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THE GHOST-LIKE ZOMBIES AND THEIR METAPHORICAL READING IN *PHI HA AYOTHAYA/THE BLACK DEATH* (2015)

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ABSTRACT

Phi Ha Ayothaya/The Black Death (2015) is one of a few serious Thai zombie films which have been released theatrically. To make the Western zombies palatable to the Thai audience that is attracted to the ghost film, a popular genre in Thailand, the film, as this paper will show, employs strategies to create ghost-like zombies. This paper, firstly, aims to illustrate these strategies by the way in which the zombies are referred to as *phi ha*, a type of Thai folkloric ghost, and the way in which the zombies behave. The cultural beliefs associated with ghosts or ghost stories are also exploited to "ghostify" the zombies in the film, making the film closer to a ghost film. The ghost-like zombies, however, remain foreign monsters. The foreignness with which they are associated leads to another argument of this paper involving the metaphorical reading of these ghost-like zombies. They, similar to the zombies in many Thai zombie films, are a metaphor for corrupting foreign influences. These influences are destructive to the traditional values, religion and its teaching on impermanence. In addition, individuals are also corrupted by foreign influences as this is metaphorically represented by the character bitten and killed by a zombie having been infected with the foreign virus.

Keywords: *Phi Ha Ayothaya*; zombies; Thai zombies; zombie films

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1. ZOMBIE FILMS

White Zombie (1932) by the Halperin brothers is regarded as the first zombie film. It tells the story of an American couple, Madeleine and Neil, who are travelling to Haiti, a place believed to be a centre of Voodoo rituals and corpse reanimation practices which had been reported in sensational writings such as the very popular William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1929) and dramatised in the pulp fiction of the time. In Haiti, the couple meet a zombie master, "Murder" Legendre, who commands a crew of zombies and later zombifies Madeleine. The zombies in this film are corpses that are reanimated to work as slaves in a sugar cane mill and serve their master. The zombies in *While Zombie* and in other early films such as Jean Yarbrough's *King of the Zombies* (1941) are reanimated corpses or the living that are zombified by Voodoo *bokors* who, in the 1950s films, are usually replaced by aliens or mad scientists, reflecting the 1950s anxiety about post-war invasion and brainwashing.

Not until 1968 do we see modern zombies as opposed to the Haitian Voodoo species. *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) by George A. Romero is credited as the first movie to feature zombies as they are popularly

known today. As Peter Dendle (2001, p. 12) argues, "Romero liberated the zombie from the shackles of a master, and invested his zombies not with a function (a job or task such as zombies were standardly given by voodoo priests), but rather a drive (eating flesh)". No longer the soulless and shuffling corpses raised by a Voodoo *bokor* to perform given tasks, the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* are flesh-eating corpses whose bite is infectious and whose sole aim is to feed on the living. The cause of the corpse's reanimation is never explained in this film nor any other of Romero's films. Throughout his *Dead* franchise, his zombies develop and vary from film to film. Those in *Day of the Dead* (1985) still retain fragments of memory and zombie Bob, after training, demonstrates rudimentary human behaviour. Big Daddy in *Land of the Dead* (2005) emerges as a zombie leader fighting against the living and the zombies are shown to have a limited communicative ability.

Romero's films are credited with "firmly defin[ing] and establish[ing] the formula, ushering in a rich and lucrative "classical" period for the subgenre" (Bishop, 2009, p. 18). "Classical" zombies, occasionally dubbed, "Romero zombies" have evolved and mutated as numerous zombie films have been produced around the world. Not necessarily the slow carnivorous undead, zombie members have included the infected living as popularised by Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002), the possessed as in the Spanish supernatural horror *Rec* (2007-2014), the highly-mutated and alien-like beings as in blockbuster *Resident Evil* (2002-2017) or zombies that have become humans again because of the power of love as in Jonathan Levine's *Warm Bodies* (2013). Such zombie variations are the result of a large number of zombie films having been produced worldwide. The mid 2000s, in particular, was marked as the "zombie renaissance" and defined as the period when more zombie films were produced than in any previous decade and when zombie games, walks, merchandise and other media flourished.

Due to the variety of zombies, attempts have been made at zombie classification. Matt Mogk, for example, proposed three types of zombies, "Voodoo zombies," "Modern zombies", defined by three elements (being a reanimated human corpse, aggressive and biologically infected and infectious), and "Living zombies", defined as "relentlessly aggressive humans driven by a biological infection" (Mogk, 2011, p. 23). For Mogk, Romeo's and his imitators' zombies are representative of these "modern zombies" and the ones in *28 Days Later* are "living zombies." However, I classify zombies into three types, "Voodoo or Haitian zombies", (as portrayed in *White Zombie*), "modern zombies" (simply called "zombies" in this paper) and "New zombies." Modern zombies include both Romero and post-Romeo zombies, both reanimated corpses and the living. Modern zombies are defined in contradistinction to Voodoo and "new" breeds, the latter being defined by some critics as zombies returning to human form or regaining humanity again as portrayed in *Worm Bodies* or the BBC's *In the Flesh* (2013-2014).

2. ZOMBIE FILMS IN THAILAND

Zombie films were first introduced to Thai audiences around the 1970s. These films included Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), Lucio Fulci's *Zombi* (1979), Lucio Fulci's *City of the Living Dead* (1980), Dan O'Bannon's *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985) and Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985), to name but a few[1]. It can thus be concluded that the early zombie films released theatrically in Thailand were those featuring modern zombies.

The zombies in the aforementioned and other films were alternatively called "*phi*" (ghost) or *phi dip* (raw ghost), "zombie," "*khon*" (human) or "*sop*" (corpse) in their Thai titles[2]. They were given various Thai names and these names reflected the Thais' early understanding of these new monsters and are descriptive of zombies that are differently portrayed in different films. Similar to their foreign undead counterparts – vampires and Jiangshi – zombies were called *phi dip* defined by the *Royal Institute Dictionary* (2011), an official and prescriptive dictionary of Thai language, as an uncremated ghost (therefore the ghost is raw) and the risen dead ghost, because zombies in many films rise from the grave and are the creatures as opposed to humans and therefore, very roughly speaking, they are ghosts. Zombies were called by various names and these names were descriptive of the zombies themselves; in other words, zombies were called according to how they appeared to the audience (Prasartthai, 2016, p. 86). They were called *khon kin khon* (human-eating humans) mainly because they appear to be humans but without consciousness. In some films, transliteration was employed as zombies were simply called "zombies" as a sign to show that this new monster was neither *phi* (ghost) nor human-eating human—zombies were zombies.

[1] See Chananya Prasartthai's *Reading Thai Society and Politics through Zombies in Thai Films and other Media* (2016), a Master's thesis (written in Thai), for a list of zombie films released theatrically in Thailand from 1977 to 1987.

[2] For example, the Thai title of *Dawn of the Dead* (1985) was *Sombi Khon Kut Khon 1* or *Zombies: Human-eating Humans Part 1* (my literal translation), *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985) was *Phi Lueam Lum* or *Ghosts Forget to Return to Their Graves* (my literal translation), *City of the Living Dead* (1980) was *Sombi Buk New York* or *Zombies Invade New York* (my literal translation).

Zombies started to be treated as zombies during the mid-2000s because of the Thais' increasing exposure to zombies at this time which has been defined by many scholars and commentators as the zombie renaissance. Capcom's *Resident Evil* video game franchise was popular in Thailand and its filmic adaptations were blockbusters here. Although the Thai title of *Resident Evil* is *Phi Chiwa* or *Biological Ghosts* (my literal translation), it is unlikely that the audience recognised the zombies as ghosts. In addition, from my observation, roughly speaking, the zombie films after *Resident Evil* do not or, at least rarely, contain the word *phi* (ghost) or *phi dip* (raw ghost) in their Thai title. In addition, based on my experience, I have hardly heard any Thai referring to zombie films as anything other than *nang sombi* or (*nang* = film, *sombi* = zombie).

3. THAI ZOMBIE FILMS

It was during the zombie renaissance that Thai films with familiar modern zombies appeared—Taweewat Wantha's *SARS Wars/Khun Krabii Hiroh* (2004) followed by Songyos Sugmakanan's "Backpackers"; one of five stories in *Phobia 2/Ha Phraeng* (2009) followed by Apisit Opasaimlikit's *Dead Bite/Gancore Gud* (2011); and then M.R. Chalermchatri Yukol's *The Black Death/Phi Ha Ayothaya* (2015) and finally Poj Arnon's *Zombie Fighters/Kud Krachak Krien* (2017). Others with what can be called localised zombies include Kittipong Panyataweesap's and Anat Yuangngern's *Curse of the Sun/Suriyakhaat* (2004) and Pakphum Wongjinda's *Formalin Man/Rak Thoe Thao Fa* (2004). (The English titles will be used in this paper when these films are referred to.) This paper will focus on *The Black Death*'s strategy to render zombies palatable to Thai audiences by making zombies like ghosts.

Making zombies similar to ghosts is one way of making zombie films attractive to the Thai audience because ghost films are very popular in Thailand. It must be mentioned that Thai horror films largely consist of ghost films (or *nang phi*) and these films involve violent ghosts or black magic and gore. Ji Eun Lee, in her doctoral thesis, shows that 2001 to 2007 saw a gradual increase in Thai horror film production and, in 2006, horror films were only second to the action films in Thai movie-goers' preference and she concluded that Thai horror films "have found a place in the hearts of the general Thai audiences" (Lee, 2010, p. 5-6).

Zombies are not ghosts as Thais understand them because the ghost is believed by Thais to be real while zombies are not. Ghosts (or *phi* in Thai) are defined by the *RID* as mysterious, invisible, intangible entities; however, they can appear to humans; the *phi* is both harmful and benevolent and *phi* also refers to the spirit and the deceased. Katarzyna Ancuta (2016, p. 22) argues that unlike some foreign ghosts which manage to tap into the Thai cultural repertoire of fear, zombies are not frightening figures because they "cannot possibly exist in the real world". Ghosts in Thai society are believed to be authentic and real; they are otherworldly or supernatural beings who can trespass upon the realm of the living and meddle with people's lives. People believe ghosts exist and that they can encounter them whereas zombies "simply do not exist in the Thai concept of what is physically or supernaturally possible" (Ancuta, 2016, p. 23). In addition, zombies are not members of the spiritual realm and therefore they are not *phi.* Indeed, since they are not *phi* they cannot be defeated by any holy amulets or by any supernatural or religious means.

As zombies are perceived to be non-existent and therefore not terrifying figures nor *phi*, Thai zombie filmmakers incorporate strategies to justify zombies' existence and increase the "culturally defined elements of realism" to disguise zombies as ghosts and make the films palatable to Thai audiences (Ancuta, 2016, p. 25). Ancuta, in her study of Thai zombie movies[3] (excluding *The Black Death* which was released after the publication of her article), illustrates such "zombie validation strategies" as the portrayal of zombies as a variation on ghosts or as corpses resurrected by black magic etc. *The Black Death* is also an example of a film attempting to render zombies like ghosts or produce ghost-like zombies.

In the first part of this paper, I borrow Ancuta' persuasive argument and use close-reading technique to illustrate the strategies the film uses to make the zombies look like ghosts. Physically and visually, the zombies in the film are familiar like Western modern ones, mindless, aggressive and physically disgusting but, at some points, they are portrayed to be and behave like ghosts as Thais understand them. The "ghostification" is also seen in certain scenes which incorporate those Thai cultural beliefs associated with ghosts or ghost films. Next this paper will show that the zombies, in spite of the attempts at ghostification, remain foreign monsters and not ghosts as Thais understand them, although these ghost-like zombies can be attractive to the Thai audience. Their viral genesis in particular makes them foreign monsters. The foreignness associated with zombies leads to the second part of this paper which aims to metaphorically read the ghost-like zombies in this film, considering them to be a metaphor for foreign influences corrupting Thais and their religion.

[3] Her chosen movies include Pakphum Wongjinda's *Formalin Man/Rak Ter Tau Fa* (2004), *Curse of the Sun/Suriyakhaat* (2004), Taweewat Wantha's *SARS Wars/Khun Krabii Hiiroh* (2004) and Songyos Sugmakanan's "Backpacker" in *Phobia 2/Ha Phraeng* (2009).

4. GHOST-LIKE ZOMBIES

The zombies in *The Black Death* are physically and visually familiar modern ones. They are disgusting, complete with blood and oozings. The zombies are reanimated corpses but they are strong and swift; in other words, they are, even though dead, similar to the "running zombies" popularised by Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002). The zombie virus is believed to have been carried to Siam by a Portuguese commercial ship. The virus, called the *Ha* in the film behaves, as the director explains (in Thai), like HIV spreading through blood and other bodily fluids (Kosolkarn, 2015). The victim dies and returns within varying hours as a cannibalistically hungry corpse. Destroying their heads is the only way to kill them. The Thai zombies in this film are therefore familiar Western modern ones both in terms of their physicality and genesis.

In the film, the zombie is called *phi ha*. This is the first attempt when the film "ghostifies" the zombie, representing it as a type of Thai ghost. *Phi ha* is a ghost of Thai folklore believed to cause severe outbreaks of disease such as cholera (*RID*). It derives its name from *Rok Ha* (*Rok* = disease, *ha* = plagues in general). *Phi ha* is categorised as a bad spirit residing in water or the river. It causes illness by spreading germs and poison in the river. People who died from epidemics such as cholera were believed to have drunk water infected and contaminated by *phi ha*. Unlike most Thai ghosts which appear in human form or possess a human body, the *phi ha* has no identifiable form nor can it possess any human elements; it is invisible and abstract. However, it is believed to make noises when it is releasing poison into the river. In addition, the *phi ha* is hardly (if at all) represented in films or TV, sources from which Thais usually take their idea of what each ghost looks like. Googling for an image of *phi ha* is simply fruitless.

The Western zombie can then be easily transformed into *phi ha* because they are both associated with outbreaks of disease and the *phi ha* has never been visualised. This is the second attempt the film uses to make the zombie more real and authentic to Thais. The Thai title of *The Black Death* is *Phi Ha Ayothaya* (literally translated as *Phi Ha* of Ayothaya). One of its advertising posters, "*Phi Ha* Facts", (see Figure 1) provides an explanation of the *phi ha* including its eyes, brain, teeth, and strength etc. This poster functions as an introduction to the *phi ha* with which Thais are assumed to be unfamiliar (since it has never been portrayed) and hence an explanation is needed. One of the subheadings in the poster reads "Everyone Calls it *Phi Ha*," further emphasising that the zombies are *phi ha*. In the film, the undead is referred to as *phi ha* as people's deaths are attributed to *Rok Ha* or the *Ha* disease. The undead in the film is thus *phi ha* and what are understood as zombies today could be similar to *phi ha*. The term *phi ha* has existed for a long time but the *phi ha* has never entered Thais' imagination. The film then, for the first time, gives a visual representation of the *phi ha*.

Figure 1: "*Phi Ha* Facts"
Source: Major Cineplex (2015)

Zombies behaving like ghosts can be seen as the third attempt. Ghosts choose to appear to, scare or assault the living and the zombies, at some points in the film, behave like ghosts in this manner. For example, at the beginning of the film, as one character is walking home at night he sees a dead body lying in the middle of the footpath. He next hears a roaring sound and sees something moving in the bushes. He loudly demands that whatever it shows itself but nothing appears and the roaring continues. In the next moment he realises that the dead body has gone. The point of view shot then shifts to an angle from which this character is being looked at from behind the bush. The shot clearly shows the zombies' perspective. They wait for the right moment to attack. A similar situation happens to the parents of the female protagonist and their entourage while they are leaving the village to escape the plague. They hear roaring and then start to be attacked one by one. The whole scene looks very much like a planned attack. Although zombies are shown throughout the rest of the film to attack mindlessly, at various points, they appear to behave like ghosts in the way they attack the living.

Apart from the ghost-like zombies that the film attempts to portray, another strategy involves the elevation of *phi ha* or the zombies' status to the same level of artistic and cultural recognition of *phi* by depicting the zombies in a temple mural painting, a form of art depicting religious subjects and cultural beliefs, etc. As mentioned earlier, the virus responsible for the zombie outbreak is said to have been brought to Siam by Portuguese ships. So, the early zombies or *phi ha* could have been Portuguese or foreign seamen. Inside the temple hall housing villagers who have fled from the zombies, the camera focuses on a mural painting depicting what this paper interprets to be a foreign seaman ghost or seafaring zombie (see Figures 2). The painting shows a terrified man on horseback, arguably escaping from a ghost. The man looks back and the figure staring back at him looks very much like the foreign seafaring ghost, as is evident in his (pirate) hat and wig. The ghost is black, so his death may be attributed to the Black Death or *Rok ha*. The temple mural paintings commonly depict stories from the Ramayana epic, the Buddhist cosmos, way of life, cultural beliefs etc. For instance, the walls of one of the buildings in Wat Tha Kham (Wat = temple) in Bangkok is decorated with a mural painting depicting a crow feeding on a cadaver, presumably that of a Chinese Manchurian man, as can be seen from his Manchurian pigtail (see Figure 3). The painting records the plague of the early Rattanakosin era (AD 1782-1932) (SILPA-MAG.COM, 2020). The foreign seaman ghost or zombie depicted in the temple mural painting in the film on the one hand records the previous outbreak or the early *phi ha* in Siam and, on the other, elevates zombies to the same level of recognition as *phi*. Both are *real* and therefore recorded in the temple mural painting.

Figures 2: The Mural Painting, *The Black Death* (2015)

Figure 3: The Mural Painting at Wat Tha Kham, Bangkok, Commissioned around King Rama IV's Reign

The film also employs horror conventions associated with ghost stories and this is evident in the temple scene. Inside the temple hall that houses terrified villagers, candles are lit, holy threads distributed and monks hastily assemble to chant to drive away evil spirits. This may be similar to the scene in Nonzee Nimibutr's *Nang Nak* (1999) in which the male protagonist flees to the temple after having learned that his wife, with whom he is living, is a ghost. In a similar way, monks distribute holy threads and chant to protect him. In *The Black Death*, inside the hall, suddenly all candles are blown out. In other ghost films, a gust of wind and extinguished candles traditionally indicate the arrival of a ghost or imminent death given the fact that life is compared to a lighted candle and when it is extinguished, life ends. Once all candles have been mysteriously blown out, the corpses kept inside the hall reanimate and this is equivalent to the arrival of a ghost. Foreshadowed by extinguished candles, all lives are ended in the temple.

Figure 4: Inside the Temple Hall, *The Black Death* (2015)

5. THE METAPHORICAL READING OF THE GHOST-LIKE ZOMBIES

The ghost-like zombies, born out of the film's attempts to make the Western modern zombies palatable to the Thai audience, are still foreign monsters and not ghosts as Thais understand them, although they can be attractive to the audience. In other words, the zombies remain foreign monsters despite possessing certain characteristics associated with ghosts. A critic at *BK Magazine* called the film "the Ayutthaya version of Resident Evil" (BK Staff, 2016) while Wise Kwai (2016), writing for the English news outlet, *The Nation*, pointed to "the familiar tropes of George Romero's "Dead" franchise mixed with the stately pageantry of "Naresuan" and "Pantai Norasingh," (both of which are historical films) to create something refreshing." In addition, this paper would like to suggest that the zombies' viral genesis further alienates them from ghosts. Thai ghosts rarely originate from viruses and disease. One may argue that some Thai ghosts are in fact connected with disease and this connection is found in various cases of possession. Ill people, suffering from mysterious diseases, who, in some cases turn maniacal while some later die, are believed by some people to be possessed by ghostly spirits. In this manner, the possessed being, ill and aggressive, is relatively similar to a zombie as both appear to suffer from diseases, inflicted upon the former by a ghost and upon the latter by a virus. However, in the case of the possessed, an evil spirit can be evicted by means of exorcism; in other words, he/she can be "cured" by religious or supernatural means while modern zombies, in most films at least, cannot be cured in this manner. Indeed, what makes modern zombies different from ghosts as Thais understand them is that ghosts are subject to religious and supernatural power while zombies are not.

This paper suggests that the ghost-like zombies, similar to zombies in other Thai zombie films, are a metaphor for corrupting foreign influence. In the first Thai zombie film, *SARS Wars* (2004), the fictional SARS virus originates in Africa and is carried to Thailand by a hornet. This, then, stings a white expatriate who, as a result, becomes the patient zero. The infection spreads in a Western-style condominium. Ji Eun Lee (2010, p. 113) views the virus and zombies in the film as a monstrous Other. Ancuta (2016, p. 32) also argues that "[d]eadly viruses and the zombie infection are clearly negative examples of such foreign influence". Chananya Prasartthai (2016, p. 109-110) reads "Backpackers" (one of five segments in *Phobia 2*) in the light of the Other, suggesting that the immigrant zombies in the film represent threats and dangers from neighbouring countries.

It is tempting then to consider the foreign commercial ship, the virus and zombies in *The Black Death* as corrupting foreign influences. It may not be an elaborate attempt to present the virus as being of foreign origin since the historical records show the pandemics in Siam were believed to originate from foreign countries. The director to a large extent is concerned with historical accuracy. He helped his father, M.C. Chatrichalerm Yukol, direct blockbuster Thai historical epic films, so he was familiar with the Ayothaya period. He also mentions certain archives and chronicles which record the plagues. These plagues, as historical documents show, were of foreign origins. The earliest plagues in Siam were recorded in AD 1347 and AD 1350. Other historical records mention one in AD 1820 (as part of the AD 1817-1824 global cholera pandemic) and it was believed to originate from India; the AD 1846 plague (as part of the AD 1846-1860 global cholera pandemic) again originated from India; the AD 1873 plague (as part of the AD 1846-1860 global cholera pandemic) was believed to be carried to Siam by pilgrims returning from Mecca (SILPA-MAG.COM, 2020).

As the virus is carried to Siam on the Portuguese ship, the ship is interpreted as the very site of moral corruption. The ship, in the beginning of the film, functions as a "vehicle" by which an immoral act can be performed. Next, when the dead rise, terrified villagers seek protection from zombies inside the temple which is swiftly invaded and overrun. This can be seen as one way in which a religion is destroyed. The religious destruction is also symbolically manifested when corpses rise as zombies to subvert the Buddhist teaching that stresses impermanence. After the temple has been ravaged, a group of survivors flees to a brothel whose strong walls are believed to act as a bulwark against the zombies. The brothel, managed by a Chinese, also represents a foreign influence endangering the moral probity of some individuals. Inside this brothel is a place where frequenters are bitten by a zombified prostitute and in this aspect the foreign zombie virus becomes a metaphor for sexually transmitted disease. At the end of the film, one survivor, Bua, manages to board the Portuguese ship, regarded by some people to be the safest place, only to find herself dismembered by the horde of undead onboard.

The foreign ship conspicuously shown at the beginning of the film (see Figure 5) symbolises the corrupting foreign influence upon Thai traditional values. The young lovers, Khong (the male protagonist) and Mien (the female protagonist) are introduced at a pier with a foreign commercial ship oddly anchored nearby. It is rather strange given the fact that the surrounding area shows no business activity at all. Khong and Mien are bemoaning their impossible relationship because Mien is from a rich family and Khong is a poor temple boy. Mien expresses her wish to board the ship to elope with Khong. On the one hand, Mien's wish to board the ship to escape from her controlling family is symbolically understandable because a ship is a conventional symbol of freedom. The foreign ship represents liberty and the new way of life to which Mien aspires. On the other hand, Mien's elopement is considered a violation of societal codes and parental authority. The ship thus becomes a means by which this violation can be accomplished. Indeed, this can amount to the way in which Western influence has been perceived by Thais. While it is seen as a civilising and "liberating" force, it also possesses corrupting elements especially if left unchecked.

Figure 5: Two Protagonists and a Foreign Ship, *The Black Death* (2015)

While zombies are on the rampage, the villagers rush to the temple as mentioned above, believing that it can safeguard them from the evil, but it fails. People run to the temple because it is not only a holy place but also structurally sounder than other constructions which largely consist of villagers' thatched lodges. It appears that the temple hall is strong enough to protect them but the corpses kept inside the temple hall, presumably awaiting a funeral ceremony, reanimate and attack both monks and laypeople. These reanimated corpses

slaughter the people inside and as a result make the temple hall vulnerable to invasion by the zombies outside. Zombies, which represent foreign influences, are able to wreak havoc from within, finally hastening the temple and the religion it represents to disintegration.

Not only is the religious place destroyed, the religious teaching on impermanence is also vitiated. It should be noted again that the undead in *The Black Death* is the risen corpse, not the infected living. People die and return within different minutes or hours. As the risen corpses or risen-from-the-grave zombies in Christianity have been popularly seen as a perversion of the resurrection, the risen ones in this film represent a violation of the Buddhist views on impermanence or a perversion of the symbolic significance of corpses.

Most Thais are cremated in accordance with Buddhist ritual. However, those who suffer from an unnatural death (violent or sudden etc.) are buried. Spirits of these people, called *phi tai hong*, are believed to be angry and dangerous. These spirits are frightening but not their corpses. There is hardly any black magic performed to summon corpses[4]. Instead, corpses are used in some black magic rituals such as the one involving the use of baby corpses to make *Kuman thong* or baby amulets and another one involving a shaman burning corpses' chins to extract oil to be used in concocting a magical love potion. The corpses are harmless and usually sites on which a certain ritual is performed as part of exorcism. In *Nang Nak*, Somdej Toh, a monk who exorcises Nak, exhumes her corpse and cuts into the centre of her forehead.

Corpses in Thai culture, rather than being frightening figures, are objects of worship and "teaching tools" used by monks. Corpses play a positive role in various practices and rituals. For instance, a corpse mediation or *asubhakammaṭṭhāna* meditation has been practised throughout South East Asia and in Thailand. Justin Thomas McDaniel (2012) explains that this meditation involves, in many cases, a corpse of the recently deceased being hung on a hook before meditating monks and nuns. In other cases, monks, nuns and lay people are instructed to imagine their bodies being dissected and to "study" their internal organs. Meditators in this practice are encouraged to focus on the disgusting nature and the impermanence of the body. The purpose "is to drive home the reality of personal impermanence and in so doing to expose the pointlessness of attachment to any kind of permanent self" (Moreman, 2018, p. 146). Not only do corpses function as a memento mori and a reminder of impermanence they are also part of protective and auspicious rituals. McDaniel mentions the corpse of an infant named Sirirot Phibunsin (commonly known as "Ae" or "Dek Chai Sirirot") displayed in a glass coffin at Wat Mahabut in Bangkok. Shortly after his burial (since he died of an unnatural cause), a terrible flood ravaged Phrakhanong District and his coffin resurfaced. In order to avoid upsetting him, a glass coffin was made for him. A number of visitors pay homage to him and ask for good luck. Some celebrated monks have been mummified and displayed for auspicious purposes. Corpses in the aforementioned meditation practice and mummified monks "are not meant to frighten…They are objects of worship and sites of memory. They invoke the values of love, dedication, and loyalty" (McDaniel, 2012).

A cold open shows a monk staring down at a pile of corpses (before he is killed by these risen corpses). The monk standing in front of corpses is reminiscent of a corpse meditation and risen corpses hence a perversion of it. The lone monk is depicted in a wide shot standing quietly. His face is emotionless, indicating his contemplation. He is carrying a talipot fan commonly used in both auspicious and funeral rituals. In the background there is an eerie humming noise, ominously suggesting the terrible things to come. Corpses, objects of religious teaching, rise from their graves. The teaching is metaphorically subverted and rendered meaningless. The monk in this scene and those in the temple are killed and at some point will reanimate as raging and angry zombies. Zombified monks (even though not shown in the film) can also be seen as a form of religious corruption.

[4] I know only one film which involves the use of black magic to reanimate corpses. Kittipong Panyataweesap's and Anat Yuangngern's *Curse of the Sun/Suriyakhaat* (2004) tells the story of a shaman resurrecting corpses (their spirits have left their bodies) to serve his evil deeds. The undead is controlled by a shaman. A corpse reanimated by a sorcerer to work for him is a well-known story in the Haitian zombie tradition.

Figure 6: A Pile of Corpses, *The Black Death* (2015)

After the temple has been overrun, a group of survivors are forced to take a refuge in a brothel because of its strong walls. The brothel is also another form of corrupting foreign influence. The brothel is decorated in Chinese style and some prostitutes are seen wearing traditional Chinese costumes. This is because while it is owned by a Thai, it is managed by a Chinese, suggesting foreign corruption and a direction geared by a foreigner towards immorality.

It is inside this immoral establishment that one of the main characters, Kwan, is bitten and turns into a zombie. This illustrates how the zombie virus can be a metaphor for HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases spread by foreigners. Kwan is a temple boy who frequently visits the brothel. (Some may find it a bit unconvincing that the poor Kwan has enough money to frequently enjoy himself in this place.) His frequent visitations to the brothel are a sign of his aberration from a virtuous path despite being born with Dharma and his direction towards self-destruction. While hiding inside the brothel, he is bitten by a zombified prostitute. Kwan being bitten by her and becoming a zombie presents an interesting analogy between the zombie virus and sexually transmitted diseases, an analogy which has often been drawn in vampire narratives. The prostitute has been infected with a foreign virus and become a zombie who later infects Kwan, turning him into one of the undead, a situation similar to a brothel frequenter becoming a victim of sexually transmitted disease.

The brothel, the last redoubt, does not last forever as it is finally overrun. One of the survivors blows up the place to kill the zombies. While a few survive the blast, Bua, a blacksmith, is the only one who manages to board the ship. By boarding the ship, she symbolically seeks help from the West but little does she know that the ship or the West is destructive. Bua, in the end, is slaughtered by a hoard of zombies awaiting anyone living on board.

6. CONCLUSION

The zombies in *The Black Death*, physically and visually, are similar to Western modern ones. They are rotten corpses but strong, swift and violent. They aggressively attack the living and people can kill them by shooting them in the head. To make the zombies palatable to the Thai audience, the film employs strategies to make them be like or behave like ghosts. The zombies are referred to as *phi ha*, a type of Thai ghost which has rarely or never been portrayed in films. Not only are they called by a Thai ghost name but they also, in some scenes, behave like one in the way they attack the living. In addition, the film incorporates the Thai cultural beliefs associated with ghosts and ghost stories such as a belief in extinguished candles to make the film closer to a ghost one.

The attempts to ghostify the Western modern zombies result in the ghost-like zombies which, to the Thai audience, are not really ghosts although they can be attractive to ghost film fans. The zombies remain foreign monsters which have led this paper to interpret them as a metaphor for corrupting foreign influences. The influences are destructive to the traditional values, religion and its teaching on impermanence as the figure of the corpse turns monstrous, departing from its religious role. In addition, individuals are also corrupted by foreign influences as this is metaphorically represented by the character bitten and killed by a prostitute having been infected with the foreign zombie virus.

Like a virus from which many types of zombies originate, zombies mutate and so have become the metaphor they carry. They can be classic shuffling reanimated corpses, the raging infected, the intelligent living

dead, highly mutated creatures or, as this paper has shown, ghost-like zombies. One character in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* tells his sister, "They're coming to get you, Barbara, there's one of them now!" Now, there are many of them and there will be more to come (I believe) to captivate the audience around the world.

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