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The Pan-Asian Outlook of *The Eye*

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The Eye (*Gin Gwai*, Danny Pang and Oxide Pang, 2002) stands as a particularly fruitful text to examine in terms of the increasingly pan-Asian (as well as more broadly transnational) nature of Asian horror production, inasmuch as it embodies contemporary regionalism and globalization at a range of intra-, inter-, and extra-textual levels. Indeed, the film's substantial success across Asia, as well as subsequent global distribution and an adaptation by Hollywood, suggest that in some way it managed to tap into themes with strong resonances both regionally and internationally. This chapter will be interested in contributing to current discussions about the varied dimensions of the increasingly transnational nature of Asian cinema, centrally through an exploration of some of *The Eye*'s textual resonances. Moving from an overview of the film's production context, this chapter will make claims for a number of key tropes of regional relevance in the film — in particular those concerning the nature of contemporary economic and cultural flows within the region and the status of gender with regard to these — then close with a brief look at a number of other Asian productions that appear to pick up on *The Eye*'s preoccupations.

The Eye's positioning as a distinctly pan-Asian text was hardly accidental, the film being the creation of a Hong-Kong based production company, Applause, established in 2000 with the specific aim of developing pan-Asian projects. As producer Peter Chan describes it, given the relatively moribund state of the Hong Kong industry in the late 1990s, the idea was not only to expand market base with films appealing to audiences beyond Hong Kong,

but also to expand creative personnel to include those from other Asian countries.[1] In following just such strategies, *The Eye* in particular "exemplifies the pan-Asian cinema model," as Bliss Cua Lim has noted.[2] The film indeed embodies such a model even in its funding, as Hong Kong's Applause Pictures co-financed the film with Singapore's Mediacorp Raintree Pictures, another Asian production firm interested in exploring strategies for reaching a pan-Asian audience.[3] In terms of personnel, the film's main producer, Chan, himself comes from a pan-Asian (indeed transnational) background, born in Hong Kong, raised largely in Thailand, educated in the U.S., and having spread his career between all three places. The directors, twin brothers Oxide Pang and Danny Pang, are also Hong Kong-born Chinese, but had achieved their greatest success and visibility in the Thai commercial and film industries, where they had worked for some time before making *The Eye*, while also still working on Hong Kong projects. The film's list of production and post-production personnel, moreover, includes a thorough mix of Chinese and Thai names, with sound mixing and film processing work handled by Thailand's Kantana Laboratories. The cast features a Malaysian-born pop music star and television personality, at the time best known in Taiwan (Lee Sin-je as Mun), and a Hong Kong pop star (Lawrence Chou as Wah), and also includes a range of lesser-known Thai actors.

In generic terms, various commentators have described *The Eye* — with its plot concerning a young Hong Kong woman who can see dead people after receiving a cornea transplant — as alternatively Asian influenced and Western influenced. The most notable exponent of the former position, Tony Rayns, argues that:

> Like earlier Pang Brothers films, *The Eye* owes very little to Hollywood models; it's unapologetically Asian in everything from its supernatural backstory to its characterisations. Its immediate inspiration was local: Ann Hui's *Visible Secret* (*Youling Ren Jian*, 2001) revived the Chinese traditions of "ghost-seeing eyes," Taoist exorcisms and so forth.[4]

Even accepting *The Eye*'s clear immersion in local cultural traditions, as well as its likely inspiration in *Visible Secret* (in which the protagonist's strange new girlfriend believes she can see ghosts), it is hard not to also see the influence of the phenomenally successful American blockbuster *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), which concerns a boy who can "see dead people" and which prefigures a wave of Hong Kong films featuring characters who can do likewise, *Visible Secret, The Eye, Inner Senses* (*Yee Do Hung Gaan*, Law Chi-Leung, 2002), and *My Left Eye Sees Ghosts* (*Ngo Joh Aan Gin Diy*

Gwai, Johnny To and Wai Ka-Fai, 2002) among them. (This is even more the case given that Hui, Chan, and the Pang brothers are all cosmopolitan figures who have lived and worked abroad and who are naturally fully conversant in the international film scene.) This is not, moreover, to suggest that any of these films are necessarily in some way unoriginal or derivative of (or "tainted" by) Western culture. Rather, they all partake of the common practice in Hong Kong cinema of borrowing, reworking, parodying, and or commenting upon motifs from successful Hollywood and non-Hollywood films in such a way that they speak directly to a Hong Kong audience.[5] What makes this particular instance of cinematic borrowing so distinctive, however, is that the source text in question seems to have generated such a singular fascination, and its resonance for the Asian context is therefore something that calls for examination in further detail.

The Eye perhaps owes some of its success to its canny tapping in to both local (Hong Kong) and Hollywood horror intertexts, but it also succeeds by partaking of an ascendant contemporary pan-Asian discourse of horror which most of the other Hong Kong films cited here do not link with to the same degree. I speak here of an evolving regional movement in horror film production occurring in the wake of the exceptional success of the Japanese horror film *Ringu* (Nakata Hideo, 1998) — a trend toward glossy, highly stylized, intertextually self-conscious horror films which often feature (among other elements) the vengeful ghost of a young woman and the revelation of grim secrets from the past, in a context emphasizing the technologically mediated unsettling of traditional Asian culture.[6] In addition to achieving a substantial measure of success across Asia, many of these films have also garnered attention among fans in the West, especially owing to their promotion through Tartan Video's Asia Extreme line of releases.[7] It is worth noting, however, that, as Lim has pointed out, the notion of "Asia" understood in discussions of the new Asian horror film are not as broadly inclusive as they might appear, given that the vast majority of horror films linked to this rubric originate in Japan and South Korea (with lesser numbers from Hong Kong and Thailand).[8] Yet, despite the fact that other Asian countries have been largely excluded from both popular and critical understandings of this pan-Asian horror discourse, it is not as though they do not bear a significant relationship to it. Not only do the Asian horror films in question have significant audiences in these countries, in Southeast Asia in particular[9] — these countries are themselves starting to produce numbers of horror films which engage elements of such a pan-Asian discourse.[10]

I would suggest that this absence of much of Asia within the discourse is itself germane to an analysis of *The Eye*, in that the film is in part concerned

with working through the ill-defined status of Southeast Asia (as an economically and politically less established Other) within Asia as a whole. One way this is achieved is through specific choices made in *The Eye*'s narrative structure and setting: the film is catapulted from Hong Kong to Thailand at the start of its third act, when, accompanied by her psychotherapist and would-be boyfriend Wah, Mun travels to the rural home of the Thai donor of her corneas to discover the source of her troubling visions. More than simply a device to add "local color" and transnational appeal to a generically allusive Hong Kong horror film, this shift, rather, grows organically out of deeper structures within the text and helps bring into relief some of its fundamental thematic preoccupations — some of which, the following analysis will argue, have to do with the problematics of a larger pan-Asian transnationalism.

Haunted Intertexts

The Eye's most immediately identifiable shared generic element is, of course, the protagonist's ability to see ghosts, which she has in common not only with the young protagonist of *The Sixth Sense*, but with many other horror protagonists. A significant twist here is that she is not at first aware it is ghosts she is seeing; this is narratively made possible in that Mun, now a young woman, has not (until the cornea transplant) been able to see since the age of two, so she is not yet able to clearly distinguish between what are "normal" visions and what are not. This confusion can arguably be seen as having a parallel in Dr Malcolm Crowe's (Bruce Willis) own lack of clarity over who is in fact a ghost in *The Sixth Sense* (in that he is unaware of his own non-living status). It is perhaps more directly similar to Peter's (Eason Chan) misperception of his ghostly girlfriend as living in *Visible Secret*, only his misperception is sustained until that film's surprise climax. Mun, on the other hand, soon figures out most of what it is she is seeing: the newly dead, the dark figures from the afterlife who arrive to guide the newly dead between worlds, and also those who have died with some issues left unresolved (and who are therefore trapped on earth reliving their deaths). (Significantly, the ability to see the arrival of these "grim reapers" also gives Mun some power of prescience — the ability to see when death is going to occur — although, again, at first she does not realize it. In this she is perhaps closer to the character of John Baxter [Donald Sutherland] in *Don't Look Now* [Nicolas Roeg, 1974], whose downfall is caused by his inability to realize his own visions are prescient.)

This theme of unresolved issues from the past is also naturally common to many films with ghostly themes. In the case of *Ringu* and many of the wave of films following it, there is more specifically a vengeful desire for justice on the part of a girl or woman who has been wronged, and it is here that the emotions of both horror and guilt in which these films are often immersed originate. Somewhat in opposition to these vengeful female ghost films, *The Eye*, again, primarily features spirits who just happen to be in transit and those needing to tie up emotional loose ends who just happen to have died in Mun's vicinity. In this, *The Eye* is once more somewhat closer to the spirit of *The Sixth Sense*, wherein the ghosts who seek out the boy Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment) with particular urgency are those aware of some matters from their lives which still need to be set right, injustices which need to be revealed; they seek him out not because of his relationship to these injustices, but because of expediency, in that he alone has the special power to see dead people. *The Eye*, however, does on one level still significantly evince some of the sense of personal guilt or indebtedness or connection between the haunter and the haunted present in ghost films of the more vengeful variety, in that one of the beings who haunts Mun — the most narratively significant one — is the woman who has donated her corneas to her.

Still another broader thematic repercussion of the narrative device of having the dead visible amongst the living is a heavy emphasis on the co-existence and close interrelationship of the past and the present; as in both *The Sixth Sense* and many (if not most) of the new wave of Asian horror, the past is revealed as still very present, as having direct implications for the now. This idea resonates at numerous levels in *The Eye*, not least in settings themselves. The initial setting of Hong Kong is imaged (much as it is in reality) as at once a city of modern high-rises and highways and of creepy, dingy, disused public spaces, where many a ghost would feel perfectly at home. Hong Kong's architectural variegation is even alluded to in dialogue at one point, when a waitress at an older and indeed haunted roast meat restaurant explains that the proprietor, unlike owners of neighboring shophouses, has not sold to developers (presumably to make way for modern construction) because he hopes to see his late wife and child return. Historical co-existence in setting is inscribed not only within the architecture of Hong Kong itself, but through the eventual shift in locale to Thailand after the film's midpoint. No matter what the actual status of Thailand's development (Bangkok is as modern a metropolis as any), *The Eye* puts the respective settings into a visual opposition which strongly implies that Hong Kong's modern and urban character is in direct contrast to Thailand's underdevelopment and rural profusion. Witness, for example, the counter-positioning of the aseptic corridors of the modern

Hong Kong hospital and the wood construction of the rural Siam Rach hospital, shot in sepia tones, as well as the film's initial elision of any narrative events in Bangkok.[11] We thus have the sense of two historical realms — one more past, the other more present — co-existing within the same narrative time frame, made all the more evident through the characters' apparent ease in transiting from one locale to the other. The two spaces are figured as co-existent within Mun's imagination as well: nightmares she has after her operation in Hong Kong transport her to the setting of the Siam Rach hospital (though she does not know this as yet), and when she awakes from these nightmares, she sees her own bedroom transform into what is eventually revealed to be the (older looking) Thailand bedroom of her cornea donor. These scenes reveal a literal wavering back and forth between the two bedrooms and their national locales, implying a kind of spatial and temporal instability, a vying for predominance among two distinct, but co-existent realms.

This co-existence of past and present, old and new, functions on a more abstract level as well, as a series of oppositions between traditional culture and modern, older regimes of knowledge and systems of belief and newer ones. Most central to the plot may be the interaction of modern, positivist, empirically derived (and largely Western in origin) medical knowledge with traditional, Asian-identified spiritual beliefs, that is, the juxtaposition of the scientific and the supernatural. This is evident, for example, in the Western educated Hong Kong doctors' initial inability to believe Mun's account of her visions of dead people — until she provides solid factual evidence in the form of knowledge about people's deaths. Significant in this respect is that in order to solve the (supernatural) problem of her doubled vision, Mun must travel to Thailand — figured as a nation that is more spiritual, less scientifically minded than Hong Kong — and that once there, the Sino-Thai physician who is informed of her visions accepts the account without hesitation. The Taoist priest whose assistance Mun's grandmother and neighbors seek in ridding their apartment complex of a ghost that Mun has perceived is, along with his particular kind of knowledge and authority, also placed in structural opposition to the Hong Kong doctors and their (more recently developed) belief system. Even the Chinese language (writing in particular) becomes positioned as an element of an older culture persisting into present contexts; as Mun's ageing instructor tells her, "Very few want to learn calligraphy nowadays." It is not incongruous that one of the more fearsome ghosts she encounters appears at her calligraphy lesson.

Significant in relation to the film's contexts of pan-Asian-ness and globalization is that the interaction between differing time frames evinced

here is simultaneously an interaction between different national and regional cultures: As the old form of Chinese writing dies away, a new form of language — English, to be specific — ascends. Mun takes note of her apprehension at having to learn English if she is to be taken to Vancouver to live with her father, caught up in modern trends of global mobility. (Her sister too is caught up in this modern mobility, connecting the family to the West, in her work as an international airline attendant which calls her away in the period after Mun's release from the hospital.) The connection of the West with the film's discourses of modernization is also alluded to in Wah's reference to his visiting psychology professor from the U.S. But while such direct references to the West are brief and fleeting, they are more than sufficient to engage most audiences' contextual knowledge of Asian-Western relations (always already inscribed in the post-colonial Hong Kong setting), to thematically link tensions regarding modernization to the film's nexus of transnational flows. In contrast to the West's association with the present and the modern, the film, as already mentioned, uses the setting of Thailand to embody the past and to allow the dramatization of the interaction with the past. This co-existence of realms, time periods, cultures interestingly again takes on a linguistic valence in the scenes of Mun and Wah's arrival at the Siam Rach hospital. They do not understand when informed in Thai of their arrival at their destination, and Wah subsequently addresses the hospital receptionists in the global language of English. When the Sino-Thai doctor whom they are seeking learns that they are from Hong Kong, he begins to address them in Mandarin dialect, and switching between Mandarin, Thai, and Mun and Wah's more accustomed Cantonese continues throughout the Thailand sequence.

This emphasis on multilinguality points to another distinctive and central theme in *The Eye* which links motifs of haunting and transnationalism, that of confusion over identity. Mun's interest in her own identity can be seen from the moment her new vision begins to come into focus: her first request is to be taken to the bathroom so that she can gaze at herself in a mirror. This interest and curiosity turns to mystification and alarm, however, when she realizes that some of her visions may be someone else's, and that the image she has been viewing in the mirror is not her own: "Who the hell are you?" she asks of the formerly misrecognized face (actually that of the dead cornea donor, Ling [Chutcha Rujinanon]) prior to smashing her mirror in frustration. This theme of misrecognition of self — of misapprehension of one's own identity and/or ontological status — interestingly comes up in different forms in quite a few of the films alluded to here. In *The Sixth Sense*, for example, Crowe mistakenly assumes that he is alive and visible to others (until the final

climax reveals otherwise), while in *Visible Secret*, Peter erroneously attributes to others actions in fact performed by himself under the influence of a ghost.

It is significant that the figuration of Mun's relationship to Ling (a Thai of Chinese ethnicity) is not typical of horror film images of a predatory or opportunistic spirit possessing an unwilling host; the sense is not one of forced submission, but of natural identity. Part of what is striking about the apparition of Ling's face in the mirror in the above described scene is that that face is communicating *Mun's* emotions, her mouth producing Mun's words and cries. The impression given is that the two young women (who indeed bear some resemblance) are in effect one, sharing the same consciousness and visions as a result of the posthumous transplant. This idea is given further weight with the later implication that it is Ling's volition that leads them to her home in rural Thailand. When Mun enters Ling's bedroom, she tells the deceased, "I know you've wanted me to come here all this time." Mun then learns Ling wanted her to come to Thailand to communicate to her mother on her behalf — to beg forgiveness for having killed herself — and when it comes time for the nightly reenactment of this suicide which Ling must carry out as do all suicide victims who continue to have unresolved issues, the identity slippages between the two continue: Ling is initially seen wearing the same clothing as Mun — and then it is Mun visible going through the motions of hanging herself. Ling's mother at that moment relents and chooses to forgive her daughter, entering the room just in time to cut her down. The girl on the floor, begging forgiveness in Thai, has Ling's face, until the forgiveness is granted and the face subtly morphs into Mun's.

The focus on the mirrored identities of these two young women of Chinese ethnicity, in a text directed by identical twin brothers of Chinese ethnicity, calls up a range of interrelated themes pertaining to interlinked identities, and more specifically to various marked sets of continuities and contrasts among characters. Of the two women, Mun is clearly the one in the position of privilege, having a more economically advantaged life in a richer world, living while her Thai counterpart dies, and ultimately deriving benefits from the quite literal use of that counterpart's body. The relationship thus suggests the senses of guilt, indebtedness, and also closeness or intimacy between haunter and haunted likewise present in many of the vengeful female ghost films. On some level, the relationship as figured here can also be seen as a synecdoche for the Hong Kong-Southeast Asia relationship as a whole, the Special Administrative Region as is well known deriving substantial benefit from the bodily labors of its Southeast Asian workers — primarily female — who can be seen in massive numbers on any given Sunday taking their release time in Hong Kong Island's Central district, but who are otherwise largely

invisible in Hong Kong life (just as Ling's presence is also invisible). Taking this a step further, if Hong Kong is understood as a stand-in for East Asia as a whole here, the relationship of intimacy and interdependency on the one hand and structural inequality on the other can also be taken as representative of the larger dynamic between East and Southeast Asia alluded to earlier, their uneasy merging into a larger Asian region.

The women's relationship arguably points as well to the labor division that operates in the production of this film, and to the relations that obtain in the majority of Thai-filmed transnational productions: non-Thai financers make use of the resources of (largely hidden) Thai creativity and labor, along with Thai settings, for the vitality and economy of their films.[12] Still other metaphors related to the production context of the film, other relationships of structural imbalance, also suggest themselves here. One can see a parallel with the relationship between Hollywood and Asian film industries, for example, the more powerful former now making use of Asian creative personnel and creative properties for the production of their own works — including direct remakes intimately linked to, indeed twinning, their Asian inspirations, which in turn run the risk of becoming marginalized in the global film discourse. (This in turn also echoes the former colonial relationship between Britain and Hong Kong, with the East again providing labor and resources for the West — an echo that seems to reverberate as well in *Koma* [*Gau Ming*, Law Chi-Leung, 2004] as argued below.) Yet another parallel exists in the relationship between Hong Kong and Singapore in the filmmaking realms. In a number of high-profile productions (notably, the *Eye* and *Infernal Affairs* [*Mou Gaan Dou*, Andrew Lau Wai-Keung and Alan Mak, 2002] series), Singapore has been an "invisible partner," serving as a source of funding but entirely absented from the text itself.

But again, the exploitative valences of the relationship between Mun and Ling, the historical economic and social imbalances to which it alludes, are undercut by the substantial levels of continuity between the two women. Though separated by class and nation, they are profoundly linked by gender and ethnicity — as well as, arguably, by outsider status within their respective societies. Mun is an outsider by virtue of her (former) blindness, which her grandmother once told her (as she relates in voice-over) makes her an extraordinary person, able to experience what others do not. (Ironically, the restoration of Mun's sight is shown as redoubling her social isolation, in that she is now politely invited to leave her former group of peers, an ensemble of blind classical musicians gearing up for a special performance with — most appropriately — the internationally successful Singapore-born Sino-Thai musician Vanessa-Mae.) Ling is also an outsider in part by virtue of perceiving

what others do not — specifically, the arrival of spirits who will lead away the newly dead, the facility she eventually shares with Mun. The other members of her rural village blame her for the deaths of which she warns people, assuming she is some kind of witch and therefore ostracizing her; when she sounds an unheeded warning before a disastrous and deadly fire, the animosity turned against her is so strong she is finally driven to suicide.

Ling's outsider status is further reinforced owing to her Chinese ethnicity. While the Chinese in Thailand have not had the same degree of difficulty as Chinese migrants in other Southeast Asian nations, at present holding a largely well respected status in Thai society, her Chinese ethnicity nevertheless makes Ling de facto not part of the dominant social bloc of her own country.[13] In fact, it is that ethnic Chinese connection which appears to help ensure her intimacy with Mun, a diasporic connection that transcends borders, indeed a form of a familial linkage, which eventually becomes literalized when the two women come to share the same flesh and blood. This sense of familial linkage, of great importance in most Asian cultures, is emphasized here in numerous plot references to family. Much of the drama in the Hong Kong sequences, for example, involves Mun's relationship to her grandmother and sister, and Wah's family is also emphasized, given that his uncle (with whom he is sometimes at odds) is also Mun's surgeon. ("Were you reincarnated into wrong body? Why are you so different from rest of the family?" the uncle asks Wah only half-jokingly, incidentally also anticipating the film's sub-themes of reincarnation.) But while Chinese family relations are highlighted as important, they are also figured as under stress, possibly victim to the centrifugal forces of modernization and globalization: Mun and Ling further reflect one another in both living without their respective fathers, Mun's again having moved to Vancouver, and Mun's sister is often abroad with her airline work. The two suicide victims Mun encounters, moreover, have specifically familial disputes to resolve: a young video-gaming boy in her apartment block has committed suicide because his parents do not believe he has genuinely lost his report card, and Ling's present dilemma concerns her lack of forgiveness from her mother.

Subtly underpinning all these other categories of social connection and difference, however, is the category of gender, and plainly their shared femininity provides one of the most significant linkages between Mun and Ling. This deeper preoccupation with the status of the feminine in a changing Asia, moreover, ultimately links *The Eye* more closely to the concerns of other new Asian horrors, with their unruly female ghosts insisting they be recognized, than might first appear to be the case. Both Mun and Ling are at a disadvantage in their respective patriarchal societies. Both women pose

problems for the consistently male medical authority figures with whom they interact, both in that their bodies require care (the one with vision problems, the other a suicide) and in that their supernatural abilities pose a conundrum for Western-based, masculinist medical regimes of knowledge; even the aforementioned (male) Thai doctor who is more open to the claims of supernatural phenomena than his Hong Kong counterparts tells the visiting Hong Kongers, "I don't understand any of this spiritual stuff; I just know [Ling] was a kind girl who had a hard life." This affront to masculine notions of order and reason also emerges in the problems which Wah's romantic (emotional, corporeal) attraction to his psychotherapy patient Mun pose for him. The attraction threatens the non-emotional, rational codes of professional behavior which he is supposed to follow and creates a rift with his surgeon uncle — his superior in the rigid patriarchal orders of medical establishment and family. Even the women's ability to see not only present, but past and, to an extent, future as well undermines Western scientific notions of linear time and teleology, suggesting a perspective more akin to an (Eastern) holistic view of time instead.

Thus, while Mun's dramatic resolution of her problems with Ling to some extent bridges certain referenced pan-Asian divides of class and nation, the subsequent merging of the two women points to still more profound structural oppositions that cannot be readily resolved. Whereas women become linked with the spiritual, the emotional, the bodily (labor), the traditional, the Asian, and, more specifically, the Southeast Asian; men become aligned, in opposition, with the positivist, the rational, the intellectual, the modern, and the Western. And whereas women become associated with a fluid, holistic view of reality, which enables them to readily transgress literal borders and conceptual frameworks (viz, Mun and Ling's ability to merge into one), men are associated by contrast with rigid, linear thinking, which requires them to occupy clearly defined and delimited territories.

Given these implicit oppositions, while on the surface the film appears to reach an initial dramatic resolution, with Mun now understanding of Ling and Ling now reconciled with her mother (and hence ready to proceed on to a peaceful afterlife), substantial irresolution still remains at a deeper level, and literally explodes into a surprise coda after this earlier resolution. In this, *The Eye* bears another significant structural similarity to *Ringu*, which likewise makes use of a false initial resolution. In that case, the main protagonists uncover the mystery of the vengeful female spirit, Sadako, and comfort her — but to their (and the audience's) horror, it becomes clear that this is not enough to defuse Sadako's deadly curse, as, presumably, the deeper (structural, social) conditions which have precipitated that curse (evidently those arising from

Japan's paternalistic social and familial systems) still remain. In both films, while the (classical, masculine) rules of causal, linear plot development and resolution would suggest the film is about to conclude, an assertion of female agency in some form prevents this from happening.

In *The Eye*'s final plot twist Mun again witnesses the arrival of guides to the afterlife, this time in large numbers, thanks to powers inherited from Ling, as she and Wah sit dozing off in a bus in a Bangkok traffic jam. Realizing a deadly disaster of some sort is about to occur, Mun dashes off the bus and runs to warn people, to no avail, and her frustrated efforts are intercut with the past parallel efforts of Ling to warn people of the fire to come to her town. In the present time frame there is again a major conflagration, owing to the ignition of fuel from an overturned tanker truck followed by a series of chain reaction explosions, and many deaths inevitably result, with cross-cutting making clear the correspondence to Ling's own earlier traumatic experience with fire. Mun stands transfixed as the explosions occur, and Wah manages to pull her down to the ground before the fireball can reach them, but not before shards of glass enter her eyes.

The overwhelming emphasis on parallels between the two conflagrations suggests, again, a challenge to modern linear temporality, evoking instead a Taoist cyclicality or Buddhist karmic inevitability: In keeping with Eastern modes of thought, past deeds cannot be erased, but rather always make their return.[14] In these terms the event can be seen as the result of Mun's own karmic debt, or perhaps also as the inheritance of Ling's bad karma — as Mun is indeed, on some levels, a reincarnation of Ling, embodying her spirit after her death. Mun's loss of sight as a result of the event, her return to her pre-operative condition, would appear to validate this reading. Yet the sequence also seems to want to do more than evoke these ideas, given the stunning nature of its imagery, its depiction of a sudden and apocalyptic firestorm which catches nonchalant Bangkokians completely unaware, incinerating them in the midst of their actions. There is indeed an *excess* in this imagery which prompts one to look for other meanings.

In a most literal sense, the imagery (especially in an Asian viewing context) recalls that of various Western military attacks upon Asia, in particular the American nuclear attacks on Japan in the Second World War (with their mass incinerations of bodies), but also (more to the Southeast Asian context) the firebombing that occurred in the Indochinese conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s. Given the insouciance of those sitting in the traffic prior to the explosion, one might read this event as a reminder or return of inadequately acknowledged or hidden suffering, of the labor and sacrifices of various socially marginalized or disempowered people, which has allowed modern Asia to

develop with the breakneck rapidity it has. And at the same time, considering the film's cyclical temporal register, the event might appear a portent of the future, a warning (for those so comfortably unaware) of a trauma potentially yet to come in the course of Asian history, a function of ongoing polar oppositions (for example, between regions, ethnicities, classes, genders) that cannot readily be reconciled. Indeed, within the conceptual framework of the film's various structural oppositions, it is telling that the explosive event occurs in Bangkok, a city that serves as a transitional point between differing realms, the traffic-clogged beacon of modernity in a country that still perceives of itself in largely agrarian terms and (relevant to themes regarding the broader conceptualization of Asia) a gateway to Southeast Asia for those from elsewhere in Asia, as well as from the rest of the world.[15] In modern history, moreover, Bangkokians' lives have been disrupted by political turmoil and "explosive" violence on more than one occasion — notably with military actions against civilian protestors in 1973, 1976, and 1992 — and such instability has in point of fact repeatedly threatened to resurface in the period since *The Eye* was made.[16]

While the film's climactic conflagration and Mun's subsequent return to blindness, which she seems fully prepared to accept, might on one level seem regressive — a flight from the horrors of the world — Mun's final voice-over suggests a more circumspect, holistic view, noting that "aside from pain, I saw beauty." Along the same lines, *The Eye* perceives a yin-yang structure to the universe, a set of dynamic oppositions which, while having immediate, topical resonances, are also part of certain eternal and inevitable conditions.

This analysis has tried to suggest ways that the narrative of *The Eye* points to a range of tensions underneath the relatively stable surface of present-day East and Southeast Asia. These tensions arise in part from the co-existence of Asian traditions and often Western-inspired trends of modernization, of spiritual cosmologies and materialistic worldviews, and from the interactivity of divergent social and economic classes of people from disparate sub-regions; and the tensions are of sufficient magnitude to produce a sense of identity crisis in both regional and personal terms. *The Eye* figures this crisis as being played out in the body of woman, thus alluding to the gendered dimension of the human costs of change: The literally fragmentary constitution of Mun's identity and her efforts to attain wholeness and stability can readily be seen to parallel crises in Asia itself — including, in the film's most immediate context, crises of production and distribution strategies for the region's increasingly transnational entertainment industries. The explosive nature of the film's coda suggests just how contingent any resolution may be under current circumstances, the protagonist's seeming acceptance of them notwithstanding.

Coda: Ghostly Returns

By way of an extended conclusion to this chapter, a brief look at some of the sequels, remakes, and other films that *The Eye* has at least partially inspired will serve to help highlight some of the themes or qualities of the film that seem to have had particular resonance for its Asian context. It is notable, for example, that the authorized "sequel" from the same producers and directors, *The Eye 2* (*Gin Gwai 2*, 2004), neither continues the narrative nor makes use of any of the same characters of the earlier film. What is picked up, rather — what is seemingly of the essence — is a certain ominous, deliberate pacing and an emphasis on themes of hidden lineage and indebtedness, now linked explicitly to Buddhist conceptualizations of reincarnation and karma. Deeper truths about the universe in *The Eye 2* are again gradually apprehended by the young female protagonist, Joey Cheng (Shu Qi), in part because of an ability to see things others cannot (spirits of the dead in particular) which she has acquired owing (the film explains) to her own proximity to death (as an attempted suicide) and her state of pregnancy. Joey is particularly alarmed by the spirits' evident interest in newborn babies, but she eventually learns that these spirits are merely waiting for the bodies in which they are to be reincarnated — and that the spirit hovering around her own as-yet-unborn child is that of the wife of the child's father, whose infidelity with Joey contributed to her suicide. The film concludes, somewhat along the lines of its predecessor, with Joey's greater understanding of the inevitable (if sometimes seemingly also cruel) cycles of life.

While this brief plot outline might suggest that issues of transnational identity are not as fully germane to *The Eye 2* as to its predecessor, the text's transnational conditions are again, in fact, quite relevant. *The Eye 2* is once more a co-production between Hong Kong's Applause Pictures and Singapore's Mediacorp Raintree Pictures and once more makes use of substantial numbers of Thai production and post-production personnel. The main cast is again transnational — yielding the irony that, while this is primarily a Cantonese-dialogue film, none of them are native speakers of Cantonese: Star Shu Qi, though a fixture of recent Hong Kong film, started her career in her native Taiwan; her husband is played by a major Thai star (Jedsaporn Poldee) who needed to have his dialogue dubbed by a Cantonese-speaking actor; and his suicidal wife is played by the California-born actress Eugenia Yuan, who divides her acting career between the US and Asia. And while, again, transnational interactions are not so central to the plot (the vast majority of which is set in Hong Kong), the filmmakers evidently did see a transnational context as essential enough to the *Eye* "formula" to be certain to emphasize

such a context. *The Eye 2* opens with Joey shopping in an upscale Bangkok mall, in an evident effort to escape the emotional difficulties of her Hong Kong life. It is while on the Bangkok trip that Joey makes her own suicide attempt and first begins (unbeknownst to her) to experience supernatural visions, so once more (if only briefly) Thailand is initially linked to the mysterious and supernatural forces which then play themselves out in the film's Hong Kong narrative.

Another 2004 Hong Kong film that bears comparison here, *Koma*, might at first appear quite removed from the Asian horror intertexts being discussed in this chapter — in that it is not technically a film involving the supernatural (though this only gradually becomes evident) nor does it centrally focus on motifs of vision. Indeed, from surface indications, the film might seem to owe more to the Korean drama *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance* (*Boksuneun naui geot*, Park Chan-wook, 2002), with which it shares a narrative focus on kidney thefts and transplants in a context of economic disparity. On a deeper level, however, *Koma*, a highly atmospheric thriller which features the main female stars of the vision-themed horror films *The Eye* and *Inner Senses* (Lee Sin-Je and Karena Lam, respectively), taps into and amplifies several key motifs from *The Eye*. Just as in the earlier film, Lee here plays an economically privileged but biologically frail and emotionally unstable young woman (suffering from kidney failure), whose physical health is indebted to the vitality of another woman (played by Lam), who is physically stronger but economically poorer and, in her turn, indebted to the financial generosity of Lee's character. Also as in the earlier film, these two women share a relationship characterized at once by profound intimacy and intense anxiety, heightened in this instance by sexual jealousy over a boyfriend. The sense of discomfort over intimacy with and (bodily) indebtedness to an economic Other is most literally embodied in the film's closing plot twist, where Lee discovers that, unbeknownst to her, she has had implanted within her Lam's kidney, which she will now be unable to live without.

This crucial motif of profound and inescapable debt to the Other — and in particular to the vitality and to the body of this Other — is not in *Koma* given the explicit transnational dimensions that it takes on in *The Eye*, with its scenes of transit between Hong Kong and Thailand. And yet contemporary Hong Kong, the sole setting of *Koma*, is again in itself a transnational space, by virtue of its recent decolonization from Britain and its re-acquisition by China an overdetermined site of transit between Asia and the West, as well between old Asia and new. Indeed, in this context, it is difficult not to see *Koma*'s final image of transplantation and inescapable interdependence and intimacy as redolent of Hong Kong's new relationships with mainland China on the one hand and Britain on the other.

Such implications of *The Eye* as a distinctively post-colonial narrative about interdependencies among disparate nations in economically unequal relationships perhaps become clearest in the film's unacknowledged (but largely scene-for-scene) Indian remake, *Naina* (a.k.a. *Evil Eyes*, Shirpal Morakhia, 2005). *Naina* hews quite closely to its East Asian model, but its few divergences are most instructive. The most obvious shift is in setting, *The Eye*'s transit from Hong Kong to rural Thailand replaced by a like transit from London to rural India, a context, again, much more directly evocative of post-colonial transnational entanglements. The London-raised protagonist Naina's intimate link to Britain's former colony is inscribed a priori in her Indian ethnicity (indeed, so unassimilated is she, it would seem, that she hardly speaks a word of English throughout the film, despite its London setting); and this linkage is redoubled when she learns that the donor of her transplanted corneas is from a remote and impoverished corner of Gujarat, India (which she visits, in the fashion of her cinematic forerunner, to exorcise the other-worldly and sometimes prescient visions she has been having).[17] Thus we have *The Eye*'s oppositions between modernity and tradition, present and history, technology and spirit now projected into the relationship between former imperial power and former colony.

The Eye's intimations/evocations of the inescapability of karma, the inevitability of the return of past deeds, are also substantially amplified in *Naina* in that the final conflagration witnessed by the title character (in which, again, she loses the sight that had been granted by the transplanted corneas) takes place not in India, but in London, after her return; there is thus much more clearly the sense that the event represents some kind of present-day fallout from past history. Naina's sighting of dark figures, harbingers of doom, circulating among the primarily fair-skinned denizens of London without their being noticed, and her inability to get Londoners to take notice and protect themselves, indeed seem to lend themselves to being read as a pessimistic commentary upon the relationship between Anglo-Europeans and those descended from the people of former British colonies living amongst them. Unsettlingly prescient in this regard is that the catastrophe Naina anticipates is a fiery explosion in a London Tube station — this in a film released some months prior to a real-world series of explosions in the London Underground set off by British-residing descendants of subjects of former British colonies.