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Spectral Bodies and Uncanny Effects: Cosmopolitan Anxieties in Shutter

Abstract

In this essay I examine the tension among the varying levels of global mobility associated with multiple spectral bodies that haunt the textual, intertextual and production spaces of the film, Shutter (2008), a Hollywood/Japanese remake of a popular Thai movie with the same title. I identify three types of spectral incarnations that are invoked or generated by the film: the Asian ghost figure in the narrative, the textual body of the Thai film that served as its source material, and Thai laborers that produced this earlier version. I argue that these spectralized forms of labor are materially present in the textual body of the film, and are perceptible to those who cultivate a “spectral vision” via uncanny effects created by ghostly doubles.

Specters do not respect boundaries. The paradoxical nature of their existence that troubles the binary states of dead/alive, visible/invisible and material/immaterial enables them to haunt and traverse liminal, “in-between” states of being. An uncanny effect is created when disruptive entities refuse to stay within their specified boundaries. The uncanny nature of the experience of traversing borders — whether temporal, spatial, textual, national, or continental — is often overshadowed by the sense of freedom and connotations of privilege usually associated with cosmopolitan mobility. This essay discusses spectral bodies as an embodiment (or rather, dis-embodied incarnation) of the uncanny nature of cosmopolitanism, a concept that needs to be expanded to include those who have acquired transnational mobility and those who have not, in order to incorporate the lived experiences of a wider variety of global subjects.[1] The acknowledgment of those excluded in limited notions of cosmopolitanism leads to a clearer understanding of how specters are created through inequities and asymmetries in global systems of economic and cultural exchange. I analyze the film Shutter (2008), a Hollywood/Japanese remake of a popular Thai movie with the same title (2004), to discuss how ghostly presences in textual, intertextual and production spaces are made perceptible via uncanny effects to those who cultivate a spectral vision. [2]

Jacques Derrida’s theory of hauntology considers spectrality as a mode of critique that can bring about social justice and address ethical debt by acknowledging ghostly presences, or “those who are not there” — whether they are already dead, not born yet, or are present but ignored and marginalized. [3] Derrida theorized the need to develop the ability to see specters, or a spectral vision that recognizes ghostly presences of entities that haunt the margins of reductive histories and limited perspectives in order to address the compelling injunctions of spectral forces. This essay addresses the need to consider specters in the context of transnational film production. My argument hinges on perceiving the presence of those rendered spectral in transnational collaborations.
in the process of making (and re-making) films, especially in relation to the concrete reality of physical and creative labor. Certain forms of labor are hidden behind the façade of cosmopolitan mobility depicted in many contemporary films that depend on transnational circulations of texts, talent, and resources. Although the spectator must make an effort to perceive these specters, their presence is always already there, and I argue, are waiting to be rendered visible or legible. While not immediately perceptible, the disruptive presence of the specter produces an uncanny effect that jolts the viewer out of complacency and generates a sense of dislocation or disjunction.

Sigmund Freud describes the uncanny as “something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression,”[4] and explores its paradoxical nature by discussing how the two German words—heimlich and unheimlich—that seemingly have opposing meanings can coincide to signify an uncanny communion of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Freud points out the uncanny nature of the figure of the double, or the doppelgänger, which is at once familiar yet alien. The sense of anxiety associated with the double has often been explored in fictional narratives of literature and film[5] and the uncanny nature of representation has been attributed to several forms of media, especially in their early stages of discovery and development. [6] This sense of anxiety is also exemplified in the initial uneasiness felt by those who gazed upon their photographic doubles when photography was first invented and the long-held superstitious belief that cameras have the ability to capture a person’s soul. Citing film scholar Tom Gunning, literary theorist Nicholas Royle notes the uncanny ability of photographs and films to generate ghostly doubles.

[Film is in its essence a world of doubles.... Starting out from what Gunning refers to as ‘the fundamentally uncanny quality of photography, its capture of a spectre-like double’, film will have captured us. [7]

Shutter both thematizes and embodies the spectralization of those who fail to fulfill cosmopolitan aspirations to transcend national boundaries, and “spectre-like” doubles haunt the narrative and production spaces of the film. The narrative depicts a cosmopolitan existence through the main characters’ geographical mobility between Japan and the U.S., while also gesturing toward the horrors of the ghost’s ontological mobility between the living and the dead. The film begins with the re-location of the two protagonists—Ben (Joshua Jackson), a young photographer on his way to achieving international success, and his wife, Jane (Rachael Taylor) — from New York to Tokyo. Jane’s character personifies the sense of anxiety, disorientation, and estrangement that underlies and contradicts the notion of privileged freedom usually associated with cosmopolitanism. The uneasiness she feels is exacerbated by recurring encounters with an inexplicable spectral presence, eventually revealed as the ghost of Megumi (Megumi Okina), a Japanese woman who committed suicide after being sexually assaulted by Ben and his friends.

Thematically and visually, Shutter demonstrates the uncanny quality already inherent in the photographic medium even without ghostly manifestations since it generates an image of a familiar/unfamiliar “spectre-like double.” In the film, the sense of unease that arises from the medium’s uncanny ability to reproduce a visible trace of living (or dead) entities escalates into fear and terror, as the spectral presence is not a visual manifestation of tame, benign ghosts who long to communicate with their loved ones, but a visual and very physical manifestation of a disruptive, malignant ghost seeking vengeance.[8] The spectral presence in the film’s narrative acquires materiality,
physicality and mobility through the medium of photography. Amplifying this sense of the uncanny is the animation of photographic doubles through the medium of cinema. This is well exemplified in a sequence of Jane flipping through a group of photographs like a flip book, thereby simulating movement. While reminiscent of the moment of shock when still photographs suddenly began to move, the uncanny effect in this scene is doubled since the moving figure in the photographs is a ghostly entity whose physical presence should be imperceptible to both the human and the camera eye.

More difficult to perceive are spectral presences that are created in the process of producing transnational film remakes, which is also a form of re-producing doubles through visual media. As a Hollywood/Japanese collaboration produced by Regency Enterprises and distributed by 20th Century Fox, Shutter was not overtly promoted as a remake of a popular Thai movie. The production process of the film, which included location shooting in Tokyo, created cosmopolitan experiences for its multinational cast and crew (mostly from the U.S., Australia, as well as Japan), whose global mobility mirrors that of the protagonists in the narrative. The film itself is a cosmopolitan body of sorts; it contains visual references that have acquired global currency, and it was produced with aspirations to target the global market and with efforts to adapt the story of the Thai version into a more legible and palatable form for American audiences.[9] As such, the remake contains ghostly presences in both its narrative and its production process, as the labor that created the earlier Thai film is rendered spectral through its elision in the remake, which reaped in more profits and attained higher recognition on a global scale. Although the Hollywood/Japanese remake is more or less faithful to the original source material, it barely acknowledges its debt to the Thai film. In the opening titles, the screenplay is credited

Film posters for the Hollywood/Japanese remake (left) and the Thai original (right). The poster for the remake announces its ties with Hollywood’s other successful “J-horror” remakes, The Grudge (2004) and The Ring (2002), rather than its connections with the Thai source material, and showcases the lead actress, Rachael Taylor.
to Luke Dawson, with no mention of the Thai writers and directors, Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom. The only person associated with the Thai film whose name is mentioned in the opening titles of the Hollywood/Japanese remake is the producer, Yodphet Sudsawad.

The erasure of source material is certainly not an unusual practice in Hollywood remakes of so-called “foreign” films.[10] In Translating Time, Bliss Lim discusses Hollywood remakes of Asian horror films, specifically Takashi Shimizu’s Ju-On: The Grudge (2003), which was remade by the same director for Paramount and released in 2004 as The Grudge. Lim comments on the voracious nature of remakes by describing the genre film as “cannibalistic” and invoking Rick Altman’s idea that “each new genre film ingests every previous film,”[11] and notes “the iterability of the specter as a stock figure of the horror film.”[12] In other words, remakes and genre films are constantly regenerating ghostly doubles — and doubles of doubles, ad infinitum — of characters and narratives in various national cinemas.[13] This cannibalistic nature of genre films becomes more rapacious in the context of transnational generic remakes, as they often deploy the powerful internationalized Hollywood standard to suppress, deny, and disavow the source material, which often remains unreleased and unknown in the U.S. Adding insult to injury, these Hollywood remakes are usually more profitable in the global market than the more modestly produced and distributed earlier versions. Such was the case in the Thai version of Shutter, which fared well in local box offices and in neighboring countries, but was not theatrically released in the U.S., though it was screened at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2005 and released on DVD in 2007. Meanwhile, the remake’s total gross worldwide was approximately sixteen times more than the Thai version (although it is not specified online whether this total includes both domestic and foreign).[14]

The disavowal of the source material is doubly problematic in the remake of Shutter. Traces of the Thai film are effaced by efforts to re-package the remake as a Hollywood/Japanese product, with a visual emphasis on Japan that underscores its affiliations with the recent success of Japanese horror films (or “J-horror”) and their Hollywood remakes in the U.S. This is manifested in the appointment of the Japanese filmmaker, Masayuki Ochiai, whose filmography includes other J-horror films,[15] as well as the film’s setting in Tokyo, which naturalizes the now familiar, iconic image of the long-haired, pale-faced Asian female ghost.[16] Not only is the national specificity of the Thai film erased under the more general category of Asian horror film, which is already questionable in its facile assumption that the distinct characteristics of various national cinemas can be lumped under the umbrella term, “Asian horror,” but it is also subsumed under the more economically powerful industry of Hollywood and the culturally predominant signature of the Japanese horror genre. The Thai source material is thereby relegated to a spectral presence, demoted to a lesser position in economic and cultural value and deprived of relevance, prominence, and mobility in the transnational context.

Although the ghost in the diegesis attains visual form and physical strength, the ghosts in the film’s production history remain less perceptible, even as traces of their existence emerge via uncanny effects. I identify three types of spectral incarnations that are invoked or generated in Shutter: 1) the Asian ghost figure in the narrative; 2) the textual body of the Thai film; and 3) the Thai workers who created the earlier version. The latter two are both produced in the global economy of international film remakes. More importantly, all three are closely intertwined in that the hyper-visible body of the Asian ghost that alerts the spectator to the presence of the less visible bodies of the Thai source material and the labor responsible for its creation. I argue that these spectralized
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forms of labor are materially present despite engaging various levels of visibility, in the textual body of the film. In this case, the Thai source is materially present in its remake through the figure of the Asian ghost in terms of its visual impact, its role in the narrative in relation to aspirations of mobility, and its numerous material incarnations via multiple modes of mediation — photographic, cinematic and digital media.

The most obvious trace of spectralized labor is embodied in the hyper-visible “alien” body of the Japanese ghost, as it alludes to the fact that Shutter is a remake of an Asian horror film.[17] Many American filmgoers are now familiar with the thematic and visual motif of the pale-faced Asian ghost with long, jet-black hair and glaring, bloodshot eyes, thanks to its multiple iterations in Hollywood remakes of Asian horror films, such as The Ring and The Grudge, as well as more “domesticated” versions of the ghost, such as The Uninvited (2009) and The Eye (2008). This figure of the Asian ghost has been made legible to U.S. audiences, and thereby bankable (at least according to the logic of Hollywood executives). Despite this visual and thematic familiarity that depends on a spectator’s knowledge of the generic conventions of Asian horror films, the figure of the ghost is still unsettling, or uncanny, in its assumed ontological alterity, which is often accentuated by audiovisual cues, such as disjunctive editing and discordant sounds. Moreover, the uncanny effect generated by the appearance of the Asian ghost is amplified by its cultural otherness in the eyes of American audiences. Despite the cross-cultural translatability and global currency of the image of the Asian ghost (if not the culturally specific emotions and responses evoked by ghosts that range from fear, horror, and guilt to nostalgia, sadness, and even affection), its ethnic iconicity points to its Asian origins and “anchors” the film to the region of Asia, albeit in a different national context.

The ghost also functions as a major narrative force by embodying aspirations of global mobility, or rather, the tragedy of those who cannot achieve it. In contrast to the young American couple who enjoys economic and geographical mobility, Megumi is immobilized in the conservative world of Japanese patriarchy, embodied by her traditionally-minded father, and can only aspire to cosmopolitan mobility through her job as translator at a globally-minded company called “Tokyo Global Koukoku” and through her relationship with a young American photographer.[18] In the case of this film, a marked contradiction exists between its narrative, which alludes to the necessity to address past wrongdoings, and the production history which creates its own ghosts. Whereas the remake is ostensibly untroubled by its ghostly double — the previously released Thai version— the American couple is haunted by Megumi’s ghost, and this haunting cuts short their privileged cosmopolitan life and their marriage.[19] And while cosmopolitan anxieties are repressed in the production history of the remake, they are made hyper-visible in its narrative through the repeated appearance of Megumi’s ghost.

Megumi’s ghostly body is a physical incarnation of not only cosmopolitan anxieties, but also anxieties surrounding the constant regeneration of “spectre-like” doubles that are enabled by the reproductive qualities of the photographic medium and further enhanced and facilitated through its digitization. Megumi achieves an uncanny level of physical mobility after her death via photographs, which is her medium of communication, embodiment and transportation. Her ghost can convey messages through material traces in photographs, exert physical force by manipulating cameras, and further, enjoys not only ontological mobility between the states of being alive or dead, but also geographical mobility between Japan and the U.S. Therefore, Megumi’s ghostly body is closely associated with the materiality of a photograph, which enables it to

Still of Megumi Okina in Shutter
substantiate itself as a physical entity, as well as the immateriality of a digital image. The film, however, evinces an ambivalent stance toward this digitally enabled global mobility. This virtual liberation of the physical body, despite its connection to positive connotations of freedom, is shrouded in an ominous shadow of uncertainty and dread. This is registered in the film's narrative through its portrayal of the uncanny nature of photographic and digital doubles, and its own (unacknowledged) debt to the industrial logic of doubling that produces remakes.

The film is further riddled by the tension among the varying levels of global mobility associated with the numerous spectral bodies that haunt its textual, intertextual, and production spaces. The mobility of the ghost in the narrative is in stark opposition to the immobility of ghostly presences created in the deracinating process of translating the Thai film into the Hollywood/Japanese remake, that is, the textual body of the Thai version and Thai laborers involved in the film's production. In other words, the cross-cultural translatability of the generic image of the Asian ghost enables it to move freely across national borders, whereas the Thai film and the Thai workers do not attain these powers of mobility and visibility in the restrictions of globally-dispersed systems of economic and cultural exchange.

This brings us back to the necessity of looking at specters in the context of film production. I discussed the case study of Shutter to demonstrate that spectralized forms of labor are materially present (at various levels of visibility) in the textual body of the film. Here I focus specifically on an example of a transnational film remake, but in most cases, the labor of below-the-line workers is obscured and made illegible in order to perpetuate the illusion of seamlessness that stems from the disavowal of labor deemed necessary for the spectator's immersion into the diegetic realm of the film. The idealized rhetoric of global mobility — of human bodies or audiovisual texts — that is often attributed to digital and transnational filmmaking elides the presences of gaps, ridges and fissures that are perceptible to those who see or sense the “seams” and the uneven texture that is generated by tensions underneath the veneer of seamlessness. Thus a spectral vision that perceives the traces of spectralized forms of material labor in cinematic texts is necessary to re-incarnate and mobilize ghostly bodies that haunt these seams, disrupting easy demarcations between living/dead, visible/invisible and material/immaterial through their uncanny non-presence.

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End Notes

[1] Sheldon Pollock, Homi Bhabha, Carol Breckenridge, and Dipesh Chakrabarty suggest multiple manifestations of cosmopolitanism, writing that “cosmopolitanism must give way to the plurality of modes and histories — not necessarily shared in degree or in concept regionally, nationally, or internationally — that comprise cosmopolitan practice and history” and proposing that “cosmopolitanism be considered in the plural, as cosmopolitanisms.” *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 8.

[2] In this essay, the title, *Shutter*, refers to the Japanese/Hollywood remake, unless specified otherwise. Despite the lack of any acknowledgement of the Thai version in the film's credits, the use of the same title is an arguably clear intertextual nod to the source material, compared to other instances of Hollywood remakes that use a different title, such as *Ju-on* and *The Grudge* and *Tale of Two Sisters* (2003) and *The Uninvited* (2009), etc.
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[6] Scholars from various disciplines, such as Nicholas Royle, Andrew Gibson, Ulrich Baer, Tom Gunning, Jeffrey Sconce, and Michel Chion, associate the concept of the uncanny with the haunting nature of audiovisual media.


[8] In addition to the material manifestations in the photographs, the physicality of the ghost is not only subjectively perceived by Ben as a sense of weight on his shoulders, but also objectively measured by a scale that indicates the weight of two people when Ben climbs on it.

[9] In an interview included in the DVD special features, Luke Dawson, the screenwriter for the remake, notes the difference between Asian horror and American horror films: “I think [the Asian audience] rely a little bit less on some of the plot development. I think the American audience needs the endings of all the plot threads to be tied up…. We made a great deal of effort to draw out the story logically and bring it to a conclusion as well.”

[10] For instance, there is nothing in the recent Hollywood remake, *The Uninvited*, that suggests or mentions that it is based on a Korean horror film, *The Tale of Two Sisters*. Even the title is changed in this case.


[12] Ibid., 190.

[13] *Shutter* is a good example of this constant regeneration. It has also been remade in Telugu as *Photo* (2006), in Tamil as *Sivi* (2007), and a Hindi remake of the film, *Click* (2010), was just released in India on February 19, 2010, in addition to the Hollywood/Japanese remake.

[14] The Hollywood remake’s total gross worldwide was $47,878,739 (the domestic gross was $25,928,550, the foreign gross was $21,950,189, http://www.boxofficemojo.com), while the Thai version’s total gross was 110,000,000 Thai Bhat, which is approximately $3,119,424 (http://www.imdb.com).


[16] Bliss Lim notes the discursive slippage that homogenizes horror films from various countries in Asia under the umbrella category, “Asian horror films,” to make the argument that “any notion of the distinctiveness of national cinema (whether formal, cultural, economic, or historical) must contend with Hollywood’s voracious capacity to deracinate such forms of distinction.” *Translating Time*, 112.

[17] I use “alien,” a signifier of difference, in both senses of the word — a foreign entity, and an otherworldly creature that comes from the realms of fantasy, horror, or science fiction.

[18] It is significant that the woman with limited means of cosmopolitan mobility is a translator, already a figure of liminality, whose work is indispensable but often ghosted or made invisible in transnational interactions.

[19] In the DVD special features, however, the efforts of the on-set translator, Chiho Asada, are duly acknowledged by cast members (actor Joshua Jackson calls her an “angel” and a “miracle”), and she is included in the interviews.