

Discovering Fear through the Camera: *Shutter* (2004)

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Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of the 2004 Thai horror movie titled *Shutter*, directed by Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom. The paper presents how the film combines various notions of horror, which stem from Thai folklore, Japanese horror films, and Western cinematographic tradition. The author argues that while the film incorporates a variety of popular horror movie tropes, such as the motif of a vengeful spirit, it also includes the notion of photography as a fear-inducing tool. The plot of *Shutter* builds on the popular belief in photography's ability to capture human spirits. However, the vengeful ghost in the movie does not only use photography to prove its existence, but also employs it to communicate a horrible truth about the photographer's actions and character. This way, the movie portrays photography as a mysterious medium, which allows unseen things to be discovered, but also depicts the character of the photographer as a monster built according to the rules of fusion described by Lewis Carroll.

Keywords: camera, folklore, ghost, horror, monster, photographer, *Shutter*, photographer, spirit, Yurei, vengeance

Introduction

Shutter's international success is based on its cultural versatility and flexibility. While the film is easily readable to a Thai viewer, who can readily recognize references to the traditional beliefs and vernacular folklore that are incorporated into the modern-type narration, this cultural code does not make the movie imperceptible to a non-Thai viewer. *Shutter*'s popularity in Asia can be explained by the movie's structural similarity to Japanese horror, which in the 1990s and early 2000s dominated the genre and set the standards for Asian horror films.¹ At the same time, *Shutter* successfully subscribes to the Western cinematic tradition of horror, which is very familiar with the concept of a vengeful spirit and has successfully used the notion of ghost photography since 1976, when Richard Donner's cult movie, *The Omen*, revived the genre for the American and European audience.

Shutter is a Thai horror movie directed by two young filmmakers, Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, who collaborated with Sapon Sukdapisit to write the script. Ananda Everingham, Natthaweeranuch Thongmee, and Achita Sikamana star in the leading roles. *Shutter* proved to be a breakthrough in the careers of these young creators and actors.²

The movie premiered in Thailand on September 9, 2004, and after taking first place at the box office, it became the fifth-highest grossing film in Thailand in 2004.³ Following its domestic success, that same year *Shutter* was released in Hong-Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore, where it was also very well received. The year 2005 marked the film's premiere in the United States, Philippines, South Korea, and in most European countries. The following year, *Shutter* reached South American and Japanese movie theaters. In 2007, the film was released on DVD in the Netherlands, Finland, and Sweden, and a year later in the United States, where it is also known as *Shutter: They Are Around Us* and *Shutter: The Original*.⁴

Shutter was nominated for the Golden Kinnaree Award for Best Film at the Bangkok International Film Festival in 2005, and a year later it won the Audience Award at the Gérardmer Film Festival in France. It was also presented at numerous film festivals, including München

Fantasy Filmfest (Germany, 2005), Lund Fantastisk Film Festival (Sweden 2005), Sitges Film Festival (Spain, 2005), Vienna International Film Festival (Austria, 2005), Lyon Asiexpo Film Festival (France, 2005), FilmAsia Festival (Czech Republic, 2005), and Dead by Dawn: Scotland's International Film Festival (UK, 2007).

Shutter's popularity is indicated by how many remakes of it have been made. In India alone, the movie was remade three times: first in the Telugu language as *Photo* (2006), a year later in Tamil as *Sivi*, and in 2010 in Hindi as *Click*. In 2008, the American remake of *Shutter* was released under the same title. The argument presented in this paper concentrates almost entirely on the original 2004 *Shutter* and does not offer any comprehensive comparative analysis of the movie's renditions. All the remakes feature very similar plot lines based on the original film, and only the American version demonstrates some meaningful deviations. The brief discussion of the American *Shutter* in the latter part of this paper is aimed towards better understanding of the Thai movie and its phenomenon.

Despite its commercial success, neither critics nor film researchers have paid excessive attention to *Shutter*. A note about the film appears in the popular horror-related blog written by Brian Collins, titled *Horror Movie a Day*, which is followed by the book with the same title.⁵ In addition, most of the reviewers do not take into consideration the movie's Thai origins but rather describe it simply as an example of Asian cinematography and discuss it within J-Horror discourse.⁶ While I agree that J-Horror methodology serves as a very useful tool to talk about *Shutter*, my paper demonstrates that the movie's success is based mostly on the subtle incorporation and combination of various traditions that include, besides motifs typical to J-Horror, elements of Thai vernacular folklore, urban legends, and plot structures typical of European and American cinematic storytelling.

The Complex Discovery Plot

As Noël Carroll writes in his study titled *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, "anybody familiar with the genre of horror knows

that its plots are very repetitive.”⁷ Following this concept, the author identifies a number of narrative structures and characteristic horror plots, among which, according to Carroll, a complex discovery plot plays a dominant role. A complex discovery plot consists of four essential movements or functions, which include onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation. It features a protagonist, who, as a result of his or her purposeful actions, unveils some terrifying truth that stems from the actions of the antagonist. This set-up makes complex discovery plot a typical outline for both horror genre and detective fiction.

The story told in *Shutter* is built according to the rules of a complex discovery plot. The beginning of the film introduces the main characters, a young photographer named Tun and his girlfriend, Jane. Their perfectly average and seemingly happy lives change drastically in the second scene of the movie, when the car driven by Jane hits a girl on the road and the couple decides to leave the victim behind. After the accident, Tun’s photographic works start to show white smears and, in some cases, an extra person who bears an uncanny resemblance to a girl from the accident. While Jane spirals further into guilt and Tun keeps looking for a rational explanation for his professional problems, various people start suggesting, first jokingly and then more seriously, that a spirit may be haunting Tun’s photographs.

At the onset of the film, the phantom appears randomly and erratically. In addition to surfacing in Tun’s photographs, it seems to inhabit the photographer’s darkroom. In her dreams, Jane sees a girl crawling from the sink and a woman-shaped creature enters the darkroom as Tun works on his prints. While these phenomena scare the photographer and his girlfriend, in the onset part, their approach toward the situation is passive and marked with resignation. However, in the following discovery phase, Jane takes on the role of an active protagonist and starts purposefully searching for the ghost that troubles her and her boyfriend.

Equipped with a Polaroid camera, Jane manages to capture a picture of a phantom woman in the Bangkok University laboratory. When she panics, a framed photograph falls from the wall, and among the displayed students, Jane recognizes the face of the girl who has been

appearing as a “ghost” on Tun’s photographs. While she realizes that this is the same person whom she hit with her car, the image’s caption provides her with a name, Natrenaja Chan-NGan. Later at home, Jane discovers another photograph, this time one that shows Natrenaja with Tun. Confronted by Jane, the photographer confesses that Natre, how he calls the girl, was a former girlfriend who had disappeared from his life some time ago.

In the confirmation phase of the film, Tun and Jane travel to Natre’s home in a provincial village, where they find out that the girl had committed a suicide and her body was never buried. This distressful news provides them with a validation of their suspicions, as according to folk beliefs, which they seem to heartily accept, the soul of an unburied person cannot rest in peace and often gets stuck between the worlds of the living and the dead. When Natre’s mother promises to cremate the mummified body, the couple feels hopeful that their troubles will end, but soon after the funeral, they find out that the ritual failed their expectations. When the movie enters the confrontation phase, the audience faces a plot twist, which makes the viewer reevaluate his or her notions about which of the film’s characters can be identified as a monster.

Naturally, it is easy to say that the ghost of Natre fulfills this role. Once again using Carroll’s terminology, the phantom that haunts Tun and his girlfriend can be identified as a typical product of fusion, which, according to the author of *The Philosophy of Horror*, is the most popular method of constructing horrific beings in the horror genre.⁸ In his taxonomy of monsters, Carroll describes a fusion-type being as a creature that transgresses the conflicting categories and appears “impure” because it is impossible to conclusively determine its nature. The examples that Carroll provides to illustrate his argument include monsters such as zombies, demonic possessions, and ghosts that venture to the world of the living. In light of this theory, Natre violates the division between the living and the dead in an exemplary way for a fusion-type creature. She is dead, but actively operates in the world of the living, belongs to neither of the realms, and represents a disturbance to the natural order. At the same time, however, when she falls into the general category

of “ghosts,” any horror devotee will notice that the phantom depicted in *Shutter* displays a strong resemblance to a vengeful spirit known in Japanese folklore as Yūrei. This character was made widely recognizable by celebrated Japanese horrors, such as *The Ring* (1998) or *The Grudge* (2004), which used the concept of Yūrei as main antagonists.

“Dead Wet Girls”

In his book titled *J-Horror: The Definite Guide to “The Ring,” “The Grunge” and Beyond*, David Kalat describes popular cinematic embodiments of Yūrei as “Dead Wet Girls,” who are ghosts of young women that died early in their lives due to the betrayal by their loved ones and come back from their graves to take revenge on them.⁹ According to the author, the distinctive appearance of “Dead Wet Girls” is a key element to understanding their character. First, by looking simultaneously tantalizing and repulsive, androgynous “Dead Wet Girls” transgress traditional categories of gender and beauty. As a rule, they look very young, almost childish, with fragile, boyish figures and long, black hair. While from far away they may pass for a living person, closer contact reveals terrifying details, such as bleeding eyes, gruesome wounds, or signs of decay. The clothing of “Dead Wet Girls” is also vague and impure, as their seemingly neat school uniforms and white dresses betray their various stages of decomposition. According to the author, numerous deviations and contradictions, which are characteristic to “Dead Wet Girls” appearance represent their rebellion against the societal rules, which these young women used to unquestioningly follow during their lifetimes. The categories proposed by Kalat find its application in the analysis of *Shutter*’s antagonist.

When Natre appears in flashbacks as a student at the university, her demeanor is always fastidious and immaculate. The girl features perfectly groomed mid-length hair and wears sensible, subdued clothing, which makes her blend into the background to the point of becoming almost invisible. This style mirrors Natre’s shy and submissive personality, as well as her adherence to the traditional demeanor of a respectable young Thai woman. In contrast, after her death, Natre

demonstratively abandons her lackluster looks and acquires the unkempt bearing of a “Dead Wet Girl,” characterized by disheveled hair falling on her face as well as her soiled dress and multiple signs of putrefaction. This alteration is accompanied with the change of her character, which drastically transforms from passive and complying to active and aggressive. It can be said that by abandoning her socially acceptable appearance, Natre establishes for herself a new reality with no rules, where she can wear whatever she wants and behave as she pleases.

In accordance with the definition given by Kalat, not only does the phantom portrayed in *Shutter* look dirty and disarrayed, but also she repeatedly appears to be associated with water or simply looks “wet.” In addition to materializing in rain, Natre seems strongly linked to Tun’s darkroom, which is the place that hosts the “wet” part of the photographic process. The ghost manifests herself in prints, which are still emerged in developing solutions in the darkroom, and crawls from a sink that is full of water. As Kalat argues, in Asian cultures, water is associated with emotionality, and the “wet” component of “Dead Wet Girls” moniker implies their passionate nature, which once again stands in contrast with the restrained demeanor traditionally expected from young Asian women. However, Natre’s connection with water can be also interpreted within Carroll’s fusion theory. In light of Carroll’s argument, the phantom’s affinity with the liquid element enhances the notion of her impurity and abomination, as this kind of environment is generally perceived as hostile to human beings.

Nevertheless, Natre’s association with water is only one example of the phantom’s many aberrations. Not only does the ghost thrive in aquatic conditions, but she also defies gravity and moves in abnormal and disturbing ways. For example, Natre displays the ability to fly parallel to the running car, walk upside-down on the ceiling, and crawl headfirst down the fire exit ladder. This behavior brings to mind movements of reptiles, insects, or arachnids and, once again, contradicts the humanoid shape of the phantom. The way Natre moves, together with her association with water, makes her not only scary, but also loathsome. As a result, this strips her from her human element and blocks any positive or sympathetic feelings that her fragile and child-like

demeanor may otherwise invoke.

In addition to these abnormalities, the decisive factor in Natre's monstrous identity is her threatening quality. Not only does the phantom look scary, but she also presents a real danger to those who can see her or whom she intends to hurt. When the girl first manifests herself in front of the car, Jane loses control of her vehicle and hits a billboard. Even though Jane and Tun manage to escape major injuries, shortly after the accident, the photographer's health declines rapidly, with neck pains being his major complaint. In addition, Tun finds out that three of his closest college friends committed suicide under mysterious circumstances, which obviously involved paranormal activity. All these occurrences make the photographer fear for his own life.

Shutter's audience reflects Tun and Jane's emotions of fear and repulsion in contact with Natre's phantom. It happens on the basis of the mirroring-effect, which Carroll describes as "a key feature of the horror genre."¹⁰ Furthermore, Tun's character is developed in a way that makes him likable. The effect is achieved by the combination of the photographer's good looks, benevolent smile, and amiable character. Tun seems genuinely attached to Jane, and they both lead a perfectly happy life that gets destroyed by the appearance of the monster, whose restlessness makes the viewer companionable toward the couple. The information revealed in the confrontation phase of the film, however, makes the notion of Tun's virtue fall under scrutiny.

After returning from Natre's funeral, Jane discovers photographs exposing the phantom's presence in the apartment. Furthermore, she figures out that the images can be organized into a sequence that shows the ghost painfully and desperately pointing toward something in the room. Following this gesture, Jane stumbles upon a series of images that display Natre being raped by Tun's friends. Confronted by his girlfriend, the photographer acknowledges taking the photographs and explains that hurting and humiliating Natre was the only way to get rid of a girlfriend who, according to his opinion, grew overly attached and difficult to deal with. His confession, supported by a disturbing scene of the pleading girl being gang-raped on the laboratory floor with the photographer taking pictures, is a turning point of the narration. Natre,

initially perceived as a monster, actually turns out to be a victim who is damaged not only by the physical and mental trauma of rape, but also by the betrayal of the one she loved. According to the rules of a model ghost story, unable to find peace in death, the girl comes back from the grave to avenge her oppressors.

In this situation, the viewer can regard Natre's revenge as "just" and "deserved." Likewise, the audience's compassion for Tun lessens and the seemingly likable photographer replaces Natre as the story's monster. Not only is he guilty of a horrible crime, but the analysis of his image also identifies him as a product of a horrific fusion, which determines Natre's monstrosity. The main factor that allows this interpretation of Tun is his photographic profession and his attachment to his camera.

Tun commits his crime with the use of the apparatus. While witnessing Natre's rape, the photographer seemingly freezes, and the only part of his body that remains active is his finger, which keeps pressing the release button. It can be said that in the rape scene, Tun becomes a hybrid machine-man, a monster built according to the rules of Carroll's fusion in a way very similar to this, which is used in the construction of Natre's character. He becomes both "impure" and dangerous, while a mechanical apparatus firmly attached to his body takes control of the photographer and strips him of his humanity. Even if he does not actively participate in the rape, Tun violates Natre with his camera as he watches and records his friends' sordid deeds. The apparatus plays for him a double role of a shield that blocks Tun's emotions and allows him to distance himself from the violated girl and of a metaphorical phallus, with which the photographer penetrates the victim.

This image is consistent with the way Natre perceives Tun's camera. For the girl the apparatus appears both to be an object of imminent torment and the promise of more pain. The traumatized victim is not able to see the images taken by Tun as possibly useful tools, which could be used against the rapists in a criminal prosecution case, but instead, according to the rules of the patriarchal society in which she lives, she sees them solely as a testimony of her humiliation and a potentiality for more shame. The fact that after her death, the girl chooses a medium

perceived as traditionally “male”¹¹ as a vehicle for vengeance against her tormentors is emblematic for the change of her character and epitomizes her rebellion against the societal rules that she followed during her life.

Throughout the movie, Natre’s phantom uses photographs and photographic paraphernalia to manifest itself and send messages. The images that appear on Tun’s photographs are consistent with the tradition of so-called spirit portraiture established in the second half of the 19th century. As John Harvey notices in *Photography and Spirits*, even if spirit photographs created in different countries sometimes significantly varied in style,¹² they have a common source in “conventions of representing ghosts in the pre-photographic period,”¹³ such as religious paintings, which depict saints and angels. Even today, spirit photography, which still enjoys a certain degree of popularity and from time to time electrifies the public with a newly captured “manifestation,” commonly reproduces conventions established in 19th century imagery. This is even more surprising considering that photographic techniques, including spirit photography, have changed significantly since the 1800s.

In the 1800s, a typical career spirit photographer worked in a studio, often with a professional medium, and “ghosts” were actively summoned to pose in the front of the camera. It means that “spirits” that appeared in commercially produced 19th century photos were invited, welcomed, and appreciated by the studio patrons. The main goal of spirit photography was to provide comfort and reassurance to the living, which was achieved by displaying “spirits” leading happy and serene afterlives.¹⁴ The photographer was in control of the entire process, and in the 1800s, there was no custom of producing images of evil or suffering spirits. In the 20th century, following the progress in photographic technology, spirit photography became an important part of pop culture and provided substance for numerous urban legends that featured “discoveries” of “spirits” in candid photographs taken by amateur photographers outside the controlled environment of the studio.¹⁵ While this concept is obviously closely tied to the belief in the camera’s ability to detect phenomena unseen by the bare eye, unwanted appearances rarely soothe the public the way they did in 19th century spirit photography. Instead, in the 1900 and the decades following,

ghost photography keeps sending the message that there are plenty of unknown phenomena that human reason and technology cannot control.

Shutter subscribes to this pop-cultural notion of spirit photography by displaying an unsolicited phantom that causes confusion and fear. Not only does the photographer lack any authority over Natre's appearances and behavior, but the spirit claims control of his camera, an action that leaves Tun powerless. While it might seem that the photographer "discovers" the presence of Natre with his apparatus, in fact, it is the spirit who uses the apparatus to manifest its presence and convey its disturbing message to the living.

In the last scenes of the confrontational phase of the movie, angered Jane leaves Tun, and the photographer decides to confront the phantom himself. To detect Natre's presence in his apartment, he frantically keeps snapping with the Polaroid camera, but fails to find the spirit. Only when the camera falls to the floor does the Polaroid produce an image of Tun with Natre's phantom firmly attached to his back. Terrified by this picture, the photographer falls from the window, but surprisingly survives the fall. The very last scene of the film depicts Tun catatonically sitting on a hospital bed with Natre's ghost possessively clutching his body.

In light of this development, it could be said that Natre's nature is not purely emotional and bloodthirsty, as her "Dead Wet Girl" demeanor suggests, but instead, the phantom's behavior betrays logic and cunning planning. Even if Natre mercilessly chases her rapists to their suicidal death, it is apparent that she never intended to kill Tun, but rather acted toward reclaiming him. To achieve her goal, Natre systematically isolates the photographer from other people, which makes him scared and vulnerable. Most importantly, the spirit establishes a strange relationship with Jane, whom she provides with clues, which gradually lead the photographer's girlfriend to the discovery that makes her abandon him. With Jane gone, Natre has Tun all for herself, which is expressed by the image of the phantom possessively clinging to the photographer's back in the hospital room. This picture is disturbingly reminiscent of the ones showing Natre and Tun as a couple during their university days.

In *J-Horror*, Kalat notices that one of the most important differences

between American horror and its Asian counterparts is the notion that in Western films, characters are afraid to die, while in Japanese, Korean, or Thai films, protagonists realize that death is not the worst thing that can happen to them.¹⁶ It is well exemplified in *Shutter*, where Tun, who verbalizes numerous times his fear of dying, decides to kill himself rather than face the alternative, which is life with Natre's phantom attached to his back. This striking difference between the Western and Eastern concepts of horror has its roots in various understandings of the nature of supernatural phenomena.

With a certain degree of generalization, it can be said that Western culture appears to prefer more rationalistic and empirical approaches toward reality, while Asian nations, including Thailand, demonstrate more confidence in the existence of unseen phenomena.¹⁷ As described by Harvey in his Introduction to *Photography and Spirit*, the Western concept of a spirit, aside from a few exceptions, contains a general idea of uncertainty and "vagueness." According to the author, this approach dates back to ancient times, and finds its reflection in the literary texts, such as *The Iliad* (c. 800 BC), which describes ghosts as "insubstantial as smoke," and Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* (167), where the emperor talks about souls in categories of "dreams and vapours."¹⁸ In general, according to Harvey, an ephemeral, indistinctive, and powerless Western "other" appears in the world of the living exclusively under very specific circumstances and occupies only restricted margins of this realm. At the same time the Thai notion of a ghost indicates a strikingly different creature.

The "Ghost Business" in Thailand

As Thomas Fuller puts it in his *New York Times* article dated February 10, 2015, meaningfully titled, "In Thailand, the Ghost Business Thrives,"¹⁹ the belief in a wide variety of ghosts and spirits cohabitating the same realm as human beings is commonplace at every level of Thai society. Not only are numerous ghosts a fact of every day reality among the Thai, but also they are corporeal, individual, and easily identifiable in ways that are unthinkable in Western beliefs. In Thailand, the world of the living

is filled with structures and paraphernalia dedicated to supernatural phenomena. While temples and small spirit houses are essential parts of the landscape, various amulets and protective figurines fill houses, cars, and commercial spaces. In addition, rituals dedicated to numerous spirits are almost seamlessly incorporated into daily life, which suggests ancient, animistic, and pre-Buddhist origins of these practices. In addition to their longevity, many beliefs result from cultural exchange and foreign influences, which makes it practically impossible to establish the precise sources of a particular imagery, story, or a ritual.

Many of the supernatural creatures that populate Thai folklore are benevolent or neutral toward human beings, which allows for peaceful cohabitation in a common space. Other times, however, a strikingly high number of malevolent, angry ghosts often represent a folk idea of justice. The extensive list includes such creatures as Phi Tai Thong Klom, a spirit of a young woman who either killed herself or died in childbirth after being betrayed by her lover, or Phi Tai Hong, a ghost of one who suffered a violent or cruel death. Not only are such phantoms portrayed as visually scary creatures, but, more importantly, they can physically torment people. For example, Phi Am attacks a human in his or her sleep and suffocates them by sitting on their chest, while a female spirit named Chao Kam Nai Wen is known to position itself on the back of a living person.

In this context, the spirit featured in *Shutter* can be identified not only as a creature modeled on the matrix developed by Japanese horror creators, but also one that is deeply rooted in native Thai legends and beliefs. Natre displays similarities both to Phi Tai Thong Klom, who takes revenge on the unfaithful lover who drove her to her grave, and to Chao Kam Nai Wen, whom she resembles in appearance and behavior. This affiliation to the creatures that are present in Thai culture for centuries makes the *Shutter* phantom both more real and more frightening. Natre's tangibility is deeply rooted in the corporeality of Thai folk ghosts, which differs significantly from the insubstantial, airy phantoms imagined in the West. For example, when the car driven by Jane "hits" the spirit on the road, it does not go through the phantom, but the collision is real and sends the vehicle spinning. In addition, even if the spirit is generally

imperceptible, some “special” people, such as a young monk in Natre’s village, can see the girl attached to Tun’s back. Finally, Natre’s physicality manifests itself in the form of Tun’s neck and back pains, as well as his weight, which, unexplainably doubles since the accident.

Natre makes the photographer physically sick, and both his mental and physical suffering are genuine. Such interpretation of a ghost is common in Asian horror, which sometimes displays the idea of the malevolent spirit taking a form of a virus. The most well known example is probably provided by the celebrated *Ring* trilogy written by Koji Suzuki, which was also turned into numerous movies and a TV series. The antagonists featured in the story, Sadako Yamamura, bears many similarities to Natre. This archetypal “Dead Wet Girl” fashions her curse through a videotape that brings death to anyone who watches it. While most of the characters never find out how to lift the curse and perish as a result, the protagonist of *The Ring* finally discovers that the only way to survive is to make a copy of the recording and, in this way, spread “the virus.” Analogically, in *Shutter*, Tun and Jane hope that a proper funeral, which Thai tradition prescribes as the proper “antidote” for a wandering spirit,²⁰ would mollify Natre and save Tun from his impending doom. When the ritual fails to fulfill their expectations, however, neither they nor the audience ever learn if any other remedy could have lifted Natre’s curse.

Despite *Shutter*’s universality, however, the creators of its remakes found it appropriate to adjust their work to specific audiences. For example, the 2010 Hindi version, *Click*, represents a Bollywood horror, which addresses a relatively small group of amateurs of this very particular cinematic genre. On the other hand, the American remake of 2008 strives to expand the appeal of the original *Shutter* to Western audiences by introducing changes that mostly strip the plot of its original vagueness and bring up more verbatim interpretations.

The producers’ decision to choose a Japanese horror movie director, Masayuki Ochiai, to work on the American remake sets the tone of the film. Not only does Ochiai make his *Shutter* much closer to a standard J-horror movie, but he also moves the action of the film to Japan, with Tokyo as the main backdrop of the story. At the same time, the American

version of *Shutter* is also purposefully westernized and much “cleaner” than the original film. For example, Jane and the photographer, whose name is Ben, are actually married and they travel to Japan on Ben’s work assignment. Various versions differ significantly when it comes to the accident scene. In the American film, Jane is completely sober, while in the Thai version of *Shutter*, the sobriety of the girl is not that obvious, and in the Indian version, the female driver is completely drunk. In addition, it is only in the American remake that the young couple does not flee from the crash scene and instead dutifully call the authorities.

Even though the remake tells practically the same story, different parts of the plot’s structure are emphasized. The Thai film is deeply rooted in the vernacular, and its main characters, despite being young professionals living in a capital city, accept the presence of Natre’s ghost without any doubts or hesitation. Actually, for Tun and Jane, the main issue is not the fact that the ghost exists, but rather why it appears to them in such a scary manner. On the other hand, for the American couple, the presence of the supernatural phenomena is shocking by itself. This experience is especially stressful for Jane, whose foreignness and loneliness in Tokyo are continuously underscored by her strikingly different looks, which stand out on Tokyo’s crowded streets, and her inability to communicate with locals. Not only is she perpetually lost in this unfamiliar city, but she also feels isolated from her husband, who speaks Japanese and appears at ease with the people who keep Jane at a distance. While being rejected by the living, the photographer’s wife finds an unlikely ally in the ghost of her husband’s dead girlfriend, and her relationship with the phantom is the most significant difference between various renditions of the film.

In the Thai version of *Shutter*, Natre, who represents the fusion of a tragic lover with a vengeful spirit from Thai folklore, does not care about Jane, while Megumi in the American remake seems to be more sympathetic toward the photographer’s wife. The 2008 retelling of the story makes it clear that the spirit’s goal is not only to reclaim her former lover, but also to warn Jane about Ben’s crimes and save her from sharing her life with a monster. Such a feminist motif is absent in the original *Shutter*, and its addition is certainly targeted toward the Western

audience. Despite Megumi being much louder and more aggressive than Natre, this version of a “Dead Wet Girl” seems more practical and considerate, while her vengeance is much more carefully targeted.

In short, the creators of the American remake “explain” *Shutter* to the Western audience in a completely unnecessary way. It has to be pointed out that this kind of approach often finds justification in academic discourse. For example, in her study titled *Japanese and American Horror*, Katarzyna Marak argues that “a work of horror can genuinely frighten its audience only when the audience understands clearly what it is that they should be afraid of.”²¹ As an example, the author provides the case of the 1999 Thai horror film titled *Nang Nak*, which is based on a folk story about a husband who comes back home from war to encounter the ghosts of his deceased family. According to Marak, only viewers who know the legend of Nak are able to understand the movie, but she seems to overlook the fact that *The Others* (2001), the acclaimed American gothic horror by Alejandro Amenábar, features an almost identical story. The similarity of these two films demonstrates that despite certain differences, a universal language of fear and horror that is comprehensible by most cultures prevails. The creators of the original *Shutter* seem to speak this language very well.

Notes

¹ David Kalat, *J-Horror: The Definite Guide to “The Ring,” “The Grunge” and Beyond* (New York: Vertical Inc., 2007), 188.

² http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0440803/?ref_=ttrel_rel_tt, accessed June 22, 2016.

³ <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/thailand/yearly/?yr=2004&p=htm>, accessed June 21, 2016.

⁴ http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0440803/releaseinfo?ref_=ttfc_sa_1, accessed June 21, 2016.

⁵ For the blog, see <http://horror-movie-a-day.blogspot.com/2010/05/shutter.html>, accessed June 21, 2016. For the book, see Brian W. Collins, *Horror Movie a Day: The Book. Horror Movie Recommendation for Every Day of the Year* (Austin: Birth.Movies.Death, 2016).

⁶ For some still accessible on-line reviews of the film, see Steve Biodrowski, “*Shutter* (2004) DVD Review,” <http://cinefantastiqueonline.com/2008/03/film-review->

shutter-2004/, or anonymous reviews at <http://horrornews.net/42535/film-review-shutter-2004/>, accessed June 21, 2016; <http://www.beyondhollywood.com/shutter-2004-movie-review>, accessed June 21, 2016.

⁷ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 99.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹ Kalat, *J-Horror*, 17.

¹⁰ Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 18.

¹¹ Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2010), 8.

¹² John Harvey, *Photography and Spirit* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Clément Chéroux et al., *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 15.

¹⁵ This evolution is well displayed by the Haunted Museum website. See http://www.prairieghosts.com/ph_history.html. See also: Howard Timberlake, *The intriguing history of ghost photography* <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20150629-the-intriguing-history-of-ghost-photography>, accessed June 21, 2016.

¹⁶ Kalat, *J-Horror*, 18.

¹⁷ See Kristen W. Endres and Andrea Lauser, “Multivocal Arenas of Modern Enchantment in Southeast Asia,” in *Engaging the Spirit World: Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia*, ed. Kristen W. Endres and Andrea Lauser (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 1-18.

¹⁸ Harvey, *Photography and Spirit*, 17.

¹⁹ Thomas Fuller, “In Thailand, the Ghost Business Thrives,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 10, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/11/world/in-thailand-the-ghost-business-thrives.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FGhosts&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=4&pgtype=collection&_r=0, accessed June 21, 2016.

²⁰ Justin Thomas McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 126.

²¹ Katarzyna Marak, *Japanese and American Horror: A Comparative Study of Film, Fiction, Graphic Novels and Video Games* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014.), Kindle edition.