

## บทความวิจัย

# เมื่อผู้หญิงหลอกหลอนกลับ: การปราကูร่างของความ น่าสะพรึงกลัวในภาพยนตร์สยองขวัญไทยเรื่อง “ร่างทรง”

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์ภาพยนตร์เรื่อง “ร่างทรง” (บรรจง ปิสัญจน์กุล, 2564) โดยมุ่งศึกษาว่าภาพยนตร์เรื่องนี้ปรับประยุกต์และท้าทายแนวคิดจิตวิเคราะห์แบบตะวันตก (ทฤษฎี abjection, monstrous-feminine, และ fragmented body) อย่างไร เมื่อถูกนำมามาใช้ในบริบทความเชื่อเรื่องผีและพิธีกรรมร่างทรงของชาวอีสาน การศึกษานี้ใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ โดยอาศัยการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาภาพยนตร์และทบทวนงานวิชาการด้านคติชนอีสานและทฤษฎีจิตวิเคราะห์ เพื่อเปิดเผยคุณค่าเฉพาะตัวของภาพยนตร์ไทยในการผสานวัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่นเข้ากับวัฒนธรรมสากล

ผลการวิจัยพบว่า ภาพยนตร์ร่างทรงมีความโดยเด่นในการสร้างความสมดุลระหว่างความบันเทิงและการอนุรักษ์วัฒนธรรม โดย 1) การตีความ Abjection ใหม่ ผ่านความกังวลต่อการปนเปื้อนของร่างกายที่เชื่อมโยงกับกรมในคติชนอีสาน ซึ่งแตกต่างจากความกังวลทางจิตวิทยาแบบตะวันตก 2) การเสริมพลังหญิง (Female Agency) ถูกนำเสนอผ่านอัตลักษณ์ของ monstrous-feminine และอำนาจทางจิตวิญญาณของผู้เป็นร่างทรงหญิงซึ่งท้าทายโครงสร้างอำนาจภายในที่

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ในท้องถิ่น และ 3) การวิเคราะห์ผ่านเลนส์สตรีนิยม ช่วยสร้างมิติสากระดับที่เข้าถึงผู้ชุมต่างชาติ โดยเน้นย้ำถึงประเด็นความกดขี่ทางเพศและความทุกข์ระทมของตัวละครหญิงในวัฒนธรรม

ภาคยนตร์เรื่องร่างทรง ประสบความสำเร็จในการนำเสนออัตลักษณ์ของคติชนอีสานสู่เวทีโลก ซึ่งถือเป็น Soft Power ทางวัฒนธรรมที่สำคัญ การวิเคราะห์ที่นี้แสดงให้เห็นว่า ภาคยนตร์ส่ายองขวัญที่มีรากฐานทางวัฒนธรรมและมีการวิเคราะห์เชิงทฤษฎีอย่างลุ่มลึก สามารถเป็นสื่อสร้างสรรค์ที่ส่งเสริมความรู้ให้ทันสื่อ (Media Literacy) และการใคร่ครวญของผู้ชมเกี่ยวกับประเด็นทางสังคมและเพศสภาพ อันเป็นส่วนสำคัญในการพัฒนานิเวศสื่อที่ปลอดภัยและสร้างสรรค์ของประเทศไทย

**คำสำคัญ:** ภาคยนตร์ส่ายองขวัญไทย, คติชนอีสาน, อสรุกาやりศรี,  
ทฤษฎีภาคยนตร์จิตวิเคราะห์, เพศภาวะและจิตวิญญาณ

## When Women Haunt Back: Embodying the Monstrous in Thai Horror Cinema's *The Medium*

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### Abstract

This article examines the film *The Medium* (2021, dir. *Banjong Pisathanakun*) focusing on how it adapts and challenges Western psychoanalytic concepts, specifically Julia Kristeva's abjection, Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine, and Jacques Lacan's fragmented body, when applied within the context of *Isan* cosmology and spirit medium rituals in Thailand. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology based on close textual analysis and a review of academic literature on *Isan* folklore and psychoanalytic theory, this study aims to reveal the unique value of Thai cinema in harmoniously blending local culture with universal cinematic discourse.

The findings show that *The Medium* excels at balancing entertainment with cultural preservation by 1) Reinterpreting Abjection as a cultural anxiety over bodily purity and contamination linked to *karma* and hostile spirits in *Isan* belief, distinct from purely Western psychological concerns; 2) The Monstrous-Feminine is reframed to embody female spiritual agency, an uncontrolled

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power that challenges traditional gender roles and patriarchal family structures in *Isan* society and; 3) The application of a feminist perspective creates a universal theme, transcending cultural boundaries by centring the narrative on the emotional and physical oppression of its female characters, making the film accessible to international audiences.

*The Medium*, therefore, demonstrates significant value in promoting *Isan* cosmology and Thai identity on a global stage, positioning it as vital cultural Soft Power. This analysis proves that culturally rooted horror cinema, when studied rigorously, can function as creative and constructive media. It directly fosters critical media literacy and audience reflection on complex social and gender issues, thus contributing significantly to the development of a safe and creative media ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Thai Horror Cinema, *Isan* Cosmology, Monstrous-Feminine, Psychoanalytic Film Theory, Gender and Spirituality

## Introduction

Thai horror cinema occupies a distinctive place within both national and international contexts, recognized for its ability to blend local folklore, spiritual beliefs, and contemporary narrative techniques into compelling films (Ancuta, 2011) that deeply resonate with audiences. Unlike its Western counterparts that often emphasize explicit violence or psychological terror (Freeland, 2000), Thai horror has developed a signature style rooted in moral storytelling and emotional symbolism (Fuhrmann, 2009). Major works such as *Nang Nak* (dir. Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999), *Shutter* (dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, 2004), and *Pee Mak* (dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun, 2013) exemplify how horror in Thailand translates superstition and spiritual belief into reflections of guilt, karma, and the social order (Ainslie, 2016). This success is not merely commercial; it positions Thai cinema as a significant form of cultural Soft Power, engaging international audiences with the country's unique spiritual and social landscape (Knee, 2013). Over time, periods of modernization and cross-cultural exchange have led Thai horror to incorporate more psychological and urban themes, reflecting the nation's shifting cultural landscape.

In recent years, Northeast Thailand (*Isan*) has emerged as a rich and distinct setting for horror narratives. *Isan* cosmology, characterized by its elaborate *phi* (spirit) structures and rituals of mediumship, has long emphasized matrilineal relationships between spirits and their human counterparts (Endres, 2011; Turton, 1972). Spirit mediums, or *rang song*, function as healers and custodians of ancestral wisdom while occupying ambivalent social

positions that command both reverence and suspicion (Poshakrishna, 2023; Meethaisong, 2021). These culturally specific stories provide new opportunities to explore gender, embodiment, and social power through the lens of *Isan* animism.

*The Medium* (2021, dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun) exemplifies this evolution. Using a mockumentary and found-footage style, the film situates the haunting within an *Isan* village to depict familial and spiritual inheritance. Centred around a female spirit medium, and her family's matrilineal inheritance of spiritual power, the film presents possession, ritual, and supernatural anxiety as both personal and communal crises. Unlike its predecessors, *The Medium* blends documentary realism with horror conventions to create an ethnographic yet terrifying narrative, highlighting the intersection of gender, religion, and local identity. Despite extensive global scholarship applying psychoanalytic theory to horror cinema, much of this literature, particularly the influential works of Kristeva's theory of abjection (1982); Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine (1993); and Lacan's concept of the fragmented body (1977), originates from Western cultural contexts. Few studies have integrated these theoretical perspectives with Southeast Asian spiritual traditions, especially those connected to *Isan* spirit mediumship and Buddhist-influenced animism. This research, thus, seeks to bridge this gap by reinterpreting psychoanalytic horror theory within the lived spirituality of *Isan* women, focusing on how local forms of haunting and possession give new meaning to concepts like abjection, monstrosity, and psychic fragmentation.

To guide this analysis, the study focuses on how *The Medium* utilizes *Isan* animistic beliefs to reconfigure and challenge these Western psychoanalytic theories, examining the ways this culturally specific reinterpretation of monstrosity contests universalist assumptions, revealing localized critiques of gender roles and power structures (Keetley, 2015; Sanpinit, 2023; Creed, 1993). Ultimately, this research aims to demonstrate the film's capacity to serve as a model for creative and constructive media. By fostering a sophisticated understanding of complex cultural and social dynamics, this analysis contributes directly to promoting critical media literacy and the development of a safe and creative media ecosystem within the Thai context.

## Objectives

1. To analyze how *The Medium* reinterprets Western psychoanalytic theories by embedding them within *Isan* cosmology and local ritual practices.
2. To examine how this culturally specific framework challenges universalist assumptions and reveals localized critiques of gender roles and power structures in contemporary rural Thai society.
3. To contribute to the fields of horror studies, gender studies, and Southeast Asian film by demonstrating the value of culturally grounded theoretical analysis for non-Western horror cinema.

## Contribution

This study offers a culturally nuanced reading of *The Medium*, illustrating horror cinema's interrogation of spirituality, gender, and social authority within a specific context. Grounded in Thai beliefs about gender, spirituality, and family, the paper challenges universal Western psychoanalytic models, highlighting localized approaches. The research expands horror studies by integrating Southeast Asian perspectives and deepening dialogue between Western theory and non-Western cultural production, enriching understanding of how horror critiques power structures across cultures.

## Review Literature

While Western psychoanalytic frameworks shape horror studies, globalized Asian cinema demands attention to cultural specificity. This review surveys the key literature relevant to this study, focusing on folk horror, Thai horror cinema, and psychoanalytic feminist theory.

### *Isan Cosmology*

*Isan* Animism posits a vibrant world teeming with spirits (*phi*) in nature, objects, and ancestral/guardian spirits reciprocal with human communities. These spirits are not distant or abstract entities but active agents influencing health, fortune, and social harmony. Within *Isan* animistic belief, spirits or *phi* in Thai lexicon, encompass a broad spectrum, ranging from benevolent guardian spirits such as *phi arak*, *phi baan*, *phi ruean*, *phi fah*, and *phi ta haek*, to ancestral

spirits (*phi banpaburut*) who bring blessings and protection (plaioi, 2009). In contrast, malevolent spirits, *phi pisat* are believed to cause illness, misfortune, and death. Particularly feared are spirits of violent or untimely deaths, including *phi tai hong* (spirits of violent death) and *phi ha* (plague spirits), who are vengeful and capable of inflicting harm on the living (Sathiankiset, 1997). *The Medium* emphasizes this latter category, revealing that the escalating horror experienced by the protagonist, Mink and her family stems not from the benevolent *Bayan* ancestral spirit but from a curse linked to the family's past karmic misdeeds, which attract this malevolent *phi tai hong*. These dynamic foregrounds the moral and spiritual consequences of familial actions, as well as the intricate relationship between *karma*, spiritual pollution, and bodily possession (Poshakrishna, 2023).

Within this cosmological framework, spirit medium, known as *rang song*, serve as intermediaries between human communities and the spirit world. These *rang song* are typically women, and their spiritual power is often inherited through matrilineal lines (Turton, 1972). The practice is accompanied by strict social expectations, ritual obligations, and physical vulnerability, as the *rang song* becomes the embodied site of both reverence and suspicion (Meethaisong, 2021).

A central concept in *Isan* spirituality is *khwan*, the life essence that ensures well-being and social integration. When the *khwan* is displaced—through fear, illness, or spiritual intrusion, it results in physical and psychological disarray (Keyes, 1983; Terwiel, 2023). Spirit possession, then, is not merely metaphorical but is

understood as a real disturbance of the vital self and a breach of cosmological boundaries.

### Thai Horror Cinema and Female Spirituality

Central to the spiritual ecology are mediums, predominantly women, who act as intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds. Known locally as *rang song*, these females *rang song* possess the ability to communicate with spirits, perform rituals, and mediate spiritual possession, healing, and protection (Pinthongvijayakul, 2015). The film's narrative centres on a protagonist's family deeply embedded in this tradition, focusing on the transmission of spiritual authority through a matrilineal lineage devoted to the ancestral deity *Ya Ba Yan*. This spiritual inheritance positions women as custodians of ancestral power, figures who command both reverence and fear within their communities. In *The Medium*, this tradition is expanded through the figure of the protagonist, Mink, whose eventual possession is not simply a symptom of personal trauma but a reflection of communal fears surrounding gender nonconformity, spiritual inheritance, and karmic retribution. Scholars like Chutikamoltham (2015), Sanpinit (2023), and Ainslie (2012) discuss how Thai horror often critiques rural harmony, revealing tensions about female agency, sexuality, and spiritual authority. This gendered framework is especially visible in the cultural role of *rang song*. Female mediums are revered as healers and protectors, on the other hand, they are also subject to intense scrutiny and restrictive expectations, particularly regarding their bodies, sexual

behaviour, and social roles. The power of a *rang song* is both sacred and dangerous, capable of social uplift or disruption.

### **Psychoanalytic Feminist Theory in Horror Studies**

Western horror theory often centres on psychoanalysis to interpret monstrosity, identity, and the body. This paper engages three major psychoanalytic concepts commonly used in horror studies which are Kristeva's concept of the abject (1982), defined as that which disturbs identity, order, and the boundaries of the self, often manifesting through bodily violation and contamination. In *The Medium*, abjection is reframed through *Isan* beliefs concerning bodily purity, the polluting influence of invading spirits (*phi*), disruption of *khwan* (the vital life essence), and the transgression of sacred boundaries (Terwiel, 2023). This culturally specific articulation of abjection reveals how horror emerges not only from universal fears of bodily breakdown but also from spiritual and moral anxieties particular to *Isan* cosmology.

Creed's theorization of the monstrous-feminine (1993), provides a framework for analysing anxieties surrounding female power, sexuality, and transgression in horror cinema. *The Medium* constructs figure of the monstrous-feminine within the context of *Isan rang song* and animistic beliefs. Here, the monstrous-feminine is shaped by the matrilineal spiritual lineage and the ambivalent social attitudes toward female spiritual authority, highlighting how gendered power is both venerated and feared in the community.

Lacan's concept (1977) of the fragmented body addresses the dissolution and disintegration of identity, a common theme in

horror. This concept is re-centred to explain how the invasion by external *phi* leads to *khwan* displacement, resulting in a splintered self and culturally specific forms of existential horror. This approach foregrounds the relationship between spiritual possession and identity fragmentation as understood within local cosmologies rather than solely through Western psychoanalytic paradigms.

This research is, therefore, guided by a conceptual framework that synthesizes three foundational psychoanalytic concepts of Kristeva's abjection, Creed's monstrous-feminine, and Lacan's fragmented self, with the animistic beliefs and gendered spiritual structures characteristic of *Isan* culture. By situating Western theories within the local cosmology of spirit possession and matrilineal authority, the study analyzes how horror in *The Medium* emerges from culturally specific tensions surrounding spiritual agency, gender roles, and bodily permeability. This integrated approach highlights the film's ability to reconfigure universalist psychoanalytic models, revealing how monstrosity and spiritual power are locally negotiated within the lived realities of Northeast Thailand. The framework, thus, enables a nuanced reading of Thai horror cinema, one that foregrounds the interplay between global theoretical paradigms and indigenous beliefs in shaping narratives of identity, power, and social order.

## Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology centred on close textual analysis of *The Medium* (2021), examining its symbolic, visual, and narrative elements to reveal intersections of local

spirituality, gender, and horror. The interdisciplinary approach, drawing from film studies, gender studies, and anthropology, is essential for analyzing a work at the intersection of global cinematic language and indigenous belief systems.

The selection of *The Medium* as the sole case study is both critical and intentional, based on its unique cultural and cinematic significance for hybrid theoretical analysis. With this regard, *The Medium* distinguishes itself by:

1. It offers a detailed portrayal of *Isan* matrilineal spiritual inheritance, *karma*<sup>1</sup>, and the varieties of *phi* (spirits), supplying rich ethnographic and cultural context;
2. Its mockumentary and found-footage style provide a critical, seemingly “objective” lens, justifying close analysis of visual narrative and rhetoric;
3. Its international commercial and critical success (Ji, 2022) establishes it as a pivotal text for studying how local Thai cosmology achieves universal resonance, particularly in themes of female oppression and spiritual agency.

This case study selection ensures the research addresses both local specificity and the film’s transnational impact, directly supporting the study’s aim of recontextualizing psychoanalytic theory within an Asian cultural framework.

The research process consisted of four main steps:

1. Literature review

<sup>1</sup> In Buddhism, Hinduism, and some other religions, the force produced by a person’s actions in one life that influences what happens to them in future lives (Cambridge Dictionary, 2011)

We conducted an extensive review of scholarly works on *Isan* cosmology, spirit mediumship, Thai animism, and psychoanalytic feminist theories relevant to horror studies. This step contextualized the film and informed the selection of analytical frameworks.

#### 2. Film viewing and data collection

In this step, repeated and systematic viewings of *The Medium* have performed. Key scenes depicting spirit possession, gendered rituals, and visual/sound motifs were identified and catalogued. Descriptive notes and time-stamped screenshots were collected for analytical reference.

#### 3. Theoretical Coding and Thematic Analysis

Guided by Kristeva's theory of abjection (1982), Creed's monstrous-feminine (1993), and Lacan's fragmented body (1977), we coded instances in the film that reflected, challenged, or subverted these psychoanalytic concepts. To ensure cultural relevance, these codes were further refined through comparison with *Isan*-specific literature and ethnographic sources. After theoretical coding, the findings were synthesized and organized into broader thematic categories, allowing us to identify recurring patterns and insights related to gender, spirituality, and horror within the film.

#### 4. Interpretive Synthesis

The resulting themes were interpreted by juxtaposing psychoanalytic theory with *Isan* religious practices, evaluating how the film reconfigures Western frameworks through local cosmologies, matrilineal authority, and spiritual agency.

Given the qualitative and interpretive nature of this research, no formalized questionnaires or external instruments were employed. Instead, the primary research instruments were analytical frameworks from psychoanalytic and cultural studies. To conclude, this integrated methodology foregrounds cultural context and theoretical pluralism, providing a model for Southeast Asian horror studies that balances global theory with local specificity.

## Result

Analysis adopts a thematic approach, grouping findings under narrative and symbolic patterns revealing horror's operation through local cosmological beliefs and gender dynamics.

### Embodiment, Spiritual Authority, and Gender in *Isan* Cosmology

*The Medium* (2021) employs a mockumentary, found-footage style, fostering realism and immediacy as it brings viewers into the lived world of Isan shamanism and spirit possession (Reyes, 2015; Heller-Nicholas, 2014). The documentary crew's viewpoint not only observes but also participates in the unfolding drama, offering a layered perspective into the otherwise private world of local ritual and belief. By documenting the female protagonist Mink's eventual possession, the film foregrounds local concerns about female agency, spiritual authority, and the shifting boundaries between human and spirit worlds within *Isan* cosmology. The body, in this context, emerges as a site of conflict, where tradition's expectations, spiritual risk, and community scrutiny all converge.

The film starts with wide-angle long shots of the rural *Isan* landscape, establishing a foundational connection to nature and the spiritual world. The first scene introduces viewers to Nim, the current possessor of the *rang song*, whose spiritual lineage links the story directly to a matrilineal belief system. Nim represents many Thai people who hold diverse beliefs in sacred beings, ghosts/spirits (*phi*), and deities (*thewada*), which have merged into a “spirit and deity belief system” (*khati phi sang thewada*) (Butchayanon, 2021). Nim’s narration underscores the ubiquity of *phi*, “We believe that there is *phi* in everything, in houses, in the forests, in the mountains, trees, fields, rice paddies. There is *phi* in absolutely everything.” This visual and narrative framework situates the horror in a unique cosmological reality where the human and supernatural worlds constantly intersect.

This authenticity situates the narrative at the intersection of religious tradition and modernity. As Poshakrishna (2023) suggests, people often worship spirits (*phi*) because they are trying to make sense of what they do not understand. Fear drives people to recognize sacred beings that are thought to have both good and bad powers (Hoskins, 2014). Sanpinit (2023) observes that in community settings, folk beliefs frequently have a bigger impact than mainstream religion, for instance, spirit possession reflects social relationships, lineage, and underlying tensions. This cosmological foundation is the key difference from much of the Thai horror genre, which often focuses on individual urban ghosts; *The Medium* roots its terror in a complex system of inherited spiritual governance.

However, within the *Isan* animist context depicted in the film, women like Nim though hold a uniquely powerful, yet sometimes dangerous, position as *rang song*. The movie shows that Nim was chosen to be the vehicle for the ancestor goddess *Bayan*, who is still revered today. An annual ceremony to worship *Bayan* is held, with Nim acting as a *rang song* who invokes *Bayan*'s power and serves as a mediator for communication between *phi* and humans. Such beliefs, elevate the status of an ancestral spirit, to that of a local protector deity (Haviland, 1983). Even though the villagers do not know the history or origins of the *Bayan*, everyone believes she is a sacred entity that protects them. This aligns with Irvine (1984) that traditional spirit medium cults must celebrate the worship of ancestral spirits and preserve these beliefs among relatives and community elders because, if there are no successors, such cults can easily decline in popularity. The *rang song* also holds a dangerous position because this power is intrinsically linked to the medium's physical body, making them both empowered and vulnerable to spiritual contamination at the same time (Pinthongvijayakul, 2012; Endres, 2011).

Many Thais hold an ancient belief in *khwan*, an unseen essence residing within a person's body, whose departure signifies illness or misfortune (Terwiel, 2023). This belief isn't unique only to the Thais in Thailand; similar ideas are found among the Shans of Upper Burma, the Laotians, and other Thai minority groups in various regions. Possession is thus understood not merely as physical or psychological distress but as a disruption of this vital essence. Boddy (1994) further explains that the intrusion of *phi* is

seen as a violation and pollution of the body, transgressing the crucial boundaries between the human and supernatural realms and threatening the possessed individual's social integration. This culturally understood violation is portrayed in the film through Mink's escalating loss of control, which makes her body a place of horrifying spiritual affliction that causes illness, erratic behaviour, and, most importantly, a feeling of fragmentation of the self when external *phi* invades the individual and shatter their sense of self (Lacan, 1977). These depictions of violated bodily integrity evoke intense horror because they represent the Abject, as Julia Kristeva (1982) affirms, which is the fear of breaking the "clean and proper body." In the *Isan* context, this abjection is precisely understood as lost *khwan* (Pinthongvijayakul, 2012).

The film explicitly portrays the *rang song*'s power associated with the *Bayan* as being inherited exclusively through the woman line. This is possibly due to the woman authority often exists alongside, and sometimes in conflict with patriarchal social structures and expectations regarding female conduct. Mougne (1978) discusses the symbolic gender roles of women in Thai culture that women are primarily socialized to be based in the household, while men, in contrast, typically engage with the external world and public social activities. In this sense, we argue that in traditional agricultural societies like in *Isan* area, the power and rituals of ancestral family spirits are considered domestic matters. The role of a *rang song* is, therefore, transmitted exclusively to women. *The Medium*, thus, complicates notions of female agency not through broad regional comparisons, but by highlighting the specific

interplay between inherited spiritual power and the lived social realities and gender dynamics pertinent to women in contemporary *Isan* society. The funeral scene encapsulates this complex interplay. While men mingle outdoors, the women, including the *rang song* Nim and Noi, are still primarily occupied with domestic tasks, reflecting prescribed, sometimes subordinate, spheres of activity. Their spiritual power, in this sense, does not necessarily negate their subjection to community scrutiny and traditional gender expectations.

The narrative further emphasizes that the *Bayan* actively selects its *rang song*, imposing the role upon the chosen woman regardless of her personal desire. The individual cannot refuse being chosen and they cannot have a family, reflecting a form of coercion placed upon women in the lineage. According to the beliefs depicted in the film, if anyone is to become a *rang song* or wishes to accept a sacred entity as part of their life, they must undergo the traditional “*rab khwan*” (spirit acceptance/offering tray) ceremony (Sanpinit, 2023). This ritual demonstrates their acceptance and reverence and prepares them for the role of a *rang song*. However, as social and cultural transformations occur over time, including demographic shifts, migration, marrying into new families, economic changes, and the influence of modernity, these factors also inevitably impact and diminish the sacredness of ancestral spirits. Noi, destined to inherit the shamanic lineage, attempted suicide, left her family to marry into the Yasantia family, and converted to Christianity, disassociating from folk beliefs. Her choices of rejection highlight the tension between traditional spirit practices and the

influence of other belief systems in contemporary *Isan* context. The film explores this tension through the contrasting paths of the sisters, Nim and Noi, highlighting the difficult choices and consequences involved in accepting or rejecting this perceived spiritual destiny within their cultural milieu. Their differing responses thus showcase not a simple binary of agency versus compulsion, but rather the multifaceted ways individuals attempt to navigate their subjectivity and life paths when confronted with powerful, inherited spiritual demands embedded within their specific cultural and familial context.

Against this backdrop of complex spiritual obligation, the narrative focus shifts to Mink, Noi's daughter, the next potential vessel. Mink, exhibiting strange and progressively erratic behaviours. These include excessive drinking, aggressive outbursts, and immodest clothing, marking a sharp departure from expected woman conduct in Thai culture (Tantiwiramanond and Pandey, 1987). These behaviours, as mentioned earlier, could be understood locally as symptoms stemming from the disturbance or loss of Mink's *khwan*. Nim, drawing on her knowledge of the spiritual lineage, initially suspects this signals Mink's selection as the next vessel for the *Bayan*. This is where the film presents its unique point of difference from other Thai folklore that as Mink's condition worsens, Nim begins to suspect that Mink is afflicted not by the benevolent *Bayan*, but by malevolent *phi* like *phi tai hong* specifically targeting the Yasantia family due to their past misdeeds and accumulated bad *karma*.

The film further complicates Mink's character by challenging traditional gender roles, portraying her working outside the domestic sphere at the local Employment Office. Her economic independence outside the home portrays her as a modern *Isan* woman disrupting norms (Ainslie, 2012). The film, in this regard, presents diverse characters within the context of a folk religious environment, a setting crucial for understanding the ensuing conflicts of belief that are clearly divided individuals into two groups: the group that believes in folk religion and the supernatural, which includes Nim and Santi, the shaman; and the group that does not believe in folk religion and the supernatural, which includes Noi and Mink.

The film displays Mink since the beginning regarding her disbelief and unwillingness to become a successor in the *rang song* lineage. Her mockery of rituals and dismissive remarks about objects of worship, “*Rang Song*? To be honest, I think it's nonsense... I've also heard people say that there's a *Doraemon*<sup>1</sup> *Rang Song*. Hilarious! I guess when they're taken over, they sing the theme song,” exemplifies a modern youth perspective clashing with her community's spiritual framework. Her use of the well-known Japanese character *Doraemon* as an equally plausible object of functions is more than just youthful cynicism; it is a strong criticism of how arbitrary traditional reverence seems to be in the face of growing global pop culture and consumerism (Ainslie, 2012; Wang, 2021). This irreverence therefore powerfully underscores the film's

<sup>1</sup> A popular Japanese manga and anime franchise about a cat-like robot from the 22nd century who travels back in time to help a young boy named Nobita Nobi.

engagement with the instability of cultural and spiritual meaning amidst rapid modernization (Wang, 2021), a dynamic where the lines between the sacred, the secular, and the commercial become increasingly blurred. Her resistance, which shows itself in her clothes, public role, and parody of customs, goes against both gender standards and spiritual authority, making her stand out as spiritually vulnerable and subject to heightened scrutiny in the patriarchal systems of her community. Her actions, viewed locally, could be seen not just as defiance, but as behaviours that make her more open to the spiritual powers, she does not believe in.

### **Monstrous-Feminine and Abjection: The Body as a Site of Cultural and Spiritual Control**

The narrative intensifies its exploration of female embodiment and agency by framing Mink's rejection of tradition and embrace of modern independence as a precarious position that attracts spiritual retribution. Within the local *Isan* belief system, her initially erratic behaviours escalate into increasingly disturbing and horrifying symptoms that signify a profound spiritual intrusion and bodily violation. One of the most dramatic and disturbing scenes in the movie shows Mink is waking up on a bench at work, confused and defenceless in front of coworkers and customers. This moment is a powerful visual portrayal of the destabilization of identity, since it shows her world breaking apart and her sense of self fading away. A little while later, she starts to have an uncontrolled internal bleeding.

The close-up on Mink's public bleeding confronts the audience with visceral bodily violation and loss of private integrity.

Within Thai cultural framework, both women and men must conform to social images to integrate into society in which beauty could thus also be used as a type of “camouflage” in societal aspects and settings (Chaipraditkul, 2013). However, the complexity of women’s bodies is not only related to beauty but to the undesirable as well. Women must protect their virtue and innocence, like in many cultures, menstrual blood is then considered to be unclean (ibid. p. 29). With this regard, Mink’s public bleeding brings up deep fears of impurity and being left out of society, making her body an abject, a site of horror and rejection within her community. Kristeva’s (1982) seminal theory of the abject is that which disturbs identity, system, and social order by transgressing crucial boundaries, provoking horror and disgust because it threatens the coherence of the self and the symbolic order (Atherton, 2021, p. 8; Kristeva, 1982, p.4). As Butler elaborates, the abject evokes a realm of “I don’t want to be that!” —a repudiation of what threatens one’s identity and social belonging (Gailey, 2014, p. 57, after Butler, 1993, p. 3). With this regard, Mink’s uncontrollable bleeding violates norms of bodily containment and cleanliness, symbolizing the breakdown of the “clean and proper body.” This loss of bodily integrity is closely linked to the displacement of *khwan*, the vital life essence, and intrusion by *phi*, central to *Isan* cosmology. The scene’s power stems not merely from the sight of blood but from its representation of the “improper,” the collapse of culturally significant boundaries between inside and outside, sacred and profane, human and other. Mink’s body becomes a place of chaos and the frightening loss of

stable identity in her culture, embodying the cultural fear of spiritual and social contamination.

As Mink's possession increases, *The Medium* portrays a dramatic and horrifying transformation marked by behaviours that radically defy *Isan* social expectations and conventional gender norms (Patamajorn, 2008). Her personality fractures, oscillating unpredictably between childlike innocence and provocative, and hypersexual aggression. Her transformation shifts fully into the realm of the Monstrous-Feminine (Creed, 1993). Her behaviours fragment her personality into unpredictable hypersexual aggression and culminating in scenes of public transgression of workplace propriety and female modesty, leading to her dismissal. Her disgusted boss exclaims, “Disgusting, this woman is shameless!.” According to these actions of Mink, it violates deeply expectations of female conduct, community propriety, and the sanctity of public spaces like the workplace. This makes her a “shame” of a society and heightening her alienation. Creed (1993) argues that horror cinema often constructs female monstrosity through figures that embody cultural anxieties about female sexuality, power, and bodily autonomy. This “anti-femininity,” her aggressive sexuality and rejection of modesty, embodies cultural anxieties about uncontrolled female power. The film's precise cultural logic, therefore, transforms Creed's (1993) psychoanalytic concept into a universal feminist metaphor: Mink's monstrosity is explained by Shaman Santi as the terrifying accumulation of malevolent *phi tai hong* (spirits of violent death) targeting the family as karmic retribution. This means Mink's body becomes the vessel for the suppressed, vengeful rage of countless

historical female victims. This complex, culturally rooted violence speaks to the universal plight of women constrained by patriarchal systems and familial obligations.

Later, a poignant visual metaphor underscores how Mink's change is permanent. As Mink gets on public transportation, a road sign reading “permanent border crossing,” appears. This sign signifies Mink's complete passage beyond the human identity and communal protection, a point of no return into complete possession by *phi*. This crossing is not merely a theoretically abject or monstrous-feminine state (Kristeva, 1982; Creed, 1993), but the terrifying reality of complete spiritual subsumption. In this state, Mink's body becomes a vessel for forces operating entirely outside human laws and kinship bonds, underscoring the permanence of her spiritual displacement and tragic loss of self. The sign's symbolism powerfully communicates the finality of Mink's alienation, from herself, her family, and her community.

The film depicts, as Mink's possession deepens, her identity erodes, and she surrenders to the possessing force. This state signifies not a willing embrace of the monstrous or a paradoxical form of autonomy, but rather the terrifying outcome of spiritual violation where the individual's self (*khwan*) is fully displaced or destroyed (Pinthongvijayakul, 2012). The entity now acting through her body operates entirely outside conventional social norms, transgressing familial, societal, and moral boundaries without restraint. This horrifying manifestation represents the dominance of the invasive spiritual entity, showcasing its power to dismantle the possessed individual's connection to human community and ethical

structures, rather than any subversive agency achieved by Mink herself.



Figure 1: Mink's reflection in the window with subtle and sinister smile

In a chilling car scene, Mink's reflection (see. fig. 1) reveals her inner turmoil and an invading spiritual entity, as her passive face contrasts with a subtle, sinister smile. This unsettling visual divergence underscores a profound internal conflict. This scene effectively utilizes Lacan's (1977) concept of the mirror stage, where the reflection typically serves to unify one's identity. However, in Mink's case, it highlights her complete alienation. This cinematic portrayal finds a compelling spiritual parallel in the *Isan* understanding of a compromised *khwan*, the vital essence essential for a cohesive and healthy identity (Pinthongvijayakul, 2012). The window itself is a symbolic space of abjection, visually manifesting the horrifying intrusion of an impure and “not-self” entity. This intrusion fundamentally threatens the integrity of the individual as conceptualized within *Isan* beliefs regarding spiritual purity and the *khwan*. Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine intensifies this

reading. The sinister reflection embodies cultural fears of uncontrolled female bodies and transgressive spiritual forces, positioning Mink as a “monstrous other” who challenges traditional ideals of femininity. This scene exhibits the dangers of spiritual violation and loss of identity, portraying Mink as a figure of horror and social rupture through possession.

Mink’s transformation embodies a mix of cultural anxieties which are the fear of women having power without societal control, the horror of spiritual contamination and the loss of identity. Her body becomes a battleground where these fears manifest in visceral, horrifying ways. The film’s nuanced portrayal resists simplistic readings of possession as mere metaphor or a mental illness. Instead, it puts terror in specific cultural, spiritual, and gendered contexts. Moreover, Mink’s possession and monstrous embodiment reflect broader tensions within contemporary *Isan* society, where traditional spiritual practices coexist and sometimes clash with modernity, globalization, and shifting gender roles. Mink’s public defiance of gender norms, her scepticism toward folk religion, and her economic independence position her as a figure caught between worlds, both socially and spiritually vulnerable.

### **The Annihilation of Self and Kinship: Abjection and the Ultimate Collapse of *Isan* Social Order**

In the subsequent scenes of *The Medium*, the spiritual and psychic dichotomy within Mink’s identity reaches a harrowing climax. The transformation is fully realized as Mink entirely surrenders her humanity, manifesting as a supernatural, violent entity commanding

an undead army. This metamorphosis signifies a complete severance from her former self, detaching her from human, moral, and familial ties. The final stage portrays Mink as fully subsumed, with the invading spiritual powers having taken over her body and will, completing the fragmentation of the self-foreshadowed earlier in the film.

A poignant scene clearly illustrates this transformation. The film displays Mink sitting inert on a bed, without a soul or agency, while her mother and her uncle watch helplessly. When Nim enters, Mink abruptly leaps from the bed, crawling and howling inhumanly. Nim's question, "Who are you?" is met with a sinister, mocking reply, "Why don't you guess who I am?," showcasing the entity's complete takeover. This display of inhuman aggression and subsequent incestuous violation shatters profound moral and kinship taboos, signalling that the possessing spirit has no respect for human moral or social order (Ainslie, 2012). This grotesque act exemplifies Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection, which she defines as a site of moral and social collapse. Such a transgression represents a fundamental breach of kinship and social codes, marking Mink's possessed body as a site of moral and social collapse. Her transformation into an abject figure simultaneously positions her as a monstrously feminine entity (Creed, 1993), becoming "other" through local cultural meanings.

As possession consumes Mink completely, the invading *phi* overwhelms her identity and *khwan*, effectively erasing her social status. Her behaviours, now dictated solely by the possessing entities, become dangerously unpredictable. The horror extends

beyond Mink's individual body to implicate the social body itself. Pinthongvijayakul (2012) notes that individuals in *Isan* communities who are seen to be dangerously possessed or spiritually contaminated often get responses from the community that range from dread and avoidance to ceremonial containment or expulsion. This is because society is trying to deal with challenges to spiritual and social order.

The film vividly depicts Mink's possession spreading across the village, where she haunts and possesses others, creating an undead army that kills villagers. This escalating contagion is captured using the found-footage style's most shocking tool with the spectral green night-vision filter. Their features distort, movements become animalistic, expressions twist into predatory snarls, and their gaze turns cold and unhuman. The unnatural lighting and distorted imagery emphasize Mink's journey into monstrosity, heightening the sense of dissociation and rendering her an uncanny embodiment of unchecked aggression unbound by human structures. The film's visual language here powerfully conveys the terrifying loss of selfhood and the overwhelming dominance of *phi* possession with a universal psychic crisis of existential dread.

In a devastating culmination of the feminist theme, Mink's mother makes a desperate, self-sacrificing attempt to reclaim her daughter. However, in a horrifying reversal of maternal bonding, Mink, driven by the possessing *phi*, commits matricide. This act is the most extreme example of abjection (Kristeva, 1982), shattering the most fundamental familial and moral connection that underpins social life. It thoroughly cements Mink's role as the Monstrous-

Feminine (Creed, 1993), not through a feminist rejection of patriarchy, but via the annihilation of the matrilineal structure itself, symbolizing the ultimate collapse of social and spiritual order in *Isan* society.

Notably, the destruction of the maternal bonds and the spread of possession through the village symbolize the broader threat posed by spiritual pollution to social fabric. In *Isan* cosmology, family and lineage are central to spiritual and social order. The film's narrative dramatizes how possession disrupts these foundational relationships, threatening communal harmony and continuity. Mink's possession and the ensuing violence reflect communal anxieties about spiritual contamination, moral decay, and the fragility of social bonds in the face of supernatural forces. The villagers' ultimate failure to prevent the destruction underscores the precarious balance between human agency and spiritual power in *Isan* belief.

### Conclusion and Discussion

Drawing on an analysis of *The Medium* (2021) through the combined lens of *Isan* cosmology and Western theoretical concepts, specifically, Kristeva's abjection, Creed's monstrous-feminine, and Lacan's fragmented self, this paper concludes with the following key findings:

1) The film reconfigures both the abject and the notion of self-fragmentation. Horror is shown to emerge not from abstract universals but from culturally rooted anxieties, where Kristeva's abjection and Lacan's fragmented self are grounded in *Isan*

cosmological realities, particularly the disruption of *khwan* and spiritual pollution caused by malevolent entities such as *phi tai hong*:

2) The monstrous-feminine is localized within the narrative. Creed's concept is shaped not only by broader patriarchal fears but also by the specific transgressions of *Isan* social norms and local anxieties surrounding female spiritual power, which is constrained by a matriarchal yet coercive lineage:

3) Horror in *The Medium* is driven by moral retribution. The film clearly distinguishes between benevolent ancestral spirits (like *Bayan*) and vengeful entities (like *phi tai hong*), illustrating that the nature of spiritual interference is shaped by inherited karmic pollution and thus reshapes how horror is experienced and understood.

This analysis highlights the nuanced interplay between traditional beliefs, gender roles, and localized patriarchal structures in *Isan* society. The findings both align with and challenge existing scholarship. While previous studies on Thai female mediums (e.g., Endres, 2011; Pinthongvijayakul, 2012, 2015) recognize the duality of the *rang song*'s power (respected healer versus scrutinized woman), this research deepens the critique by arguing that the matrilineal lineage enforces a coercive form of gendered spiritual control (celibacy, denial of family) that ultimately fuels Mink's defiance.

Furthermore, the explicit grounding of the Monstrous-Feminine in karmic retribution and *phi tai hong* directly debunks Western interpretations (e.g., Butler's performance of gender) that

might mistakenly view Mink's behaviour as mere psychological chaos, thus challenge the universal applicability of psychoanalytic theories when divorce from local cosmology. Ultimately, this research contributes to horror, gender, and Southeast Asian film scholarship by challenging universal Western paradigms and rigorously emphasizing culturally grounded analysis.

### Creative Media and Safe Media Ecosystem: Reflections from *The Medium*

In this respect, *The Medium* operates as a paradigmatic example of creative and constructive media for future folklore films, establishing a robust framework for telling local stories in a universal way. This model is defined by three essential elements. First, there is cosmological specificity, which involves rigorously embedding the narrative in local belief systems to maintain authenticity and preserve local identity. Second, formal hybridity emerges through the use of mockumentary and found-footage style, providing a seemingly objective outsider viewpoint that renders highly local concepts universally accessible. Third, the film achieves thematic universalism through local trauma, translating constraints such as rang song coercion and karmic sin into universal feminist themes of bodily autonomy and generational rage.

This approach not only foregrounds marginalized voices but also encourages audiences and scholars to address complex emotions and contested traditions. It demonstrates how horror can be harnessed as a positive force. Furthermore, engaging with this cinema in the Thai context becomes a process of decoding cultural

symbols that reveal social tensions, acting as a critical tool for media literacy.

Future research should explore horror, gender, and spirituality in diverse cultural contexts by using integrated Western and local belief system methodologies. Such studies can reveal how non-Western filmmakers appropriate, adapt, or resist global horror conventions. This often results in unique cinematic expressions that challenge dominant narratives and broaden the horizons of horror studies.

### Policy Recommendations

This study highlights the importance of promoting cultural sensitivity and specificity in both in higher education curricula and professional media production, particularly when addressing Southeast Asian horror cinema such as *The Medium*. The following steps are vital for promoting culturally sensitive and effective media practice in Southeast Asian horror cinema and beyond:

- 1) Integrate local beliefs, spiritual practices, and gender roles into higher education curricula, including Cultural Studies and Film Studies programmes;
- 2) Encourage academic research that foregrounds non-Western perspectives to develop a richer and more accurate understanding of regional cinematic traditions;
- 3) Develop policies requiring local voices, especially those of women and practitioners of indigenous spiritual traditions, to participate actively in shaping guidelines for cultural and media representation;

4) Support professional media production that values authenticity and diversity, ensuring respectful and accurate portrayals of local traditions.

### Implementation Recommendations

To implement these policies, it is important that educators, critics, and filmmakers receive training in culturally grounded frameworks that respect and reflect local traditions and beliefs.

1) Educational institutions should integrate the analysis of films such as *The Medium* into higher education and media literacy programs, ensuring a more nuanced and critical understanding.

2) Training programs for filmmakers and critics should emphasize culturally grounded frameworks, as demonstrated in this model, to ensure authentic and ethical representation of local traditions and spiritual concepts.

3) Media guidelines and cultural policies should be developed through collaboration with local communities, women, and indigenous spiritual practitioners so that cultural narratives can foster authenticity, respect, and empowerment.

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