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Thailand Haunted:

THE POWER OF THE PAST IN THE CONTEMPORARY THAI HORROR FILM

Adam Knee

One of the latest generic trends in the recent resurgence of Thai cinema (at least on Asian screens and at international festivals, if not yet on Western screens) has been the reemergence of the Thai horror film. Over the course of several months from late 2001 into early 2002, no fewer than four Thai horror films were released in Thai theaters—a substantial enough phenomenon (given the dozen or so Thai films being produced annually in recent years) to elicit a two-page feature article in the Weekend section of one of Bangkok's English-language dailies.¹ Subsequently, the mid-year Thai release of two pan-Asian horror films made with some Thai personnel and financing, along with the planned release of a number of additional Thai horror films later in the year, elicited still another newspaper feature on the phenomenon.² This rediscovery of the horror film may be attributable in part to the singular success of Nonzee Nimibutr's *Nang Nak* (1999), a ghost film that broke box office records in Thailand and notably increased the international profile of Thai cinema. But the trend speaks also to the ongoing cultural relevance of the horror film in Thailand, especially given that these latest Thai horror films appear, by and large, aimed primarily at a local Thai audience. These films mark a retrieval of the past, a return to a genre quite popular in the heyday of Thai cinema. They do, to some extent, engage modern global (read Hollywood) conventions of the horror genre, but also very specifically refer back to the local genre tradition, itself deeply rooted in local folklore, with such featured spirits as the *pii bporp* (a malevolent, liver-consuming spirit), *pii kraseu* (a rotten meat-eating female ghost, usually represented as a head with dangling entrails), and *pii dtai tang krom* (the ghost of a woman who has died during childbirth, Nang Nak being the best known of these).³ Thai traditions and history are thus multiply engaged in many

of these texts, which make a return to past tradition as a source for narratives explicitly dealing with the return of the past in supernatural form. As preoccupied as these texts are with the past on several levels, they appear almost equally preoccupied, this essay shall contend, with issues of gender—and, more specifically, with the embattled status of women in Thai society. These preoccupations, moreover, are intimately linked: the hidden pasts by which these texts are haunted are primarily those pertaining to women's oppression. The past and the feminine are figured as sources of anxiety through their linkage to the supernatural, an anxiety that these texts choose variously to exorcize or come to terms with.

Nak Revived

The cultural resonance of the story of Nang Nak, a nineteenth-century woman who dies in childbirth while her husband is away in battle, then attempts to reclaim him from beyond the grave on his return home, is immediately evident merely from its singular popularity as a basis for films (reportedly more than twenty versions have been made), television shows, theatrical productions, comic books, prose fiction, and even poetry.⁴ Like the character herself, the story of Nak simply refuses to stay dead; indeed, popular industry lore has it that when a director's career is lagging, directing a new version of *Nang Nak* will revive it. In point of fact, director Nonzee's career was hardly lagging, his successful debut feature *Daeng Bireley's and Young Gangsters* (a.k.a. 2499: *Antapahn Krong Meuang*, literally "1956: Gangsters Rule the City," 1997) having already given him some international recognition.⁵ An awareness that *Nang Nak* would likewise have international circulation partly shapes the film's approach to the classic horror story—an approach that evokes nostalgia for both a past era in Thai filmmaking history and a still earlier past era in Thai history more broadly. This foregrounding of the past is initially suggested by way of a title at the film's opening, which sets the start of the action in 1868, as well as through the intercutting of historical mural paintings of some of the film's events into the credit sequence, and through a pre-credit voiceover narration, immediately following the husband Mak's departure for battle, which informs us that "Nak's ghostly spirit is said to be a true story, long-told over generations. The legend has it that Nang Nak, local to the Prakanong District [of Bangkok], was a true and perfect wife, highly loyal to her husband. Even death could not make mortal her love and loyalty. Her loving soul wandered, awaiting for her husband to return."

This narration speaks to the film's two primary audiences—its local audience and its international film festival audience—at once, though in slightly differing ways. The general outline of the story is not necessary for the local audience, all of whom are fully familiar with it; in this regard, the viewing of a *Nang Nak* film by the Thai audience does not involve the same level of mystery and suspense that might ordinarily accompany the viewing of a horror film. Such a film for a Thai audience is rather more a ritual reenactment of a familiar (if also horrific) tale. Indeed, it is precisely this sense of ritual, this sense of a connection to tradition, that the opening narration—"long-told over generations"—invokes for Thai viewers, while also anticipating through its choice of descriptive terms one possible judgment toward Nak and her actions. This sense of tradition is certainly invoked for international viewers as well, but since the nature of that tradition is likely to be unfamiliar to such viewers, the outlining of the tale functions to bring them up to speed on the local legend.

The ritualistic function and the connection to past texts comes to the fore with the film's inclusion of certain *de rigueur* sequences, certain anticipated narrative moments that appear in most every version of the tale. These are, most importantly, the scene where Nak's (Intira Jaroenpura) arm unnaturally extends to retrieve an item that has fallen to the ground beneath her house while she prepares a meal (in this version as in many others also the moment of Mak's [Winai Kraibutr] realization that his wife is a ghost), and the scene where a local clergyman attempts to protect Mak from Nak's influence by setting up a border around him with string and chanting. What marks these scenes as different from earlier versions is perhaps most centrally their greater technical proficiency, their increased concern with rendering their fantastic occurrences with a degree of plausibility. The potential unconvincingness of images of the extended arm, for example, is circumvented through swift editing and a distant camera position that allow the event to register but prevent any dwelling on details. The threat from Nak during the chanting scene at a local *wat* (Buddhist temple) is inventively and startlingly represented with Nak's appearance upside down on the ceiling in a number of cleanly executed special effects shots. This increased emphasis on plausibility and technical proficiency—in contrast to the flimsy effects and often facetious tone of many horror films of earlier decades (including earlier versions of the Nak narrative)—is in keeping with this *Nang Nak*'s positioning itself as a "world-class" film, one that can succeed with international audiences.

The concern with plausibility is also suggested by the unusually extensive historical research that went into the production, which, according to one local commentator, resulted in “a stunning horror movie that sparked also a tremendous amount of interest among Thai audiences, not only about ghostly matters, but about their own history as well.”⁶ The film’s nostalgia for this Thai history is perhaps most evident in its lovingly rendered images of an idealized agrarian past; the film is infused with images of sun-drenched rice paddies, lotus leaves dripping with rain, Thai-style houses on stilts giving out onto quiet waterways, and—an integral part of this idealized mosaic—Mak and Nak sitting on the branch of a tree out in a field as a water buffalo lounges peacefully nearby. These images serve the dual function of elegizing the past and broadcasting the film’s national origins; they loudly and clearly tell us, “Made in Thailand,” thus paradoxically working to position the film for international festival consumption (articulating “Thainess” as a means of product differentiation) in a global industry at the same time as they imply regret over the loss of a distinctly local past.

But while the film is characterized by a certain nationalistic nostalgia, not all is right in its idyllic past; it is, after all, a horror film, and its central emblem of times past, its title character, instills terror in most of those with whom she comes into contact, as spirits of the dead are wont to do. One apparent paradox here is that Nak, while fear-inspiring, is also set up as a paragon of certain feminine virtues; again, as the opening narration notes, her return from the dead is understood as a function of her unflagging love and loyalty. It is precisely this tenacity, however, that ends up making her such a horror—a tenacity arguably emblemized in the grotesque iconographic image of her long-reaching arm. Such is Nak’s single-mindedness in keeping her marriage alive that she does not hesitate to kill those who would reveal her ghostly secret to Mak. While what is scary about Nak then is in part the ardent nature of her love, it is instructive to keep in mind that Mak is haunted not only by her but also by the spirit of his dead child; the haunting thus seems to embody a male fear over a powerful female desire and over domesticity more broadly. It is the family from which he cannot escape.

The particular narrative form that the struggle with Nak takes is also significant in attempting to “read” this haunting. One dimension of the legend that Nonzee takes care to underscore is Nak’s defiance in the face of various levels of patriarchal power. Her spirit repeatedly shows an indifference to the apparatus of the patriarchal Buddhist state; indeed, her very existence is an affront to Buddhist epistemology, as she is a *pii*—

a ghost or spirit—and thus a holdover from earlier belief systems that have tenaciously continued to coexist with Buddhism in Thailand.⁷ Nak repeatedly ignores the injunctions of the local head monk, whose rituals seem utterly irrelevant to her. “Scaring the monks is a sin,” he reminds her when she appears on the ceiling of the *wat*. However, when he goes on to insist she stop bothering Mak, she responds, “I listen to no one.” Shortly afterward, a local exorcist brought in by villagers has still less success in driving away Nak’s spirit. It is only when a high Buddhist dignitary from neighboring Thonburi journeys to Prakanong to confront her that she finally accedes to the patriarchal-Buddhist order. In the light of these details it would seem that, beyond signaling anxiety over overweening love or the obligations of power, 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 one sense, the striking image of Nak upside down on the ceiling of the *wat* nicely sums up the opposition she poses to male order. She literally inverts the male frame of reference—a notion previously suggested in the monk’s instruction to Mak to bend over and look between his legs if he wants to apprehend Nak’s true nature. She is upside down to the men’s right-side up, one to their many, feminine (indeed, she again appears here holding her baby) to their masculinity, spectral to their earthliness. But while this is an overdetermined image of oppositionality, it is also one of complementarity; Nak completes the picture, dwells in the space where the men do not, and wields a power of fertility (the presence of the baby reminds us) that the men on their own are lacking. For Mak this sense of complementarity is immediately felt, which is why he remains far more drawn to her than repelled by her and cannot be persuaded to turn against her. Indeed, the film, from the opening narration, is decidedly mixed in its attitude toward Nak, suggesting that she is not to be seen as purely a horrific figure; she is, after all, a model of devotion, and in effect suffers because of it—suffers through her husband’s absence at war and suffers through a painful and finally deadly pregnancy. Her existence beyond death too is shown to be profoundly sorrowful to her (despite moments when her brutality gets the better of her), as suggested when she examines her hair coming out in the mirror, or when she gets up in the middle of the night to prepare rice for her husband for fear that she might not be able to stay with him much longer. “Don’t you pity me?” she tearfully asks of her husband after defying the elder monk in the scene at the *wat*—and indeed we as viewers do.

It is in keeping with an understanding of Nak as something other than the embodiment of evil (despite her opposition to the established pillars of law, order, and morality) that the narrative does not conclude with her utter destruction; rather, the resolution of the film seems predicated on an understanding that Nak—and what she stands for—is something to be contained rather than erased, an integral (if also occluded and repressed) part of culture. Her spirit eventually dwells in a piece of her skull bone, the narration informs us, worn by the dignitary until his dying day, then “handed down to many others, nondetected, till now nobody knows where the item is.” Thus, while feminine forces become partially hidden within patriarchal history—female suffering secreted within the institutions of marriage and motherhood—these forces, like Nak, cannot be fully buried and must be eternally acknowledged, for example, through narrative rituals such as this film and through respect paid at the real-life shrine that still exists for Nak in twenty-first-century Bangkok.

Bliss Cua Lim’s recent theoretical consideration of the phenomenon of haunting in the cinema (for which she, not incidentally, utilizes two Asian films centered on female ghosts as her prime examples) provides a useful frame of reference here for the kind of feminine disruption of the present and reassertion of the past I am positing for *Nang Nak*—and will attribute to other recent Thai horror films as well. As Lim argues, “the ghost narrative opens the possibility of a radicalized concept of non-contemporaneity; haunting as ghostly return precisely refuses the idea that things are just ‘left behind,’ that the past is inert and the present uniform.”⁸ Nak’s presence does indeed “[trouble] the boundaries of past, present, and future,” insisting on its own simultaneous frame of reference and thus pointing to the possibility of the kind of “radicalized historical consciousness” Lim describes, even if another ideological effect of the film is to contain the feminine threat Nak represents by providing a safely circumscribed space in which to articulate and thus partially assuage oppositional concerns, to give ritualized expression to that which is ordinarily kept securely underground, behind the housefront, or in a linearly conceived past.⁹

Fearful Females

Such a sense of the disruption and problematizing of the present—and, more specifically, the modern—is likewise strongly articulated throughout the omnibus film *Bangkok Haunted* (*Pii Sam Baht*, literally “Three-

Baht Ghost," 2001, the first two segments directed by Pisuth Praesaengiam and the third by Oxide Pang); it is even suggested through the film's English-language title, Bangkok in some senses being practically synonymous with Thailand's modernity. The decentering of time and the deauthorizing of any single conceptualization of history arguably increases exponentially here, in that each of the film's three stories has multiple interwoven time frames that are never clearly related across one another nor back to a fourth framing narrative of the stories being told. This tension between temporal regimes explodes into the film's visual field in the kind of spatio-temporal overlay that Lim finds also characterizes the two films she discusses: the jarring physical juxtaposition of differing temporal realms is inherent in the post-modern setting of Bangkok, a city that, in an architectural sense, is haunted indeed—with the old and the new, the disused and the thriving often crammed into the same spaces.¹⁰

One example of such an overlay is in the setting of the framing narrative: the film's three stories are told among friends in a trendy, modern café that has been constructed in the shell of an old building in Bangkok's historic Chinatown. But the film's most striking architectural palimpsest occurs in the first of the three narratives during which a woman under the influence of a ghost has a vision of past events at her historic wooden house on Bangkok's Chao Phraya River; although the witnessed events are presumably taking place in the past, the seemingly spectral presences of two modern apartment towers on the other side of the river dominate the background of several shots, as though the past were being haunted by the present. The overlay of past and present naturally continues when we return to the setting after the vision has apparently ended; even in the "real" version of things, the old Thai-style house and the modern high-rises coincide, both time frames remaining coexistent and coextensive.

As in *Nang Nak*, this haunting is again related to female will and agency and is in some instances precipitated by the unresolved state of historical injustices against women; female agency is most literally suggested in the fact that the three tales are each narrated by a woman, while the link between the feminine and the spectral is driven home when these three narrators are revealed at the film's close to be ghosts (or the product of another female ghost's imagination). The sense of female agency is perhaps strongest in the third tale, which focuses on a police detective investigating an apparently suicidal death he suspects may have been a murder. While the detective appears largely in control of events for the

better part of the narrative (save for where the ghost of the victim seems to appear), the tale's denouement reveals that the course of events had been carefully orchestrated by the ghost in order to exact revenge against a number of men for having spurned her love or—in the case of her husband—for having forced her to miscarry. In each case, the woman's past oppression—and, more specifically, the attempt to thwart her desire and reproductive power—is an occluded fact coexistent with the historically "present" reality of a given man, but the man is eventually forced to face the past misdeed and to pay for it with his life. A brutal attempt to thwart a young woman's desire is what precipitates the haunting in the first tale as well; there the ghost is a young woman murdered by a man some decades in the past whom she relates to as a brother but who is jealous of her newfound attraction to another man. It is the spirit of this past victim that possesses the body of the segment's present-day protagonist, in the sequence described earlier, after a drum containing the woman's severed arm mysteriously shows up at the protagonist's antique shop.

Anxiety and fear related to woman's desire is a more distinctive focus of the second of the tales, which concerns a lonely young Bangkok woman who turns to a recommended love potion in her pursuit of male companionship—unaware that the potion is made from fluid drained from a woman's corpse (significantly, by a man who also seems interested in ravishing the corpse) in the city morgue. With the benefit of the potion the young woman successfully pursues first one, then another man who strikes her fancy. As might be expected in such a horror narrative there is a price to be paid for this newfound sexual freedom; we can see that the ghost of the woman from whose body the potion was made hovers around the man on whom the potion is placed, indeed joining him and the protagonist as they sleep together (although apparently unbeknownst to them). The result is the mysterious illness and death of the men the protagonist sleeps with, one of whom returns from the grave to murder her. Thus, while this particular tale seems to force a certain retribution on men for the past suffering of women it also posits a woman's free expression of sexual desire as something that calls for containment and punishment. The sense of sexual panic suggested here can be seen as a part of the film's confrontation between modernity and the past: the protagonist's sexual aggression (as seen, for example, in her rubbing up against a man she is interested in on a crowded commuter boat) is something entirely out of keeping with traditionally "proper" Thai female behavior, something immediately associated with Bangkok and the modern age. That the first

negative result of her sexual activity is her lover's deathly illness, in a city hard-hit by the AIDS crisis, is also immediately suggestive of the historically and nationally specific dimensions of such a sexual panic. One could further note that the female protagonists of *Bangkok Haunted* consistently express interest in men of higher class status than they—a detail that associates the city's unregulated sexual desire with social and economic ambition as intertwined symptoms of modernity.

The sexual dimensions of the clash between differing historical frames of reference are still more pronounced in the contemporary supernatural film *Body Jumper* (*Bporp Wheed Sayong*, literally “Bporp Scream Horror,” 2001), directed by Heamarn Cheatamee. This film's engagement with the past is, like *Nang Nak*'s, based partly on its allusion to earlier narrative models—both a tradition of popular tales of *pui bporp* and an earlier series of successful *bporp* films. In its recurrent slapstick humor and generally farcical approach, *Body Jumper* indeed appears much closer in tone to the often comic Thai horror films of earlier decades than does the relatively sober 1999 *Nang Nak*, which arguably dispenses with a local sense of humor in making itself a “world-class” horror film. The sense of collision between past and present (and, in conjunction with this, between rural and urban) is narrativized in a plot about a *bporp* that has been contained in a clay pot (a usual method) in an upcountry village in 1932, then is accidentally unleashed by some visiting college students from Bangkok in the modern day. The freed *bporp* immediately possesses the most seemingly innocent of the female college students, commenting that “kids nowadays sure grow up quick” when it looks down at the budding breasts on its newly acquired body. When the possessed girl, Ger (Chompunoot Piyapane), then returns to Bangkok, her new nature expresses itself in a now sexually provocative style of dress and behavior.

While what is fearful about a *bporp* is its insatiable appetite for human livers, it does not take much of an interpretive step to see that such an appetite here metaphorizes a modern teen sexual appetite: Ger acquires livers not by chasing after victims (in traditional ghostly fashion) but by seducing them. The casting of a diminutive actress in the role of the possessed co-ed emphasizes an unsavory sense of underage sexuality, while her modus operandi of having sex with strangers in strange bedrooms and parking lots invokes concerns over modern female teen promiscuity, as well as concerns over teen prostitution. Also relevant is the fact that one of her anonymous “pick-ups” occurs at Bangkok's Royal City Avenue nightclub strip—an area notorious for catering to college-age

(and sometimes younger) patrons and sometimes targeted by various guardians of law and public morality for this reason. The sense of the *bporp* as representing a distinctively sexual danger is also clearly suggested in the fact that one of the weapons eventually used in the fight against the spirit is an “anti-*bporp* condom,” which comes in a three-pack and, when inflated, can temporarily halt the entity’s onslaught—this, it should be noted, in a locality where condom usage became popularized by the government specifically as a weapon against the spread of AIDS. Although Ger’s victims die immediately, there is also a clear suggestion of infection present here; the *bporp* can (and eventually does) jump from one host to another. There is additionally a sense of a deadly “queerness” linked to the possessed girl’s (hetero)sexualized activities in that she retrieves livers from a number of her willing and sexually aroused back-alley victims by “fisting” them, reaching up through their rectums to gain hold of the desired organs.

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 sociocultural influences—not surprising, given that foreign forces are often held to blame for various modern problems in Thailand in a range of popular and governmental discourses. For example, in the eyes of many, foreign media influences are 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 its sexual panic and the influence of things non-Thai rests in 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 simultaneously indicate the lascivious nature of the young woman’s appetites and link such appetites with foreignness.

The film’s reference to foreignness continues with another 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. The fact that Kong ends up a hero, working with the college students and using his special skills to thwart the *bporp*, does somewhat counter the film’s implicit racism and xenophobia. But it is also suggested that Kong has his ghost-fighting skills because of his link to the fearful

supernatural; in him foreignness and nonhumanness become ciphers for each other. This is most explicitly articulated in the scene where the college students go to get Kong at the traditional Thai house where he resides. Upon meeting Kong's Thai mother, one of the students somewhat indecorously inquires as to what his non-Thai half is. The Thai audience would have already assumed the father was likely an African American serviceman. The mother's response, however, is that Kong is "half-ghost, half-human," a formulation that clearly aligns Thainess with humanness, foreignness with the ghostly forces that need to be battled. Paradoxically, however, Kong's foreignness is also linked to modernity through the high technology he employs in battling the supernatural: he utilizes a laptop computer to direct the battle (though it is never made clear quite how) and offers up an arsenal of high-tech weapons to aid the college students in confronting the ancient *bporp*, including a "Ghost Gun Millennium Edition." The whole notion of pursuing ghosts in a systematic, professional fashion with high-tech weaponry is a foreign influence in this rendition of a traditional Thai tale—a knowing allusion to Hollywood's *Ghostbusters* (1984). (One can argue a similar Western cinematic influence in the film's preponderance of gags concerning teen tumescence, the legacy of Hollywood teen sex comedies in the mold of *Porky's* [1981].)

What these Thai "ghostbusters" end up doing battle with, however, is an emblem not of modern or foreign influences but, quite clearly, of a fear-inspiring, hungry, desirous, monstrous femininity. After jumping among a number of bodies, the *bporp* ends up possessing Fah (Angie Grant), a character who, significantly, has earlier expressed her own (initially unreturned) amorous desire for one of the male protagonists. Fah's newly monstrous form is one of grotesquely amplified corporeal femininity, a grayish, fleshy body with large breasts and a distended—indeed, almost pregnant-looking—belly. The image is thus akin to other images of fearful fertility and grotesque motherhood in the modern Thai horror film, such as Nang Nak's ghostly mothering of her ghostly baby, or the gory shot of a miscarriage being induced with a wire hanger in the third segment of *Bangkok Haunted*. (Indeed, *Body Jumper* opens with another image of monstrous motherhood, a flashback in which a young boy, unaware or unbelieving of his mother's possession by the *bporp*, runs to her for comfort and is strangled.) The attack on the monstrous-feminine is now executed by driving a computer-guided electric current through the *bporp's* pendulous breasts, markers of fertility and revulsion. Thus,

modern technology exorcizes the ancient feminine curse, with the end result being a docile Fah, once again fitting the mold of a safe femininity.

Unsettled Histories

In a number of other supernatural films the clash between past and present arises when the fallout of certain historical secrets, certain unresolved events, pushes its way into the here-and-now. For example in Anukul Jarotok's *The Hotel!!* (*Rong Raem Pii*, literally "Ghost Hotel," 2002), the owner-residents of the titular establishment find themselves under attack by a supernatural force they cannot recognize—until clues finally reveal that a ghost (played by a heavily made-up Winai Kraibutr) is trying to wreak vengeance against the family because its patriarch had, some decades earlier, eloped with the fiancée of the previous hotel owner. Resolution only comes when the ghost confronts a daughter who looks strikingly like the woman he lost and accedes to her pleas for forgiveness and her explanation that "Revenge doesn't undo what was done; it just adds to your sin."

This theme of needing to discover and resolve historical secrets arguably has very strong resonance in Thai culture, particularly in relation to a number of key events in late-twentieth-century Thai history. Thailand has a long history of corruption, hidden deals, and favoritism in business and politics, a tradition that came under sustained critical scrutiny in the time period of the film productions described in this essay—as voters became increasingly tired of corrupt politics and, after the economic crash of 1997, as Thailand was forced to begin to implement reforms in business and politics in order to regain credibility in the global marketplace and in international politics.¹¹ Nowhere among these films is the connection between national history and the need to deal with a hidden past more evident than in Somching Srisupap's *303: Fear/Faith/Revenge* (*303: Kloor/Klah/Abkaht*, 1998). Unlike the other films discussed here, this film's generic lineage lies more in the Hollywood teen slasher subgenre—though it, too, retains a link to Thai supernatural traditions, as ghostly possession proves to be central to murders taking place at an exclusive boys' prep school in 1960. These murders begin shortly after a group of new students tries to investigate why a young royal had reportedly killed himself at the school eight years earlier, despite their being warned by the school's head priest not to do so. They make use of a Ouija board to initi-



The spirit of Prince
Daovadueng (Jesdaporn
Pholdee) helps save the
day in 303:
Fear/Faith/Revenge
(1998)

ate their investigation, and it is this, the head priest explains when he later learns of it, that “opens the door for evil” to enter their school.

This sense that old problems—past historical traumas and secrets—are better left undisturbed is driven resoundingly home as the film reaches its conclusion. It is eventually revealed that the prince did not take his own life, but rather was a bystander killed in a shooting rampage in 1952, along with several other students, by a student who was upset at being bullied and ostracized. Now, in 1960, the awakened spirit of the murderer has possessed one of the friends initially involved in the investigation, and he proceeds to murder several more students, taking particular aim at bullies. Order is restored only when the spirit of the prince also springs into action, helping to destroy the murderer’s evil spirit. The surviving friends now willingly participate in the disguising of the earlier murders, as well as the finessing of the facts around the new ones, with the main protagonist’s voiceover narration informing us, “We can only hope this terror will never be repeated and hope everything that happened here will remain a secret with us forever.”

This desire to keep past wounds from opening up, to quietly resolve rather than amplify past difficulties, is echoed in the resolutions of some other Thai horror films, which have a way of ending in compromise rather than with the utter vanquishing of an opposing force—witness the final negotiation with the ghost in *The Hotel!!!*, and the containment (rather than destruction) of the eponymous spirit in *Nang Nak*. This tendency agrees with the high value Thais have traditionally assigned to the quality

of self-control or *jai yen* (literally, “cool heart”).¹² A number of distinctive factors in *303*, moreover, lend themselves to a reading of this kind of resolution as having particular resonance for Thai culture. For one thing, the death of the prince by a gunshot under mysterious circumstances in the film echoes the actual mysterious death of a young Thai royal—a king, in fact—by a gunshot wound just a few years previously, in 1946. This potentially explosive death too was the object of considerable speculation and confusion and contributed directly to a level of political instability, just as the prince’s death, when suddenly the focus of the students’ curiosity, threatens to bring disorder in the school.¹³

Two other historical referents that would have more direct bearing for the late 1990s Thai audience, however, are the violent university unrest of the mid-1970s and a bloody crackdown on anti-military protest in 1992 in which many civilians were shot; *303*’s vague black-and-white flashback images of student corpses in uniform might indeed directly recall circulating imagery of the former of these referents.¹⁴ These events are highly resonant with the occurrences in the film as historical traumas that are still cloaked in mystery and controversy, which still, to the present day, threaten social disaffection and disruption; central events in modern Thai historical consciousness, they both remain bitter sites of contestation—of attempts to clearly determine facts, assign guilt, and dole out punishment—as well as of battles over the representation of the past in classroom textbooks and popular media alike. Although the troublesome status of these modern traumas is certainly not the only determining factor in the uneasy attitude toward the past in *303* and other Thai horror films, the events’ continuing cultural predominance does readily lend to their cinematic purchase.

Bestial Doings

Another Thai supernatural tradition (both in folktales and in film) that has reappeared in recent productions has to do not with ghosts but with entities that are part human and part animal—or with humans who have otherworldly connections to animals. In these animal-related supernatural films, however, the same preoccupations with the past and with the feminine have a marked presence. A woman is at the center of the themes of supernatural horror in Somching’s follow-up, *Mae Bia* (literally, “The Cobra’s Hood,” 2001), for example—although the woman does not have any supernatural properties, she is watched over by a jealous snake, which causes peril for the various men in her life. Themes of relationships

between women and snakes have a long-standing tradition in Thai cinema—in an earlier version of *Mae Bia* and in a number of films about women who are part snake (such as *Ngu Pii* [literally, “Ghost Snake,” 1966]).¹⁵ The new *Mae Bia*, like many of the other films discussed here, foregrounds the fact of the modern remaking of a traditional tale, while also forging links between the feminine, the supernatural, and the historical. The film’s modern-day story develops as an urban, yuppified, Western-educated Thai businessman, Chanachol (Puthichai Amatayakul), falls for the rural-dwelling Mekhala (Nakapapapa Nekaprasit)—as well as her traditional lifestyle—after taking a journey into the Thai countryside. Mekhala’s link to the past resides not only in her old-style homestead but also, once more, in past secrets and past suffering: while growing up in a polygamous household in which she and her mother were not in favor, she learned to accept the comfort and protection of a snake that chose to watch over her and still continues this task, striking out at would-be attackers and would-be lovers alike. A passionate affair develops between Mekhala and the businessman but with tragic consequences, both because of Mekhala’s supernatural connection to a difficult past and the man’s connection to the present—the wife and child he has in Bangkok.

The coincidence of supernatural animal themes and polygamy occurs as well in Suthud Intaranupakorn’s *Krai Thong* (2001), also a remake of an earlier film based on an old Thai legend. While on its most surface terms this narrative concerns the exploits of the brave and skillful title warrior who manages to save a small village from attacks by a voracious and enormous crocodile, its contours also suggest a primal struggle for patriarchal dominance by gaining control over wealth and also over all the most desirable women in a given community. Krai Thong (Winai Kraibutr once more) makes his way to the village when the news has spread that the village chief will give half his riches to whatever warrior can kill the animal that has been terrorizing them and soon after arriving makes clear his amorous interest in one of the chief’s daughters (Tong, played by Wannasa Thongwiset). However, the crocodile, Chalawan, who has the ability to change into human form and who lives in a nearby underwater cave, has similar designs on the daughter. During a ceremony intended to bring blessings to the village in their battle against the crocodile, Chalawan shows up and takes hold of Tong, bringing her down to his underwater cave in his jaws, and then (in human form) making love to her, much to the consternation of the two wives he already has—wives who are also crocodiles able to assume human form. Krai Thong, in pursuit of the kidnapped daughter, eventually reaches the cave and successfully does

battle with Chalawan, wounding him and taking off with Tong, though not before pausing to admire the beauty of the crocodile wives. Once back at the surface, the overjoyed chief offers Krai Thong the promised half of his fortune and the hands of both his daughters in marriage.

The reciprocity of ostensible hero and ostensible villain, as mirror reflections of each other on either side of the water's surface, is quite striking; each is a powerful warrior with two wives, and each has a cross-species attraction to one or more of the other's women. Now, however, as Chalawan recovers from his injury, he vows never to kill again. Krai Thong, on the other hand, becomes determined to kill the crocodile to bring peace to the villagers and to lift an affliction facing Tong: she lost her voice following her encounter with Chalawan and only his death will cure her. Krai Thong eventually succeeds at this (in part through the advice of his late warrior father, whose spirit is able to communicate with him), and, like the model of an alpha male, he also takes both of the crocodile wives as his own, living half the time in one world, half in the other.

As fables often do, this one certainly lends itself to many kinds of interpretation. It can, for example, be understood as concerning Thai civilization's prehistoric relationship to the animal world or to water and aquatic life more specifically—relationships central in Thai culture as in many others. It can likewise be understood as pertaining to the Thai people's relationship to neighboring peoples, Thailand having historically seen many kinds of migration and intermixing with peoples from adjoining regions. The tale also concerns the nature of social order and hierarchy and the nature of social succession in a patriarchal society, clearly detailing male violence and sexual aggression (both figured as literally animalistic) as a historical part of this order and succession. An interesting particular is that all of the film's scenes of lovemaking are interspecies and technically underwater, in the crocodiles' caves. While on the one hand this echoes a universal association between water and fertility (one hinted at as well in the heavy presence of the river in *Nang Nak*), on the other hand it links both fertility and desire with otherness. At the same time it places passion—and more particularly an aggressive, violent, male-dominated passion for the other—literally out of view of the socially ordered land-dwelling world. Such desire and aggression, it seems, are yet another troublesome historical secret, which must be kept hidden below the surface despite their formative significance.

Examined in a broader view, then, contemporary Thai horror films consistently appear as a cultural means of grappling with the past, with



The monstrous-feminine makes an appearance in *Body Jumper* (2001)

secrets and traumas still haunting the country. These films look to the past by (variously or in combination) reengaging with earlier folk and cinematic narrative and generic traditions, by representing earlier historical periods, and by dramatizing tensions between (and confusions among) differing historical frameworks and perspectives. Bangkok, as an emblem or instantiation of modernity, is a key reference point for the historical contradictions in a number of the films (especially *Bangkok Haunted*, *Body Jumper*, and *Mae Bia*) and often appears to engender an anxiety over foreign influence and the loss of traditional mores, especially in relation to sexuality. More broadly, these films consistently return to anxieties over gender-related issues, often coincident with irresolution regarding past trauma—concerns over the violence of male sexual aggression (particularly *Krai Thong*, *The Hotel!!*, *Bangkok Haunted*, *Mae Bia*, and, arguably, *303: Fear/Faith/Revenge*), the suffering and oppression of women in patriarchal society (*Nang Nak*, *Bangkok Haunted*, *Mae Bia*), and the disruptive potential of female agency and desire (*Nang Nak*, *Bangkok Haunted*, *Body Jumper*). The relish with which the horror genre has now been taken up suggests just how provocative these issues remain.

Notes

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1. Hanuman, "A Dying Breed," *The Nation* (Bangkok), March 8, 2002, Weekend section, 8–9. Given current trends, the annual number of Thai feature films is expected to rise dramatically, to thirty-five or forty by 2003.
2. Kong Rithdee, "The Sum of All Fears," *Bangkok Post*, August 9, 2002, Realtime section, 1. The mid-year releases were the Thai co-produced omnibus film *Three* (*Ahrom/Ahtun/Abkhat*, literally "Emotion/Curse/Vengeance"), the first segment of which is directed by Nonzee Nimibutr and features a Thai period setting; and the Hong Kong-produced feature *The Eye*, directed by Oxide and Danny Pang (Hong Kong-based brothers who often work in Thailand) and including a lengthy sequence set in Thailand. Among the horror releases announced for later in 2002 were 999–9999, a supernatural thriller about an evidently dangerous phone number, and *Krasue*, based on a traditional Thai ghost legend.
3. A brief overview of some of these spirit beliefs can be found in William P. Tuchrello, "The Society and Its Environment," in *Thailand: A Country Study*, 6th ed., ed. Barbara Leitch LePoer (Washington, DC: U.S. Government, 1989), 101–2. See also Niels Mulder, *Inside Thai Society: Interpretations of Everyday Life*, 5th ed. (Amsterdam: Pepin, 1996), chap. 5.
4. For an overview of the Nak phenomenon and some key interpretations of it, see Ka F. Wong, "Nang Nak: The Cult and Myth of a Popular Ghost in Thailand," in *Thai Folklore: Insights into Thai Folk Culture*, ed. Siraporn Nathalang (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2000), 123–42. Various documents pertaining to the phenomenon are reproduced in Anake Nawigamune, *Mae Nak: Classical Ghost of Siam* (Bangkok: Nora, 2000) (in Thai), while more than twenty posters from various Nang Nak films are reproduced in Dome Sukwong and Sawasdi Suwannapak, *A Century of Thai Cinema*, trans. and ed. David Smyth (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 52–55.
5. For a brief overview of the director's career, see Mitch Davis, "The Rain Beneath the Earth: An Interview with Nonzee Nimibutr," in *Fear Without Frontiers: Horror Cinema across the Globe*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider (Surrey, UK: FAB Press, 2003).
6. Hanuman, "A Dying Breed," 9.
7. For an interpretation of the myth that accords with this one, see Wong, "Nang Nak," 135. On the relationship between Buddhism and other forms of belief, see Charles F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), 178–81, and Siraporn Nathalang, "Conflict and Compromise between the Indigenous Beliefs and Buddhism as Reflected in Thai Rice Myths," in Nathalang, *Thai Folklore*, 99–113.
8. Bliss Cua Lim, "Spectral Times: The Ghost Film as Historical Allegory," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 9, no. 2 (2001): 288. The films Lim discusses are *Rouge* (Yanzhi Kou, 1987, directed by Stanley Kwan) and *Haplos* (*Caress*, 1982, directed by José Luis Pérez).
9. Lim, "Spectral Times," 287.
10. *Ibid.*, 289–92.

11. On corruption and its political consequences in modern Thailand, see Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidh Piriyarangsarn, *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1994); and Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand's Crisis* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2000), chaps. 5–6.
12. See Mulder, *Inside Thai Society*, 85–86.
13. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State*, 71–72; Alec Waugh, *Bangkok: The Story of a City* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), chaps. 12–13; and David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 263–66.
14. The key 1970s events were a student uprising in October 1973, which led to the overthrow of two military leaders and the appointment of a new prime minister, and a bloody coup in October 1976, which allowed for the return of certain right-wing military elements to power. See John L. S. Girling, *Thailand: Society and Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), chap. 5; and Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, 297–303. On the violent crackdown on anti-military protest in May 1992, see Duncan McCargo, *Chamlong Srimuang and the New Thai Politics* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), chap. 8. One commentator interestingly likens the May 1992 events and their aftermath to a horror-film narrative—and suggests this may help explain the popularity of horror films in that time period; William A. Callahan, *Imagining Democracy: Reading "The Events of May" in Thailand* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), 156–58.
15. Some of these popular films about snake women were in fact produced in neighboring Cambodia. For an interesting special issue of an online journal about the Asian snake woman phenomenon, see *The Illuminated Lantern* 10 (2001), online at <http://www.illuminatedlantern.com/snakes/index.html>, accessed June 18, 2002.