Ghosts in Asian Cinemas

Veranstalter: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of Zurich
Datum, Ort: 04.11.2011–05.11.2011, Zurich
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The international workshop „Ghosts in Asian Cinemas" took place on the 4th and 5th of November 2011 and was organised by the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of Zurich, with generous support from the University Research Priority Program Asia and Europe.[1] It aimed to investigate concepts of spectrality, haunting and horror in Asian cinemas across regional as well as disciplinary divides. The workshop especially focused on the complex relationship between traditional views on nature, cosmologies, spiritual beliefs and local myths on the one hand, and the transnational configurations and representations of (global) modernity on the other. While classic Japanese horror cinema was the starting point of the workshop, lesser studied cinematic traditions were given ample space, especially Thai cinema.

ANDREA RIEMENSCHNITTER (Zurich) offered an overview over post-modern varieties of haunting in Asian contexts, examining recent literary, cinematic and architectonic representations of spectrality. Following Wolfgang Welsch's blueprint, she argued that spectrality as an aesthetic category has gained momentum in a time of accelerated social change and ecological crisis. Observing a trend to recycle traditional ghost stories in Asian cinemas and literatures and drawing on Donna Haraway's image of a transient natural phenomenon called „Jim's dog", Riemenschnitter furthermore showed how the perception of spectrality in the form of (post-) human bodies as incomplete or excessive incarnations has become an everyday experience in our contemporary forms of social interaction. Based on movies by Zhang Yimou and Jia Zhangke she further discussed how, on the one hand, the political economy of vision with its focus on virtuality and second-order mythologies has resulted in the primacy of the teletechnologically transmitted image over actual human labour, and how, on the other hand, violent transformations of cities and communities have reached an unprecedented scale under global consumer capitalism. She proposed that the workshop contribute to the development of a critical vocabulary of spectrality, which would enable us to address more adequately these aesthetic engagements in the interstices between historical trauma and rapid societal as well as environmental change.

Following the screening of the movie *Tales of the Moon and Rain* (Japan, 1953), the first panel entitled „Urbanity, Nature, Modernity" focused on contemporary transformations as well as creations of images of haunting derived from repressed pasts and pre-civilization nature. ELISABETH SCHERER (Düsseldorf) showed how stereotypical narratives and images concerning the female ghost in Japanese horror cinema, of which *Tales of the Moon and Rain* represents an early example, had developed out of much older artistic traditions and religious discourse. She argued that especially Nō musical drama (for example the masks) and Kabuki theatre continue to have a strong influence on the visuality and narrative structure of contemporary J-horror. NATALIE BÖHLER (Zurich) followed with her analysis of the dream sequence in *Uncle Boonmee: Who can recall his past lives* (2010) by the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul. She showed how the short sequence in the movie, which is based on an art installation project by the director entitled *Primitive*, stands out from the rest of the movie through its use of still-images and an off-screen speaker. These techniques and the images in the dream sequence form a critique of official Thai history and of the riots between the rural and urban political camps at the time when the movie was filmed. Furthermore, she proposed to read this scene and its Buddhist coded cyclical structure as an artistic response to state authoritarianism and censorship. Cyclicality and coevalness were afterwards discussed as different time concepts of Buddhism. The Singapore horror movie *The Maid* (2005) was shown at the

[1] The workshop was furthermore supported by the Zürcher Universitätsverein, Zürcher Hochschulstiftung, Wilhelm Jerg-Legat, Vereinigung akademischer Mittelbau der Universität Zürich, Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft and the Institute for Cinema Studies.

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end of this panel. It provided a perspective on an important, politically highly charged subject matter, namely the ghostliness attributed to migrant workers and diasporic identities.

The second panel, entitled „Spectral kinship", was intended to focus more closely on the specific bonds ghosts share with the living and the role of ancestors in contemporary political discourse. LAURA COPPENS (Zurich) showed how during the „New Order" period in Indonesia (1966-1998), horror movies had to balance the portrayal of the genre's most important character, the evil seductress spirit, between popular demand and state religious discourse. While in contemporary Indonesian horror movies the horrifying seductress has turned into a monstrous victim, the underlying identity politics remains unchallenged. In a similar vein, ARNIKA FUHRMANN (Hong Kong) touched upon state discourse and legal issues with respect to homosexuality in Thailand, but focused her discussion on the alternative cinematic world of rural utopianism and homosexual bliss that director Apichatpong Weerasethakul constructs in the first half of his movie *Tropical Malady* (2004). In a contrastive reading of the first and second part of the film she claimed that the director actively avoided engaging with the conventional motifs of homosexual struggle. She then offered a detailed analysis of the mythical figure of the tiger-spirit that rules over the second half of the movie, and argued that it was used to convey the eternal loss of the possibility to create non-identitarian subjectivities. JESSICA IMBACH (Zurich) then analyzed the use of traditional Chinese operatic figures like the exorcist Zhong Kui or the exorcist puppet in Yu Xiaoyang's movie *The Shore of Mist* (1992/3) as aesthetic interventions into state historiography and contemporary consumer culture. Based on Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's concept of the psychic phantom, she showed how transgenerationally repressed trauma disguised in ghostly images of the past is given aesthetic momentum through traditional modes of theatricality to reestablish a sense of shared historical experience. FELICIDAD CUA LIM (Irvine) ended the panel with her paper on aswang, the viscera-sucking monsters in Filipino folklore. She analyzed a diverse range of contemporary Filipino and Filipino-American media fragments such as short films and amateur videos to show how the aswang – conventionally understood as a Filipino national monster external to human sociality – is problematized as a member of a family and of a community. Her interpretation of the aswang raised complex questions about kinship, intimacy and sexuality, and explained how the figure of this monster challenges the notion of a unified Filipino culture.

The gravitational pull of the past on aesthetic interventions dealing with present struggles over citizenship and shared social as well as cultural spaces emerged as a central topic. The function of these past images remained ambivalent: while the supernatural capabilities of the virgin witch, the animal spirit, the operatic demon and the aswang can often be read as a vision of the empowerment of subaltern agents, the liminality of these ghostly figures is just as often foregrounded by rendering their powers as a curse.

Before the third panel entitled „Global Gothic" started, the Thai horror movie *Alone* (2007) was screened. This exceptionally successful movie inspired numerous remakes all over Asia. KATARZYNA ANCUTA (Bangkok) then presented a genealogy of Thai horror cinema and developed a classification of Thai gothic tropes, which could be used to expand the classically Anglo-Saxon genre of the gothic. She also showed how this very diverse and popular genre increasingly oriented itself towards the urban consumer and most recently started to address issues concerning the rapidly developing suburban middle class. MARIE LAUREILLARD (Lyon) followed with her paper on Tsai Mingliang's movie *What time is it there?* (Taiwan, 2001). She explained how German and French auteur cinemas influenced the narrative and visuality of the film, while Buddhist-coded temporalities and their ability to overcome temporal and local divides are the underlying concern of the movie. KAYO ADACHI-RABE (Berlin) presented a close reading of Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Cure* (Japan, 1997) and Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (Denmark, 1932). She argued that Kurosawa based his hypnosis movie on Dreyer's classic vampire film to

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convey a sense of the horrific ordinary while at the same time visualizing the ordinary in a native vocabulary of the mysterious and strange. She also examined this relocation of the uncanny by referring to David Bordwell's investigations into cinematic metadiegesis.

It became clear after this third panel that localised Asian traditions can not only expand the notion of the gothic, but that, significantly, these acts of adaptation and transformation defy any simple classification as products of globalization's homogenizing thrust on local forms of cultural expression and thereby also challenge the temporal othering of the postcolonial space. Especially ghosts and their power to disrupt chronological orders have become important figures in this critique of modernity's normative temporality. The workshop ended with an outlook, this time not thematic but regional, on Indian gothic cinema with the screening of the horror comedy *Bhul Bulaiya* (2007).

In all, Buddhist interrogations of temporality and the impact of state discourse on local and non-urban modes of commemoration emerged as central themes across areas and disciplines. The movie screenings provided valuable material for the discussions and demonstrated the multifacetedness of the topic. The workshop thus provided new insight into the diverse range of spectral figures and their sometimes shared roots in religious discourse. However, many discussions remained confined to the regional boundaries of a particular area. Several topics for interdisciplinary inquiries were singled out as fruitful and promising approaches, but could not be tackled in their full theoretical potential. Especially the topic of spectral time and untimeliness beyond the local/urban, traditional/modern, religious/scientific divide turned out to be a pressing theoretical issue, for which further discussion will be needed.

Conference overview:

Keynote speech

Andrea Riemenschnitter (Zurich): Spectrality as an Aesthetic Category of Asian Postmodernities

Film screening

Tales of the Moon and Rain (Japan, 1953)

Panel 1: Urbanity, Nature, Modernity

Elisabeth Scherer (Düsseldorf): Female Ghosts in Japanese Cinema and Their Origins in Japanese Traditional Arts and Folk Beliefs

Natalie Böhler (Zurich): "...for I had many friends in the future": The Dream Sequence in „Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives"

Film screening

The Maid (Singapore, 2005)

Panel 2: Spectral Kinship

Laura Coppens (Zurich): Revenge of the Virgin – Female Ghosts in Indonesian Horror Films

Arnika Fuhrmann (Hong Kong): „Tropical Malady": Queer Haunting in Contemporary Thai Cinema

Jessica Imbach (Zurich): Chinese Theatricality and the Specter of the Cultural Revolution in Yu Xiaoyang's „The Shore of Mist"

Felicidad „Bliss" Cua Lim (Irvine, California): Monstrous Intimacies: Aswang Fragments in Filipino Transmedia

Film screening

Alone (Thailand, 2007)

Panel 3: Global Gothic

Katarzyna Ancuta (Bangkok): Ghost Visions: Thai Spirits and the Horror Film

Marie Laureillard (Lyon): Ghostly Visions in „What Time Is It There?" of Tsai Ming-Liang

Kayo Adachi-Rabe (Berlin): Mediality and Spirituality in Kiyoshi Kurosawa's „Cure"

Film screening

Bhul Bulaiya (India, 2007)

Tagungsbericht *Ghosts in Asian Cinemas*. 04.11.2011–05.11.2011, Zurich, in: H-Soz-Kult 25.01.2012.

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