis states that *Nang Nak* was the only ghost included in *likay*<sup>6</sup> but was dropped in the 1940s because she frightened audiences too much.<sup>7</sup> It seems that for Thai people, ‘*sanoook*’ and ‘*sabai*’, meaning ‘easy’, are

<sup>5</sup> Peter Nellhaus, “An Introduction to the most popular genre in Thai cinema,” *Suite 101.com* 28 Mar 2007 <[http://asian-films.suite101.com/article.cfm/scary\\_fun\\_thai\\_horror\\_comedies](http://asian-films.suite101.com/article.cfm/scary_fun_thai_horror_comedies)>.

<sup>6</sup> Dramatic synthetic performance of Thailand

<sup>7</sup> Glen Lewis, *Virtual Thailand: The Media and Cultural Politics in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2005).

powerful concepts in their daily lives. Therefore, Thai audiences want to see horror film for fun, and, consequently, the film should not only be scary, but it should also contain comic lines as well, even slapstick action is fine, and startling is most welcomed. That is the way many comedians appear in Thai horror films; making their roles exactly the same as how they act on TV comedy programs or on the stage in cafés.

When *Shutter Kot Tit Winyan* was ranked as 1<sup>st</sup> in box office receipts by earning 110 million baht in 2004, it could hardly be predicted that this serious horror film directed by two young directors would succeed to that extent. There were no funny characters, and it was fearful enough to cause goose bumps, but it was well received by both audiences and critics in Thailand, as well as in many other countries. This film seems to have received significant influence from films from Korea, Japan or Hong Kong. Following this film, a number of real horrific horror films were released to the favor of Thai audiences.

Even though storylines and plots are now more plausible and realistic, and narrative styles are more fashionable and sensible owing to the development of cinematic techniques, the underlying motifs of Thai horror films have not much changed. Most motifs of Thai horror films from the former times and the present stick to ‘good deeds provide for a good life, bad deeds for a bad one [ทำดีได้ดีทำชั่วได้ชั่ว]’ (not just in horror genre though). This cause and effect theme is one of the important principles in the life of Thai people, which is primarily based on Buddhist beliefs. *Traibhumikatha*, written by Phraya Lithai of the Sukhothai Dynasty, presents well the cosmology of Thais: There are gods, human beings, and creatures (*pret*) in the universe and what they are at the present is determined by what they did in previous lives.<sup>8</sup> Animistic belief that there are other beings living in the world besides human, Buddhist causationism, and social context together provide the basis for Thai horror films.

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<sup>8</sup> King Lithai *Traibhumikatha: The Story of the Three Planes of Existence* (ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 1985).

Likewise, the notion by Tudor that a genre is what we collectively believe it to be <sup>9</sup> and a statement in the research of Back Moon-im that audiences want to see something new from horror film,<sup>10</sup> but it should be something familiar at the same time, indicate that horror films should be regarded on a cultural basis, along with collective memories and fears, and, if this crosses a cultural border, it can be new, but fail to arouse fear which is the ultimate purpose of horror film. Therefore, even if the way of sweeping blood to the screen is adapted, for a horror film to be successful, the substantial object of fear can not be tampered with.

## Monsters in Thai Horror films

The monster is born...as an embodiment...of a time, a feeling, and a place.<sup>11</sup>

### Definition of Monsters

The monster is an important part of the iconography in horror film, with horror films having offered numerous features and types of the monstrous. Film critics and scholars have analyzed and examined the monsters in horror films using psychological, historical, cultural methods and many other approaches. The widely known work about monsters of Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, states that the characteristics of monsters is a compound of “threat” and “impurity”.<sup>12</sup> The monster may be psychologically, morally, or socially threatening. Impurity involves a conflict between two or more standing cultural categories. Thus, it should come as no surprise that many of the most basic structures for representing horrific creatures are combinatory in nature.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Tudor, *Image and Influence: Studies in the Sociology of Film* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1986). 203-211

<sup>10</sup> Back Moon-im, *A Cry of Wolha: History of Korean Horror films through Female Ghosts* (Chaeck Sesang: 2008). (In Korean)

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 3-25.

<sup>12</sup> Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

The author of *Monster Theory*, Jeffery Cohen, asserts that the ultimate definition of a monster is something or someone who has a psychological effect on a person that invokes fear.<sup>13</sup> The method by which a monster does this is subjective, but there are a few basic principles monsters tend to follow. First, monsters have various physical aspects that make them monstrous. Monsters tend to be deformed in some manner or have a kind of half human aspect to their physical appearance. This ranges from monsters, such as circus freaks with body deformities, to monsters like Dracula that are not normal humans, but have a basic human form. They are often large and have the physical capability to cause harm to humans, whether physically, emotionally, or psychologically. Monsters cannot be put into set classifications of animals or humans, but cross those lines of categorization. Monsters, such as satyrs, cannot be defined as human or goat, and are, therefore, deemed monstrous. Monsters, characteristically, are messengers of evil. Monsters cause harm to humans or animals and often perform the work of Satan or a devil. They cause suffering, death, and destruction and their actions lead to complications in our otherwise simple lives. They do not bring about a common good, but fight against peace and the lawful order of society. We fear them because they show us that we have reason to fear them. We can see the evil they cause and the pain they inflict; monsters threaten what is normal. They force us to go beyond what is comfortable and routine, and examine the inner depths of our minds. They force us to evaluate why we fear them and their actions, and, in doing so, we have to understand parts of our mind and personality, parts that often we would prefer to hide from the world. Monsters often embody what we hate most in ourselves. Monsters stem from the inner workings of our mind and can often be used as displacement or as a symbol of some childhood regression. They become scary because we know that if we have to face that monster, we have to face what is scary and real to us.

Monsters that appear in Thai horror films are mainly ghosts, primarily female. When they were human beings, they died due to some terrible reason, mostly by male villains with sexual desires, and

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen.

then they are reborn as a ghost with supernatural power and strong rage for revenge; for example, *Buppa Rahtree* (2003), *Hien* (*The Unborn*, 2003), *Shutter Kot Tit Winyan* (2004), *Wong Pisaj* (*Dark Water*, 2007). Besides female ghosts, child or fetus ghosts and male ghosts are also horrific objects appeared in Thai horror films, although there are not as many examples as female ghosts, e.g. *Rom Ram Phi* (*The Hotel*, 2002), *Koy Thur Yom* (*See How They Run*, 2006), *Dek Hur* (*Dorm*, 2006).

However, human beings possessed by malevolent ghosts, such as *phi pob* and *krasue*, are another type of monster that appear in Thai horror films. It is difficult to define these as ghosts because of their ambiguity in that they are normal human beings in the day time, but in the dark they suddenly turn into a horrific ghost flying about to dispel their thirst for bloods and the intestines of humans. In *Tamnan Krasue* (*Demonic Beauty*, 2002), a young woman named *Dao*, possessed by *Arawati*, a Khmer princess killed by a conquering tyrant, is a lovely little woman in the day time, but at night, her head and entrails leave *Dao's* body to drift in the air looking for prey. In the very popular movie series *Ban Phi Pob*, an old grandmother is possessed by a malevolent ghost and eats young women's intestines. They are not normal human beings, but are not like a typical ghost; therefore, I suggest these types of monsters should be set apart from ghosts.

Abjection, another concept used when referring to monsters, is described as a process integral to the formation of the self, one that involves the exclusion of those elements that might threaten or undermine the individual's sense of themselves as a distinct entity. Hence, various bodily fluids and substances passing from inside the body to outside become abject inasmuch as they breach the body's borders.<sup>14</sup> In Thai horror films, sometimes humans are combined with animal features; for instance, *Tuke Phi* (*Lizard Woman*, 2004). In previous periods, *Manut Mapa* (meaning 'werewolf', 1987), definitely influenced by Hollywood, and *Athap Suea Saming* (1990), a combination with a tiger based on a Thai old legend, were released. In addition to fusion between human and animal, there are monsters

<sup>14</sup> Peter Hutchings, *The Horror Film* (Pearson Education Limited, 2004) 1-9.

combining human and nature, such as a tree and water, most probably coming from Thai animistic beliefs; for example, *Takean* (2003), human features combined with the spirit of an old large tree, *Ban Phi Sing* (*The House*, 2007), a haunted house that has human features as ghosts; *Phi Mai Jim Fan* (*Vow of Death*, 2007), a spirit of a dead man manifested as a banyan tree; *Wong Pisaj* (*Dark Water*, 2007), a spirit under the water. One thing that gets our attention here is whether or not the monster is a tree or water, a snake, tiger, or gecko, the features are mostly female exteriors, in the way of a sexy beauty or with a ferocious ghastly look. In this regard, many scholars have analyzed that monstrous females are quite often used in horror films due to the patriarchal society in Asian countries.

Another type of monster that appears in Thai horror films are beautiful women who are neither ghosts nor spirits. They are wholly human beings, but have supernatural power by black magic with an evil mind. Similar to witches, not devils, they are analogous to the cruel evil serial killers in Hollywood horror films, although they are not usually psychopaths. The way of threat is distinguished from Hollywood films in that they kill the victims with black magic, such as enchantment, or by tearing a cursing dummy. Female monsters in *Khon Len Khong* (*Art of Devil*, 2004), *Long Khong* (*Art of Devil 2*, 2005) are examples of this type.

The Thai word '*phi*' is very tricky to define, although usually translated simply as 'ghost'. Ghost has been defined as an apparition of a dead person which is believed to appear to the living (Oxford English Dictionary), however, in Thailand ghosts emanate not only from dead people, but from anything in nature, such as animals. Also, it should be noted that not all ghosts are monsters, because, according to Thai beliefs, there are two kinds of ghosts: bad and good. However, a monster as defined in horror film is someone or something that will harm or threaten people, no matter whether human, ghosts, undead like zombie (*SARS War*, 2004) or something between human and animal, human and nature, the living and the dead, following the notion of Carroll.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Carroll.

## Monster as social metaphor

We live in a time of monsters. Monsters provide a key to understand the culture that spawned them.<sup>16</sup>

Edward Ingebreetsen states that every monster is, essentially, a political entity; that our production of monsters are always part of our broader political understanding of the world and of our notions of good and evil.<sup>17</sup> Some initial evidence for this claim can be found in the observation that horror film tends to become more popular during times of social upheaval. Paul Wells, for instance, asserts that the history of horror film is essentially a history of anxiety in the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> When the culture is in turmoil, for some reason audiences flock to horror films. Monsters particularize individual and social fears. Horror monsters have also been interpreted as expressions of or as metaphors for socially specific fears and anxieties. From this perspective, monsters help audiences (and perhaps film-makers as well) to engage with and come to terms with those fears.

In addition, Robin Wood offers a more politicized engagement with the horror monster, one that seeks to combine the Freudian psychoanalytical concept 'return of the repression', with Marxist ideas about social oppression.<sup>19</sup> For Wood, the monsters in horror film are expressions of social and psychological repression that can reveal truths about the political and social structures within which we all live. He also suggests that in his own culture the concepts of "otherness" are immanent and admits the sense of distances if it states the theme of horror film itself; however, many critics and scholars agree that it is still probably the best method to explain the horror genre. In his research, he mentions eight concepts of "otherness" in his culture: other people, woman, the proletariat, other cultures, ethnic groups

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<sup>16</sup> Cohen.

<sup>17</sup> Edward J. Ingebreetsen, "Monster-Making: A Politics of Persuasion," *Journal of American Culture* 21 (1998): 25.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Wells, *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (London: Wallflower, 2000) 3.

<sup>19</sup> Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 77-94.

within the culture, alternative ideologies or political systems, deviations from ideological sexual norms, and children. Using the method of “otherness” by Wood, in this essay, I want to examine the monsters that appear in Thai horror films and how they are represented.

**1. Monstrous Female** - Wood explains that in a male-dominated culture, where power, money, law, and social institutions are controlled by past, present, and future patriarchs, women as the ‘Other’ assumes particular significance. In patriarchal societies, especially in Asian countries, women’s status in society is relatively inferior to that of men; the anatomy and capability of women is easily ignored, particularly women’s sexuality. Horror is one of the least respected genres of cinema, and yet it portrays much of today’s culture and values within its context. In Thai horror films, social structure and norms are well described. Moreover, social problems at the time are mainly the motifs adopted. In political circles, which have been male-dominated for a long time, a female minister is nominated and many women are working in high-ranking positions in business and government; however, there are still considerable numbers of young women degenerated into being trifled with men by their own wishes or unwillingness. Monsters in Thai horror films are mostly female and most of them are sexually abused or murdered by male villains before becoming a ghost with a powerful rage. Some of them are based on traditional old Thai ghost stories, some are adapted from novels and some are influenced by films from other countries.

*Khon Len Khon (Art of Devil, 2004)*, directed by Thanit Jitnukul is a legitimate horror film that is quite brutal. The identity of Boom, who is the main character in this film, is not a ghost but a human being. However, she has supernatural power from black magic she obtained by asking a spirit doctor for a *kuman thong*, that was once her baby from a secret lover killed in a car accident. The methods of killing in these films are unlike Hollywood horror films, but tend to involve the ones they were acquainted with in a former life, be they lovers, relatives, friends or enemies. Boom is a beautiful young girl, who has a secret love affair with a married man. She does this for the promotion of her social status and for money, but not for

love. When she gets pregnant, she intends to use her baby to threaten her lover. However, he does not accept her as his family because he also thinks of her as a tool for his sexual desire. She is raped and almost killed by him and his friends and her revenge begins. She uses her beauty to seduce the man's son. In the end, she kills all the members of the man's family. But she also gets punished for her guilty desire for money and sex. Glen Lewis notes that the female temptress as a murderous ghost is common in Thai ghost movies,<sup>20</sup> but the twist here is the element of implied incest when Boom becomes involved with the family's eldest son after her aborted affair with the father. *Mia nois* (mistresses) remain a common source of conflict for Thai families. This film portrays the mammonism of Boom, who may be a substitute for young people, capitalism and the sexual desire of the secret lover, a secret lover who is a high ranking middle aged male. The prejudice against appearance, polygamy, incest, and the breaking of other social norms remain deeply beneath the surface, biding the time to be vented.

Kamchon Luyyaphong, a Thai film expert, argues that the existence of female monsters reminds us that we were once living in a matriarchal society where women were the key players in the social structure.<sup>21</sup> This remained until the adoption of Buddhism and Brahmin doctrines, which shifted the power from females to males. In Thai tradition, a ghost can be a protector and an antagonist. But women are generally chosen to be vengeful female monsters to represent bad deeds and misconduct against social norms. As the world has evolved, this meaning has become more fluid. In today's patriarchal society, the female image is often portrayed as a reflection of male desire. Male characters, especially comedians, can verbally tease female ghosts or even touch their breasts. In many movies today, we still see female ghosts in see-through pajamas and postures that suggest sexual rapture. This would seem to have the tendency to devalue women's status in society, as well as perpetuate chauvinism.

In the scene in *Nang Nak*, directed by Nonsri Nimibutr (1999), when Nak cooks dinner for Mak, her beloved husband, she stretches

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<sup>20</sup> Lewis.

<sup>21</sup> Alongkorn.

her arm grossly longer to pick a lime that has fallen on the ground. Audiences shriek at its grotesquery, but it is a very important part of the movie because Mak realizes that Nak is a ghost. Nak, who used to be a beautiful woman in prior scenes, turns to be a horrific ghost and, at this point, audience are reminded that Nak is different from human beings. The threat of Nak does not end until her spirit is confronted by a Buddhist monk. Adam Knee states that Nak's spirit repeatedly shows an indifference to the apparatus of the patriarchal Buddhist state.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, her very existence is an affront to Buddhist epistemology, as she is a *phi* and, thus, a holdover from earlier belief systems that have tenaciously continued to coexist with Buddhism in Thailand. Nak's apparition also points to a fear of feminine recalcitrance and willfulness, of female agency as a threat to patriarchal systems of power, and of realms of knowledge and belief that run counter to those of the state-adopted religion—the “official version” of reality.

In *Hien*, (*The Unborn*, 2003), directed by *Bhandit Thongdee*, Por is beaten by a drug dealer and wakes up in a hospital to discover that she is pregnant. While there, she is haunted by a female spirit who was raped and killed while pregnant. In this movie, the protagonist ignores the moral system in society, she is addicted to drugs, is prenatally pregnant, and gets an abortion. The female spirit comes out to ask for help to get revenge of her own, but at the same time, she is a protector of the baby that Por tried to abort. In the end, the monster in the film switches to the doctor, who is a mother of the spirit's lover and murderer. Interestingly, the film shows that the female monster threatening Por, who is a protagonist in the film, in the first part of the movie diverts to be another female monster, not a male, in later scenes.

In *Yuthlet Sippapak's Buppha Rahtree* (2003), Buppha Rahtree is a university student from a poor family in the country, who falls in love with Ake and gets pregnant. But when she finds out that her boyfriend has abused her, she commits suicide and then becomes a

<sup>22</sup> Adam Knee, “Thailand Haunted: The Power of the Past in the Contemporary Thai Horror Film,” *Horror International*. Eds. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2005) 141-159.

vengeful ghost. She is pregnant when she dies, which is a common story line in other films where female monsters appear.

With respect to sexual repression, Chalida Uabumrungjit, Director of the Thai Film Foundation, explains that one of the reason why most female monsters are beautiful, even sexy is that Thai horror films can be an exit for Thai people from the restraints of society, especially with respect to sexuality. This explains why almost all actresses who have starred in horror films have been sexy beauties. After the 1930 Film Act was enforced, films that contained sex, violence, and morally offensive scenes were banned. Thus, filmmakers intentionally turned their interests to teenage film and, once they succeeded, many epigonic films followed. For a while there was only teenage film. So, adults needed to find something else to relieve their repressions and at the same time filmmakers needed to make money. The horror genre was a good solution to both demands; that is, to give satisfaction to audiences, especially male adults.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 1: Preeya Rungruang starring as Nak in 1958

**2. Other cultures** - In *Khun Krabi Phi Rabat (SARS War, 2004)*, by Taweewat Wantha, the insolent *farang* (foreigner) played by Andrew Biggs, is beginning to spread the disease SARS No. 4. This disease is infectious by a bite from the host, and whoever is infected becomes a zombie. The action mainly happens at a night

<sup>23</sup> Chalida Uabumrungjit, personal interview, Apr. 2007.

club, a symbol of western pop culture, where young Thai people get together and shake their bodies to western rhythms and get drunk with whisky and drugs. Slapstick and dirty toilet jokes run through the whole story. As well, some sort of 'nationalism' is represented in the film; for instance, the "Stop Virus Bullet" made in Thailand and the very famous motto by Thaksin's government, "One Tambon One Product".



Figure 2: *Farang* zombie (Andrew Biggs) in *SARS War* (2004)

Kamjohn Ruiyapong notes that there is political allegory between *Phi Pob* and Isan (and Lao).<sup>24</sup> In *Ban Phi Pob* (1989), the protagonist is a female aged-ghost who scares and startles villagers. Later, the male protagonist, who is a doctor, comes from Bangkok to expel *Phi Pob*; however, *Phi Pob* will not go and, furthermore, constantly spreads her species to younger women, despite the endeavors of the male protagonists, even a male spirit doctor. Victory of *Phi Pob* represents two meanings; first, the power of female ghosts in Isan society; second, a triumph over Bangkok. *Phi Pob* represents Isan, fighting to protect the traditional culture of Isan and Lao. *Phi Pob*, as the female, also represents the vulnerable local people in Isan competing against the strong and powerful central government system, which is the male, particularly from 1987 to 1997, when Thailand changed into a more industrialized and centralized society during what has been called the golden era of Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs).

<sup>24</sup> Alongkorn.

**3. Ethnic groups** - *Phi Krasue* is a star ghost of Thai horror films, as well as a part of Southeast Asian mythology, being a part of popular folklore in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. *Phi Krasue* is the floating head of a female ghost, with intestines hang out of the ghost's neck and trailing behind the head. *Tamnan Krasue* (*Demonic Beauty*, 2000), by Bin Bunluerit tells a ghastly revenge tale from the ancient past. Arawati, a Khmer princess, is forced to marry the conquering tyrant of the new Thai regime, but is in love with one of his soldiers. She is sentenced to death after being caught in a hidden love affair with the young soldier and is burnt alive, yet not before she has magical incantations spoken over her by a Khmer priestess. Although she is burned at the stake, this Khmer magic enables her soul to remain unharmed in her head and bowels, which escape as she is transformed into the Southeast Asian Horror, the *krasue* (sometimes referred to as P'Graseau, or Penanggalan in Chinese), a witch with a flying head. At the same time in a different village another young woman named Dao, who just happened to be her identical twin, dies by black magic because she rejected the advances of the son of the village sorcerer. Arawati's soul occupies Dao's corpse in order to stay alive on earth, while at night, her head and entrails leave Dao's occupied body to drift in the air looking for prey. The local villagers are confused as to why Dao has resurrected and how she know some of their names, but they fail to suspect her as the local will-o-wisp that begins her terrorizing by disemboweling animals and then moves on to bigger and better victims, blaming instead a local disheveled old woman living on the outskirts of town.

Knee analyzes *Body Jumper* (*Pob Wit Sayong*, 2001), directed by Heamarn Cheatamee, saying that the film's reference to foreignness includes an Afro-Thai character, Kong, whose face, in its physical difference, initially scares one of the male protagonists when he unexpectedly encounters him in a library.<sup>25</sup> While the film's sexual anxiety is related to, among other things, modern teen sexual mores in an age of AIDS, and more particularly to female sexual desire, this anxiety is also linked to a concern over foreign socio-cultural influences; not surprising, given that foreign forces are often held to

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<sup>25</sup> Knee.

blame for various modern problems in Thailand in a rage of popular and governmental discourse. For example, in the eyes of many, foreign media influences are the key to the loss of tradition among youth, and foreign money is what has reshaped Bangkok into a modern metropolis, one teeming with tourists who may bring negative moral influences, not to mention sexually transmittable diseases. One linkage the film establishes between sexual panic and the influence of things non-Thai rests on the fact that one of the first of Ger's promiscuous conquests is evidently Afro-Thai. In one of the film's many crude, throwaway gags, Ger pulls out a magnifying glass to disappointedly examine the man's genitals once he disrobes; a gesture that engages racist stereotypes to indicate simultaneously the lascivious nature of the young woman's sexual appetite and links such appetite with foreignness.

**4. Homosexuality and bisexuality** - Thailand has been labeled a 'gay paradise' in Asia. It is easy to see '*katoey*' (men dressing and acting as women) in the street, as well as the 'Miss Tiffany' beauty contest for transgender people every year. Many famous *katoey* actors (or actresses) and scholars appear on TV, and many movies having homosexuality as a main theme have been released in Thailand. Nonetheless, the status of sexual minorities seems as tenuous as ever, as they are restricted from social systems and often have to struggle for identity. Thailand, at least in Bangkok, seems quite open to acceptance; however, stereotypes are perpetuated on TV or films where they are portrayed as nothing but a flock of facetious and loud people. However, in a positive way, they are mostly the friend of the main actress, caring and assisting the protagonist.

*Koey Thur Gay* (*Ghost Station*, 2008), a parody of *Koey Thur Yom* (*See How They Run*, 2006) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) directed by Ang Lee, is Yuthlet Sippapak's latest horror comedy film. Two homosexual couples appear in the film, one is a male couple and the other is female. Udd and Yai are a gay male couple who love cowboy movies and move from the city to a rural area to have a more intimate, rustic setting for their relationship. However, Udd then finds that Yai is having an affair with Tangmo, a local woman who has a lesbian lover, Jenny. Neither Yai nor Tangmo are aware of either of their sexual histories, but Udd discovers the affair and plans to have

sex with Yai's grandfather out of revenge. However, none of them know that the grandfather is a zombie and lives with some scary spirits.

5. **Children** - Children have figured prominently in horror film as ghosts. *Dek Hur (Dorm, 2007)*, directed by Songyos Sukmakanan, contains a very familiar ghost story about a school dorm where a child ghost is hovering about. In *Koey Thur Yom (See How They Run, 2006)* by Yongyooth Thongkonthun, the unborn baby ghost wanders around the village where his biological father lives as a head monk and startles the village people. *Tit for Tat* directed by Paween Purikitpanya, which is one episode of *See Praeng (4bia, 2008)*, also tells the story of a school boy's curses, a boy who had been bullied by a group of friends at school. Children or babies as monsters appearing in Thai horror films are mostly victims of adults. They were once abused by adults, mostly their parents, or discarded before being born. They show up because they are lonely or they want to be loved. Children monsters in Thai horror films are relevant to family problems: domineering father, blindly loving mother, conflicts with half brothers or sisters. Direct or indirect experience in sexuality in a child's growth has an impact on a child's unconsciousness, becoming a fear or repugnance and can lead to images of monsters. This is implied in *Dek Hur* in that Chatri, a young boy, finds his father having an affair with a maid in the house one night. It is the moment that adds loathsomeness to hatred regarding his father and, later at the school dorm, he feels sympathy from a boy ghost hanging around the school, a ghost that actually he has created by himself.

6. **Machines and New technology** – In modern society, everything changes with super-rapidity attributed to new technology, especially IT. Sometimes a day equals a year and not knowing about a new model of mobile phone, new IT term, or the latest internet feature, means you are treated as a hopelessly out-of-date person. It is no doubt that many people have technology phobia, technophobia, which has been observed to affect various societies and communities through the world. In some of these cases, the new technologies conflict with established beliefs, such as personal values of simplicity and modest lifestyles. Frankenstein is an example frequently selected of a movie that expresses this technophobia idea. What is unknown

can give anxiety and fearsome to people and offer ideas for a horror film motif.

In *Happiness* directed by Yongyooth Thongkonthun, another episode of *See Praeng*, a ghost turns up via a mobile phone. In the film, two motifs of fear are raised: the relationship between human and machine, mobile phone, and the solitude of human in modern city life. A young woman, stuck in her apartment due to a cast on her leg, communicates with the outside world via a mobile phone and text messages. The mobile phone, her only friend in this situation, however, suddenly turns into a monster through an invisible spirit that has a young man's voice. The enigmatic voice that defines itself as a friend, appeals to her loneliness and drags her to death in the end so that they can be friends forever. From the Thai belief in 'ghosts everywhere', now there is a ghost connected via the mobile phone.

## Conclusion

Archivist and film-historian Dome Sukwong said the characteristics of Thai horror films are similar to Thai food, such as *tom yum kung*, which has all tastes in one dish.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, it is quite popular for Thai horror films to combine romance, comedy, and action and monsters in the action often appear with facetious features. Thai horror film can make people laugh, cry, or be scared, and have even been used as educational tools. However, in the early 2000s, Thai horror films changed into perhaps a more mainstream horror genre through influences from Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong horror films. Monsters in these films are not funny any longer, but are more grotesque, vengeful and gruesome than ever before. Monsters in the films have been evolving and transforming. In the past, monsters that appeared in horror films were mostly female ghosts, however from 2001 to 2008, monsters are more variable: e.g. female ghosts, children ghosts in *Dek Hur* (*Dorm*, 2007), *Koey Thur Yom* (*See How They Run*, 2006), *Tit for Tat* (2008); male ghosts in *Koey Thur Gay* (*Ghost Station*, 2008), monstrous women in *Khon Len Khon* (*Art of Devil*,

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<sup>26</sup> Dome Sukwong, personal interview, Apr. 2007.

2004); women combine with animals in *Tuke Phi (Lizard Woman, 2004)*; zombies in *Khun Krabi Phi Rabat (SARS War, 2004)*.

However, whether the monsters are ghosts, humans, or some other form, they are mostly female, which implies the patriarchal nature of Thai society with women still in an inferior status to that of men. Using the method of Robin Wood to analyze the monsters in horror films, I examine the 'otherness' of Thais, which can be considered the concept in the creation of the monsters in Thai horror films. These 'others' include women, children, other cultures, ethnic groups, homosexuals, and machines and new technology. Monsters in horror films are portraits of our fears, and the evil of our minds, which can change following time and place. However, at the same time, they are representative of the 'collective memories' that we share in a culture and society, thus monsters that horrify us are based on our own particular culture and society.

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