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On *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema* by Arnika Fuhrmann. Duke University Press, 2016.

Review essays by Rachel Harrison and Megan Sinnott, with a response from Arnika Fuhrmann

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Review Essay I: Rachel Harrison

There are perilously few academic works on Thailand that explore the junctures between critical theory and cultural production. Arnika Fuhrmann's *Ghostly Desires* is an exception — a deft and delicately defined analysis of the intersections between queer sexuality, vernacular Buddhist tenets and Thai cinema, tales and images. Thai cultural studies has struggled for some decades now with the question of what to do with "theory". The field has been dominated — perhaps even marred — by a predilection for rich tapestries of empirical data in preference to forms of analysis commonly deprecated as somehow abstruse. Fuhrmann's work contributes in significant ways to rebalancing that (inter)disciplinary failing. Not only does she take on cultural texts often labelled rarefied and recondite — such as the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Thunska Pansitthivorakul or the artworks of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook — but she also addresses these from a multifaceted theoretical perspective that moves well beyond mere socio-political contextualization.

One example of this achievement is Fuhrmann's desire to theorize Thai cultural studies through the wide-angled lens of "Other"

locations beyond the regional boundaries of the Thai nation-state. She refers, for instance, to Bliss Cua Lim's *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (2009). For Fuhrmann, Lim's work serves a purpose similar to her own, in that it "scrutinizes the ghostly as a terrain of critical force" (Fuhrmann 2016, p. 20). But this terrain is itself so often elusive, inscrutable, unhomely and haunting in nature. In the translation of supernaturalisms into homogenous time, for example, Lim upholds Henri Bergson's plural treatment of time while also arguing for "the refusal of anachronisms, and the recognition of untranslatability, that is, the avowal of *immiscible temporalities*" (Lim 2009, p. 13, italics in the original) as a critique of "the world-historical project of modernity that hinged on colonialism" (ibid.).

"From this novel theorization of temporality emerges", Fuhrmann writes, "the assertion that the past is never left behind but persists into the present and remains coeval with it" (Fuhrmann 2016, p. 19). While she acknowledges that concepts such as these are "not necessarily globally applicable" (ibid., p. 49), Fuhrmann is not alone in being enticed by the analytical promise they might hold for the Thai cultural case. The same could be said of the ways in which Fuhrmann is drawn to discussion of "noncontemporaneous contemporaneity" in the work of Harry Harootoonian (2007; see Fuhrmann 2016, p. 20). *Ghostly Desires* relies on the question of time (and the untimely) to do the (much-needed) work of cultural and critical disruption. But the extent to which we can explore the cultural specificities of these concepts in a notably different cultural context defines the limitations of such frameworks. Are there points of interruption or hiatus in the implications of homogenous time for Thai cinema? Does the semi-colonial nuance of Siam/Thailand's history inflect the development of ideologies of progress in that particular locale, where imperial expansion made felt its effects via a significantly different trajectory from that affecting other locales? Certainly Fuhrmann agrees with the observation made by Tamara Loos and by scholars working the fields of Thai anthropology and religious studies that modernity in Thailand has never been solely

secular. The implication of this concurrence, however, is to call into question Bliss's linking the ideology of progress and patterns of imperial expansion.

Staying with the question of time that is so central to the expression of *Ghostly Desires*, the complex texture of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand further invites inconsistencies in the sensation of time. Fuhrmann is at pains, and rightly so, to dismantle the various strands of Buddhist belief and practice that are at play in Thailand, noting that she draws on vernacular rather than doctrinal variations in this spiritual realm. But the distinction between textual and popular Buddhism in Thailand is in no way a clear or consistent one; rather, the former is haunted by accretions and the latter hybridized with the vestiges of animistic and supernatural belief. The effect is to obfuscate the extent to which time can be experienced or defined as "Buddhist time" (Fuhrmann 2016, p. 18) in Thailand and to overlook the experience of what we might call "subaltern time".

A case in point is to be found in the ghost Nang Nak, the cinematic depiction of which Fuhrmann explores in depth and with great sophistication. The 1999 film *Nang Nak* and other contemporary Thai horror-ghost films, she explains,

> draw on a notion of temporal incongruity that is central to Theravadin Buddhist pedagogy. This pedagogy vitally relies on the double temporality attributed to the female body that lets this body incarnate illusionary beauty as well as the fundamental Buddhist truth of impermanence, or constantly impending loss. (ibid., pp. 48–49)

Fuhrmann rightly contextualizes director Nonzee Nimibutr's production of the well-known Nang Nak ghost-wife story in terms of the nationalist, bourgeois heritage mode of Thai film-making that prevailed in the era following the 1997 economic crisis.[1] The context is important, she argues, because of the way in which the depiction of Nak reflects dominant socio-political views of femininity and the nation in that distinctive moment of inward-looking nostalgia that characterized Thailand's turn away from globalization. "Although Nonzee's film does not deploy the language of policy, the femininity

that the ghost Nak stretches to embody represents a radically contemporary model that bears both nationalist-capitalist inscription and Buddhist-folkloric components" (ibid., p. 50).

In the representation of this mood of "Buddhist-nationalist cultural recovery in the domain of sexuality" (ibid., p. 50) in *Nang Nak*, the eponymous ghost-wife becomes "an icon of updated traditional femininity" (ibid., p. 51). Fuhrmann argues, however, that cracks in this fantasy also emerge, revealing certain inconsistencies in "new notions of exemplary femininity in Thailand" (ibid.). What she might have emphasized more strongly is that the highly syncretic nature of this Thai Buddhist idiom undermines the force of this disruption of an exemplary, "nationalized" femininity. Furthermore, Nak is not simply conceived from the perspective of a doctrinal Buddhism inseminated by a vernacular Buddhist agenda in which all Other beliefs — in spirits, ghosts and the supernatural power of nature — are subordinated to the law of the Theravadin text. In other senses, even in Nonzee's purist vision of the folktale, Nak connects with a deep seam of cultural anxiety regarding the corporeal and the maternal that requires interpretation outside a Buddhist lens.

Fuhrmann herself marks out this variation when she acknowledges, "In Thai ghost films in general, female haunting is a significantly embodied condition" (ibid., p. 61). It is, in my view, this firm attachment to embodiment that in turn becomes the source of terror, not simply for Nang Nak but for an array of other kinds of *phi* or ghosts — all of which are gendered female. It is no coincidence that the cause of Nak's untimely death is childbirth. Nonzee's movie — in keeping with other versions of the tale — makes it clear that Nak has died during labour and, crucially, prior to giving birth; the precise Thai term for such a death is *tai thang klom*. At the point of death, the baby remains trapped within the maternal body. In Fuhrmann's vernacular Buddhist framework of reading "ghostly desires", this might serve to reiterate the "problem" of attachment from a Buddhist perspective, but it has another frame of reference, too. In folkloric belief, the maternal body is a hauntingly and unpredictably powerful one. The maternal *phi* poses a danger to those around her through

her psychic threat of castration. Nonzee's Nang Nak, like any other, bears the hallmarks of both the archaic and the phallic mother. As the former she is dark, ominous and all encompassing. The child to whom she fails to give birth remains ever attached, physically and psychologically smothered by a relentless maternal presence. Nak attempts to take full psychic control of her husband Mak on his return to the family home so as to ensnare him in illusion, leading her to torment her neighbours by taking on the form of a menacing and violent storm. As the phallic mother who poses the threat of castration, Nonzee's Nak retains the idiosyncratic feature of an extendable arm that stretches down between the floorboards to retrieve a lime that she has let slip while cooking. It is no coincidence that Mak catches a glimpse of the phallic arm at the very moment that he takes the advice of the village abbot to bend over and peer between his legs if he seeks to witness the truth. Mak thus has a realization of the implied threat to his own genitalia.

These deeply embodied and visceral features of Nang Nak — and other female *phi* — are significant because of their implications for the question of ghostly desire. Fuhrmann distances herself from the diagnosis of the "silence" of female desire in Thai culture (ibid., p. 48) that she finds in Jackson and Cook (1999), Morris (1994), and Harrison (2000 and 2002). Instead, she argues for the presence of desire. And while I concur that the ghost's desire for worldly attachment abounds in *Nang Nak*, it is clear from Nonzee's staging of Mak's return home that Nak has no desire for sexual exchange. Not only does she demurely rebuff his advances, but, when she does eventually accede to intercourse, the film immediately connects the potential for sexual pleasure with Nak's demise and subsequent death. The moment of orgasm is visually and structurally interlaced with the difficulty of labour, the impossibility of birth, the retention of the phallus and Nak's final breath in human form.

Whereas Fuhrmann focuses on the desire of attachment in Nonzee's characterization of Nak by applying a vernacular Buddhist framework, her interpretation of female desire arguably overlooks the problematic, bodily drives of the female *phi* in Thai culture.

Ghostly Desires reads Siamese desires as "ghostly" in both content and form. But the *phi* is not ghostly in quite the sense that the English term — with its allusions to an ethereal, wraith-like, spectral apparition — conveys. Rather it is demonic, repulsive and monstrous in form and deed. And while *Ghostly Desires*, again in a Buddhist register, draws out the subtle implications of the impermanence of female flesh, it pays less attention to the cultural imaginary of the deeply troubling nature of female sexual allure, of the female body as procreative source and bearer of the threat of castration. With these features of female physicality at play, the disruption of the link between femininity and the nation is activated because of femininity's limited association with beauty; it is not, that is, associated with the agency and power of sexuality. These restrictions are codified in *Nang Nak* in the closing scene of the film, in which Nak's malicious spirit is exorcised and laid to rest.

Fuhrmann sees the configuration of this sequence as one of "communal restoration", which positions "the heterofamilial ideal that the ghost longs for at the centre of community and nation" (ibid., p. 73). But this communal restoration by the graveside is not a representative one, for it includes only men. The majority are monks, the minority male lay Buddhists; not a single female community member is present. Rather than perceive the ritual of Nak's exorcism as one of communal restoration, one might read it as a performance of masculine control over feminine abjection. Nak's ghostly body submits to the dominance of superior, male spiritual power, just as the hyper-masculinized Thai nation sought to assert itself over the wayward temptations of globalization that had challenged the purity of its self-sufficient traditions at the time when the film was made. In this sense, after 1997, the female body of the pregnant Nak alludes to an attachment to the "irrational" material world — a dangerously capitalist site of over-attachment that could only be tempered by the royal and Buddhist model of self-sufficiency. It is this model that Mak is ultimately set free to adopt following his necessary detachment from the earthly concerns of female physicality.

Fuhrmann's treatment of the ghostly desires that manifest themselves in *Nang Nak* to some degree overlook the raw physicality of this female *phi* as imagined beyond doctrinal or vernacular Buddhist belief, in the animistic, supernatural realm of the Thai subaltern. Because of limitations of space, I focus in this review of *Ghostly Desires* specifically on the case of Nang Nak, though Fuhrmann deals with other cultural texts, other ghosts, and other artists in the remainder of her book. Each case exposes the imperative of nuanced theoretical perspectives for understanding contemporary Thailand. Inevitably, however, as part of this process and in a reflection of her own scholarly accomplishment, she opens up new fissures in our own cravings for transparency, solutions, and resolutions.

Review Essay II: Megan Sinnott

Arnika Fuhrmann's *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema* has achieved a rare accomplishment in the field of Thai studies. It fuses innovative, postmodern theoretical sophistication with a rich grounding and expertise in the Thai cultural, historical, and aesthetic context. Fuhrmann's analysis of post-1997 Thai cinema and video art does not merely instantiate the theoretical claims that she engages; it also uses the Thai materials to push the potential of these theoretical conversations to shift our thinking about the interplay of embodied sexuality (and gender), state-sanctioned normative representations of sexuality, temporalities, and competing ontological frameworks. And, in turn, through her weaving together of Buddhist and postmodern ontologies, she provides a grounded and innovative understanding of the cultural moment in Thailand that is the framework for her study. Yes, it is an ambitious book.

We best approach the contribution of Fuhrmann's volume to the range of scholarly fields with which she engages — Buddhist, Thai, film, feminist, and queer studies, with the adumbration of psychoanalysis — with an outline of the argument that she

constructs. I see a circular linking of three central touchstones that drive the analysis: the tenet of Buddhist negativity; queerness, as both an analytic and a form of desire; and the descriptive concept of "Buddhist melancholia" (pp. 68–70). "Buddhism" here refers broadly to the "vernacular" Buddhism of Thailand that is the central concern of this book.

Buddhist negativity refers in turn to an ontology in which the impermanence of existence and the inevitable failure of desire are core tenets. Attachments — that is desires for the sustained existence of something — lead to loss and suffering. Detachment and renunciation of these vectors of desire are therefore Buddhist imperatives, with non-being representing the ultimate goal. It is on this point that Fuhrmann delicately moves between Freudian and Lacanian intonations on the one hand and Buddhist teachings on the other. Attachments are both illustrative of the Lacanian concept of desire as that which is never fulfilled, and the Buddhist theme of craving/desire. For Freud ([1917] 1953, p. 245), the proper ability to detach libidinal energy from the lost love object is termed "mourning". In a compatible way, Buddhism teaches that attachment is a source of suffering, and that the renunciation of attachments is the proper path. This Buddhist teaching on the futility of attachment is most commonly illustrated through images of sexual or erotic desire — particularly in the form of a beautiful female body that ultimately decays, thereby demonstrating the truth of impermanence. The bottom line is that Buddhist negativity places a heavy weight on sexual desire in the Thai context. In addition, vernacular Buddhist concepts of karma frame sexual or gender nonconformity as a form of suffering caused by past misdeeds, rendering those sexual or gendered embodied identities as diminished.

In the time frame that Fuhrmann discusses, Buddhist negativity has been coupled with public policies aimed at stigmatizing gender and sexual nonconformity and thus at addressing the fear of an impending loss of purportedly authentic Thainess. Similarly, outmoded psychological models of sexual and gender deviance and pathology persist in the public sphere. The result of the confluence

of sexual negativity is "diminished citizens" (Fuhrmann 2016, p. 8): homosexuals, trans people, sexual and gendered nonconformists, and women in general. Yes, this a bleak picture, but Fuhrmann is not focused primarily on the injuries experienced within this social framework. Rather, an exploration of interventions in Thai cinema and video art that reveal the cracks within the negativity fuels her text. That intervention is provided through attention to "Queerness".

For Fuhrmann, queerness is, on the one hand, an analytic framework that uncovers the "incoherence" (ibid., p. 17) and instability of identity, and by extension the instability of the symbolic/linguistic/cultural ordering in the system of meaning. On the other hand, it also refers to unruly desire that fails to fail completely. More specifically, Fuhrmann provides a concise definition, "Queerness in this study thus stands more broadly for counternormative or as yet impossible desires" (ibid., p. 13). Queerness describes the in-betweenness, the fissures, and the troubling of binaries that are brought to bear on normative and symbolic meaning systems. Queerness is a mode of reading for these cracks and fissures, whether it be through viewing the mainstream "heritage film" *Nang Nak* (Nonzee 1999), the independent film *Tropical Malady* (Apichatpong 2004), or the avant-garde video art of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook. Queerness is also those moments when the desires and attachments that fail to resolve become eroticized, and when the tenets of non-attachment and impermanence fail to take hold pedagogically. That is, queer moments come when a character's desire persists in spite of the ostensible pedagogical message that requires the character to disavow desire and attachment after having properly come to understand that their persistence is the cause of suffering. Queerness operates in the space between the demands of renunciation as exemplified by Buddhist negativity and the radical appropriation of negativity, as in the "queer negativity" espoused by Lee Edelman (2004). Fuhrmann posits that the queer space represents a kind of deferral rather than an absolute rejection, beautifully phrased as existing in "the anteroom of impermanence" (ibid., p. 18) — in other words, the space between absolutes such as impermanence and attachment.

Fuhrmann makes clear that the aesthetic and the political are inseparable. Queerness also opens the space between the constricting binary that posits that the only positions possible regarding the political struggle over sexuality, gender and desire are embracing the "illiberal" (p. 9) negativity of Buddhist negativity, social stigma, vernacular renderings of notions of karma and psychological theories of sexual and gendered deviance or, alternatively, embracing the liberal mode of redress through national inclusion — also described in queer theory literature as homonormativity or homonationalism. The wriggling of queerness between these poles, which Fuhrmann astutely uncovers in her materials, undoes dominant approaches to discussing sexuality and gender in contemporary Thailand. She challenges an approach to the subject that posits an illiberal Thai past against a liberating, newly emergent liberal order that promises to redress the injury done to sexual and gender "minorities" through national inclusion. In other words, she rejects the formulation of an authentic Thainess of the past, whether framed as oppressive or as liberating, against a transnationally driven new national liberal order framed as either the loss of true Thainess or as a rejection of the illiberalism of the past. Instead, queerness replaces this binary with an appreciation of the collusion between multiple registers of negativity — Buddhist, legal, social, and others — on the Thai social landscape since the 1990s to form new ways of sexual or gendered surveillance and regulation. Likewise, queerness troubles the opposition to the repressive state and social regulation as existing only in the realm of "minoritarian injury" and of possible redress through inclusion in the liberal national order (ibid., p. 5). And here we come to the final piece of my summary of the theoretical moves that Fuhrmann makes in her analysis: Buddhist melancholy.

For Freud, melancholy describes the failure of the subject properly to redirect libidinal energy away from a lost object of desire — failure, that is, to achieve "mourning" (Freud [1917] 1953, p. 245). Buddhist melancholy is thus the mood that occurs when desire persists, is suspended in time, and resists ultimate negation. The films and videos that Fuhrmann studies use Buddhist motifs

and imagery to explore the persistence of desire and the queer possibility of the collapsing of obliteration (ibid.). As Fuhrmann shows, the extraordinary genre of the Thai ghost movie provides the theme of haunting to explore desire, loss, injury, reparation, and in/exclusion. Even the most mainstream, commercial film discussed, Nonzee Nimibutr's 1999 film *Nang Nak,* allows for the exploration of the persistence of grievance and attachment through time — or, perhaps more accurately, through the collapsing of temporal modes. In *Nang Nak*, a heritage film set on the pre-modern outskirts of Bangkok, the female protagonist rejects impermanence and resists detachment from both her desire for continued existence with her husband and her need for vengeance for past injustices. While in this version of the popular tale Nang Nak is ultimately subdued through the intervention of a masculine Buddhist authority and relinquishes her desirous self, the ostensibly Buddhist pedagogical reading of the film is not the only one possible, as Fuhrmann's discussion of the contemporary shrine to Nang Nak demonstrates. As the iconic image of female loss and persistent desire, Nang Nak continues today to provide abundance to supplicants who visit that shrine. Buddhist melancholy captures the possibility of vernacular Buddhism to exceed doctrinal pronouncements and reveal the psychic-social potential of inhabiting the space in-between attachment and loss, and negativity and inclusion. Of course, much more could be conveyed regarding Fuhrmann's reading of this film and the other material that she discusses, as well as her discussion of temporality, but I want to conclude with some final thoughts on the larger contributions of this ambitious and important work.

Fuhrmann demonstrates that queer theory and its psychoanalytic underpinnings may be utterly compatible with other ontological frameworks, such as the vernacular Buddhism of this study. Queer theory and the intellectual traditions from which it draws can bring attention to the possibilities of ontological frameworks such as vernacular Buddhism to elicit cracks and flexibility in dominant meaning systems. And vice versa: Buddhist images and allusions can be powerful ways in which queerness manifests itself, and

the language of Buddhism can be a medium for the imagination of queer possibilities. Queer Buddhism neither subsumes nor eliminates the historical and cultural specificity of contemporary Thailand. Indeed, it is a reflection of and participant in the always emerging cultural present. Queer Buddhism also moves us beyond the intractable binaries so troublesome for Thai sexuality and gender studies, and for transnational queer politics more generally. For example, Fuhrmann demonstrates that these films resist the dominant narrative in which an illiberal/authentic/past is pitted against a liberal/inclusive/present.

Fuhrmann's work compels the inclusion of these Thai cultural texts into the queer studies archive, but not as far-flung examples of the applicability of queer theory. Rather, these texts are to be valued as important and innovative explorations of the possibilities of queerness. In reviewing Apichatpong Weerasethakul's 2004 film *Tropical Malady*, Fuhrmann identifies a kind of queerness that becomes wonderfully revolutionary by exceeding the stifling binaries in which gender and sexual nonconformity is typically confined. "Here Apichatpong's cinema reframes queer personhood as ordinary, though not obedient, and as socially central, though not assimilated" (ibid., p. 157). This simple statement captures the elusive political project of queerness that resists minoritization in assimilationist liberal nationalism, the stigmatization of people as diminished citizens, and depiction as a marker of cultural loss.

Finally, I ponder the potential of vernacular Buddhism to speak to queerness and its liberatory project. The quotidian, vernacular Buddhism that informs the films and videos studied in *Ghostly Desires* is in itself based on mainstream Buddhist teachings about fluidity; the tenet of impermanence speaks to the lack of stable or fixed identities. The "middle-way" central to Buddhist teachings suggests that the imperative to detach is in itself an extreme position, and ultimately the achievement of the obliterating freedom of nirvana is a product of the middle way. That middle way guides a social approach in which absolute resistance is extreme, but total compliance unnecessary. *Mettā*, or mercy, guides a gentle approach

to manoeuvring within and between the poles of Buddhist negativity, so well illustrated by Fuhrmann, and the pleasures and desires of this worldly existence.

Author's Response: Arnika Fuhrmann

I am delighted to have the opportunity to respond to the insightful engagement with my book, *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema*, on the part of Rachel Harrison and Megan Sinnott — two pioneering scholars in the field of Thai cultural studies. *Ghostly Desires* is foundationally indebted to the rich body of works that these two scholars have produced. My study emerges from two intellectual desires. The first is the need to provide an account of sexuality in the context of contemporary Thailand at a time when sexuality takes on a novel role in national discourses and the country's cinema and video art burgeon and circulate globally. Most importantly, *Ghostly Desires* aims to provide a Southeast Asian and Buddhist account of sexuality and negativity and thereby to intervene in writing on the topics focussed on the United States and Europe, as well as in writing that centres on global sexualities.

I am inspired by Rachel Harrison's eloquent, positive review and challenging critique of the treatment of Buddhism, temporality, and female haunting in the first chapter of *Ghostly Desires*. In response to Harrison's remarks, I welcome the opportunity to call attention to some of the nuances of femininity and temporality in contemporary Thailand that my book seeks to highlight. *Ghostly Desires* in no way aims to attribute a pervasive Buddhist temporality to "Thailand" or even to individual Thai films. Neither, I argue, does it "overlook the experience of 'subaltern time'". Rather, I develop the concept of Buddhist melancholia to denote a particular temporal move with regard to desire prominent in works of cinema and art since the late 1990s as well as, arguably, in psycho-devotional practices such as those at the shrine of Mae Nak in Phra Khanong, Bangkok.

In deliberating on the temporalities encountered in the heritage film, the first chapter of the book engages theorists such as Bliss Cua Lim precisely to delineate a divergent, locally situated conceptualization of ghostly temporality in Thailand, at least where Nonzee Nimibutr's 1999 film *Nang Nak* is concerned. I choose to engage Lim's theorizations of haunting as they represent the most sophisticated account to date of what I will call "temporal difference" in film in Asia. My analysis of *Nang Nak*, however, departs from Lim's persuasive argument that haunting can function as a reparative epistemological tool that aids the recovery of minoritized, subaltern histories. In Lim's account, haunting provides the key to revealing such histories over and against colonial occupations of time and historiography. I argue that *Nang Nak*, by contrast, represents a prime example of a narrative in which haunting does not fulfil this highly desirable function. Nak's non-revisionary mode of haunting, I further argue, is central to understanding a particular, influential strand of political rhetoric in present-day Thailand.

Nang Nak is the film of my opening analysis — my mainstream, or "conservative" example — and I investigate its deployment of female haunting to delineate a non-emancipatory position vis-à-vis history and femininity that predominates in sections of contemporary cultural production and policy rhetoric. When I first approached texts of haunting such as this one, I had expected to encounter uniformly contestatory narratives. However, I found that the domains of loss and haunting in popular culture and visual representation had long been occupied by wholly non-emancipatory political projects. The first chapter of the book thus functions to outline the non-revisionary function that haunting can also take on — the ways in which haunting does not become "oppositional" or bring about social or historical justice, as so many theorists of haunting hope that it will. It is in such calibrations that I adapt "global" theories of temporal difference to the historical specificity of the Thai context.

In this context, Harry Harootunian's work becomes relevant as a rare conceptualization of temporal difference in which divergent temporalities cease to have the nearly automatic critical

function frequently attributed to them. I build on his notion of an undifferentiated, "boundless present" to explain how temporal difference in the Thai context under review in this first chapter points to the ways in which both cultural production and post-1997 governments have inhabited and manipulated temporal mobility to highly conservative ends (Fuhrmann 2016, pp. 21, 49). This explanation constitutes my attempt precisely to conceptualize a temporality that takes into account Thailand's semi-colonial pasts, presents, and self-designations.

I very much agree with Harrison that the oppositional, primordial force of Nak's haunting — and of any female haunting — is a significant factor in a Thai cultural imaginary and understandings of (historical) temporality. My chapter acknowledges this significance throughout, but its analytic emphasis lies in tracking the function of contemporary rhetorics and delineations of femininity that are more self-consciously "Buddhist". The chapter thus underlines the ways in which the "traditional" haunting force of the female ghost is sublimated into new forms of Buddhist-nationalist expression. Moreover, I felt that the extant work on female haunting in the Thai context had already focused sufficiently on "monstrous femininity". I value the resource of psychoanalytic feminist interpretations of body and femininity as fundamentally threatening to masculinity and patriarchal order and do not dispute their applicability to the case of Thai female ghosts. Even in her partially domesticated incarnation in Nonzee Nimibutr's film, we can still read Nak as embodying such a force. However, it seemed to me that this perspective had been covered most persuasively by Harrison herself and, to an extent, by Adam Knee and writers such as Mary Beth Mills.

Harrison's explication of the work that Thai ghosts and the female body perform in the context of a psychoanalytically grounded discourse of the monstrous feminine represents the most sophisticated account of this position. Readers of *SOJOURN* will be able to draw on her text here as a valuable reference, as well as on her publications on abject femininity and female desire in the literary and cinematic domains.[2]

In addition, a strand of feminist film studies that focuses on other geographic areas, had long worked on refining this position: writers such as Carol Clover, Mary Ann Doane, Barbara Creed, and Jack Halberstam — as well as theorists such as Julia Kristeva — had developed influential critical frameworks around the notion of the feminine as abject or monstrous. The second chapter of *Ghostly Desires* addresses Thai and Asian horror genres' difference from what these theorists outline. My approach also differs from that of the analyses to date of female figures in Asian horror films, which largely interpret these in terms of sexual difference and frequently build on the work of thinkers such as Barbara Creed. The extant work further relates female figures in Asian horror largely to anxieties about changing gender roles in Asia, to body–technology themes, and to national–global anxieties in different locations across the region.

My analysis of *Nang Nak* and of Danny and Oxide Pang's 2002 film, *The Eye*, privileges other, previously undiscussed aspects of femininity and temporal difference. In the case of *Nang Nak*, I thus highlight a double reading of the ghost's import. Rather than exclusively setting Nak in opposition to patriarchy and official religion, I seek to draw out the ways in which this incarnation of the ghost fits into, and in fact carries out work, within a Buddhist-nationalist trajectory.

In the same vein, I agree with Harrison that haunting appears as a significantly embodied condition in the context of Thai cinema. But the body can also encode things other than the abject or monstrous. The book's first chapter thus analyses the ways in which Nak and Nak's corporeality also concur with newly invigorated Buddhist social norms. Conversely, I want to underline the degree to which Buddhism is being subsumed into a variety of nationalist discourses on gender and sexuality.

Here it is important to me to underline a vernacularity that has not yet been recognized — namely, the fact that Buddhism does not solely appear as a moral-ethical framework in this context. I stress that, in *Nang Nak* and also in other films, such as *Tropical Malady*,

Buddhism does not merely appear as a framework of permission or prohibition. Rather Buddhism is at times completely severed from moral-ethical import and instead becomes a special effect, a scaling tool, or a framework for fantasy. A central aspiration of *Ghostly Desires* is thus to shed light on the work that Buddhism performs not only outside of the sphere of religious instruction but also outside of the sphere of the legitimation of political authority. While we may realize that Buddhism frequently manifests in non-doctrinal ways, we are not yet equipped to recognize the ways in which it provides frameworks of affect, aesthetics, and scale.

I am grateful for Megan Sinnott's positive assessment of what *Ghostly Desires* accomplishes. The clarity and eloquence of her review makes me wish that she could have written sections of the book! And, indeed, *Ghostly Desires* is deeply reliant on Sinnott's foundational work in theorizing same-sex desires, practices, and forms of representation in Thailand.

Foregrounding the importance of negativity in the book, Sinnott reads Buddhist-informed tropes in *Ghostly Desires* in tandem with psychoanalytic accounts of desire, attachment, and detachment. She thus situates the book's mining of a vernacular Buddhist domain of psychological theorizing within larger debates in queer studies. Sinnott thereby draws out the ways in which the fields of inquiry that we call "Buddhism" and "queerness" can interrogate and enrich each other. In her account, *Ghostly Desires* is then able to inhabit and define theoretical positions that are difficult to attain, that point beyond conceptual impasses, and that enable the synthesis of seemingly incommensurable conceptions. She ends on the note of the emphasis in Buddhism on the middle way, and usefully points out that this middle way allows us to think about the *samsaric* and *nibbanic* along a line of continuity.

Sinnott's review prompts me to think that whatever *Ghostly Desires* might accomplish in the domain of queer theorizing relies also on a "middle way" conceptualization of the temporalities of negativity. My treatment of "negativity" began more broadly as an inquiry into the function and temporality of trauma that is so

prominent in the Thai cinema and art of the period from the late 1990s to the 2010s. Aiming to draw out a Buddhist, Southeast Asian perspective on the temporalities of trauma, *Ghostly Desires* arrived at what is perhaps a modified, intermediary understanding of this concept. This undertaking was carried out also in conversation with conceptualizations of the temporalities of trauma in the work of Lauren Berlant, Wendy Brown and Cathy Caruth.[3] Berlant's work, especially, directs us away from notions of trauma as a singular, momentous event and introduces the notion of adversity as a means of accurately reflecting the ongoing nature of hardship and struggle that minoritized persons experience.[4]

I argue in the book that the specificity of Buddhist melancholia — and of Buddhist temporalities of trauma — can be traced to the central position that the concept of impermanence occupies both in Buddhist thought and in its non-doctrinal citation in cultural production and vernacular practice. In the visual archive considered in the book, temporalities of endurance, rather than eventful notions of trauma and overcoming, mark negativity.

In orthodox Buddhist thought, temporality is infused with a traumatic quality even before a traumatic event occurs. In Buddhist-informed materials there is thus a particular temporal focus at work, one in which trauma is figured as ongoing. The ontological truth of the traumatic nature of existence is preeminent. The goal is not the trauma's alleviation or integration into an historical context or personal narrative, but our realization of its factuality. Subsequent to such visceral realization, one can strive for an overcoming through detachment. But the trauma's alleviation is never the primary goal. Rather, it is our conscious experience and subsequent integration of the trauma into soteriologically effective action that is required.

What orthodox Buddhism seeks in the enduring temporalities of trauma is thus realization and the relinquishing of attachment. As *Ghostly Desires* shows, the vernacular uses in contemporary Thai film and video art of this same Buddhist space derive, in contrast, from trauma and from the temporalities of deferral a recapturing, a redirection of histories of personal and collective desires. This focus on the "what could have been" and the "what could still be"

makes these temporalities so productive for queer and feminist representation.

I use the notion of Buddhist melancholia to designate the deferral of the detachment from a (lost) object that Buddhist orthodoxy — and psychoanalysis — requires. In the stories examined, everything happens within this space of deferral. What Buddhist melancholia allows for in each of the works studied is a vantage point from which to view the minute workings of loss, continued attachment, and the possibilities of agency and cognition that women and queers — ghostly and otherwise — develop within this space. Buddhist melancholia enables an elastic temporality that allows for dilation and for focus on things that otherwise slip through the cracks of attention, recognition, or acceptance. Sustaining ambiances of traumatic loss throughout, the texts and practices studied both require and enable a different kind of agency for the gendered and queer subject. In this they rely on a modified, "middle way" notion of the temporalities of negativity.

The Thai films and works of art analysed in *Ghostly Desires* have taught me not only to pay attention to the many possibilities for thinking about desire that the space of deferral or belatedness opens up, however. These works, along with the writings of Cathy Caruth, have also taught me to pay attention to continuities located precisely in the space of (seeming) discontinuity. I found that Buddhist melancholia — the affect and aesthetic that inhabits impermanence so centrally — builds worlds in which feminist and queer claims attain a legibility that differs from that of liberal claims to full citizenship and the critical tools that we usually have at our disposition.

The Eightfold Path, or "middle way", represents the path from samsaric suffering towards nibbanic liberation in Buddhist teachings. In the vernacular aesthetic sphere, rather than leading to liberation from the suffering of worldly existence, it represents a path towards liberation from rigid notions of temporality, personhood, desire, and collectivity.

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NOTES

1. Also see May Adadol Ingawanij (2007).
2. For her most recent publication on this subject, see Harrison (2017).
3. See, for example, Caruth (1995).
4. See Berlant (1999).

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