



Narcissism, Melancholia and the Manifestation of Suffering in *Shutter*

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Figures of vengeful female ghosts are commonly visualized in Asian horror cinema as an allegorical response to patriarchal injustice. Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom's *Shutter* (2004) utilizes this trope by highlighting the psychological subjectivity of the central protagonist Tun as he deals with the loss of a love-object while sustaining a desire to bolster his egocentricity. By utilizing psychoanalytic knowledge informed by Freudian concepts of melancholia and narcissism, this essay will examine how the character's psychological burden emerges as a complex allegory that reflects on culturally specific gender ideology. Framed against the larger metanarrative of gender inequality that underscores contemporary Thailand's social landscape, Tun's relationship with his love-object is representative of the way in which men continue to oppress, (ab)use and construct women for their own desires and ends. The manifestation of male psychological damage further underlines the unjust gender ideology that remains entrenched in the patriarchal-inflected Thai-Buddhist belief system.

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Similar to Japan's contemporary horror films such as *Ringu* (1998), *Pulse* (2001) and *One Missed Call* (2003), Banjong Phisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom's high-grossing Thai feature *Shutter* (2004) presents an avenging spirit that manifests through technology, or more specifically, the camera, to haunt the living. The film's haunted technology trope does not only function as a commentary on societal concerns over globalization and digitally mediated existence but it also reflects upon a past that still remains. This past, as Colette Balmain writes, can be one that is repressed and also "monstrous,

chaotic and a threat to all things rational and modern” (Balmain 2008, 169). Based on this assertion, the ‘monstrous’ past as reflected in *Shutter* points to the socio-cultural history of Thailand, a history predicated on female repression and subjugation.

In “Thailand Haunted: The Power of the Past in the Contemporary Thai Horror Film”, Adam Knee notes how the embattled status of Thai women and the unresolved state of historical injustices against them may serve as a basis for the disposition of hatred and revenge by female agency in the genre (Knee 2005, 147). The critically-acclaimed *Nang Nak* (1999) and other filmic retellings of the popular Thai ghost folklore *Mae Nak Phra Khanong*, for example, are repository of gender anxieties in relations to patriarchal control. Similarly, the monstrous-feminine in *Shutter* is embodied in the form of Natre, a troubled and aggressive spirit who exerts vengeance on her rapists. Prior to her suicide, she is first abandoned by her lover Tun and later falls prey to his sexually abusive friends. Her fatal victimization provides a powerful allegory for gender and identity politics in contemporary Thailand.

Although scarce, critical scholarship of the film tends to make similar arguments about Thailand’s gender power relations and constructs through the lens of culture (Knee 2005, 2009; Fuhrmann 2009; Ainslie 2012). Natre’s spirit remains significant in underscoring the culturally-specific monstrosity that is symbolic of female oppression and experience. Parallel to Knee’s observation of gender identities in Thai horror cinema, Mary Ainslie suggests that the motif of “righteous” female spirits in New Thai horror cinema articulate the growing concerns regarding the “mistreatment of Thai women” in the past and the present (Ainslie 2011, 51). In her analysis of *Shutter*, Ainslie asserts that the film attempts to reconcile “the polar oppositions that now run through and disrupt Thai society” in order to “solve its ongoing social problems” (Ainslie 2012, 240). Tun’s existing lover Jane is representative of a “connection” between Natre, the (oppressed) female and Tun, the (male) oppressor in reconciling the “opposing social forces” and “subjectivities equally” for Thailand to eradicate “discrimination or prejudice” (ibid: 241).

Moreover, Rebecca Booth situates her discussion of the film within the context of Theravada Buddhism—a religious doctrine that is most influential among Thailand’s population (Booth 2016). Booth highlights the spiritual elements of *Shutter*—the (brief) portrayal of monks in appeasing the dead and the traditional world of earthbound spirits—all of which narrate a “historical folklorist message” about gender inequalities as part of the Buddhist construct (Booth 2016). In a manner analogous to Ainslie’s study, Booth positions Jane as a mediator between the physical and spiritual world and the one who receives “warning about patriarchal power” from the abused Natre (Booth 2016). In both analyses, Natre’s malignant force is seen as less of a threat to Thailand’s long-held patriarchal system. She is, in fact, a representative of dependency and submission among females instead of an agent that subverts

the masculine order. The ending of *Shutter* indeed shows both Jane and Natre ‘returning’ to their oppressor Tun despite his past violation toward them.

This essay offers a slightly different perspective on how (Thai) masculinity substantiates as a dominant form of oppression by focusing specifically on the film’s male protagonist Tun. Ultimately, *Shutter* is a cinematic reflection of the psychological constructions of gender intersecting with cultural and ideological sentiments. The need to delve into the inner workings of the oppressive male ego is important to fathom the patriarchal forms in the psyche. The ideological dynamics of *Shutter* can be read allegorically within a Freudian psychoanalytic framework to further understand the gender politics which may largely stem from the unconscious. My argument is founded on the assumption that Tun’s experience of loss precedes his deep melancholic suffering while Natre’s ghostly existence is precipitated by his growing desire for Jane. Instead of positioning Natre as an avenging spirit, I view her monstrosity as a critical projection of Tun’s melancholia in securing his narcissistic position.

However, it must be emphasized that the anxieties Tun experiences are fundamentally unconscious. He does not know that Natre has returned because his unconscious has willed it, nor does he realize that it is a narcissistic condition that propels this willing. I also examine the character’s attachment to photography—along with the traditional masculine gaze that is associated with the camera—which strongly suggests a sense of sentimentality that confines him in a complex mental state. Here, I draw briefly on Susan Sontag’s view of photographs as ‘melancholy objects’ and Roland Barthes’ observation on the intersection between photography and memory to make further connections between Tun’s art and his melancholia. The purpose of this essay is hence twofold: to provide an in-depth analysis of the unstable and fragmented subjectivity of the central male character as well as to examine the spectral embodiment of the both the ego and love-object.

The film follows Tun, a freelance photographer in Bangkok whose relationship with his new lover Jane is threatened by the presence of a female spirit. Tun’s camera lens often captures images of a wraith-like figure and his portfolio of clientele photographs bear peculiar white shadows. Tun and Jane presume the spirit to be the young woman whom they accidentally hit on the road a while before. In hopes of laying the unquiet spirit to rest, Jane leads him into investigating the mystery by referring to an editor at a spoof magazine specializing in spirit photography. Meanwhile, Tun’s college mate Tonn inexplicably commits suicide at almost the same time as two of their other friends. They deduce that Tonn may have fallen victim to the same menacing spirit that has been after them. Jane soon learns that the spirit is of Natre, a former lover of Tun. A flashback scene during the climactic point in the film reveals Tun to be one of Natre’s perpetrators—he has photographed the rape as a form of blackmail, which ultimately compels her to take her own life. The

resulting narrative is motivated by Tun's desperate attempt to escape from his past wrongdoing as Natre's spirit persists.

Central to the plot is Tun's refusal to admit responsibility for Natre's rape, suffering and subsequent suicide, which evidently implies great inner turmoil that besets him throughout the narrative. Despite clear signs that point to his being haunted by his past crimes, Tun chooses to remain silent and resists acknowledging the painful truth of his involvement in Natre's fate. His willfulness characterizes a complex melancholic denial in which he is, ambivalently, unable to forget and remember Natre—his lost love-object.

In his seminal essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud describes melancholia as a "morbid" pathological condition in comparison to mourning whereby the subject is unable to recuperate from the loss or death of a love-object (Freud 1917, 243). Freud posits that certain conditions, particularly the "loss of the object, ambivalence and regression of libido into the ego," need to surface to engender melancholia (ibid: 249). He writes: "...the free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego... Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego" (ibid: 249). Once the loss has occurred, the 'shadow' of the love-object assimilates into the subject's ego through identification, hence becoming a single whole. The ego and object of love are now inseparable.

An understanding of mourning is integral to fathom the criticalness of melancholia. Freud evaluates the work of mourning as a process in which "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again" by the lost love-object (ibid: 245). The pain of deep grief can be overwhelming but Freud believes that the mourning process can allow the subject to renounce his relationship to the lost object and reinvests in a new libidinal substitute, or in other words, a different object of desire. After all, the lost love-object has ceased to exist and the acceptance of such reality "proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object" (ibid: 244). Following this withdrawal of libidinal cathexes from the love-object, the subject's "free libido" is displaced onto the new object as the detachment solidifies (ibid: 249-52).

Additionally, the Freudian concept of mourning does not involve a sense of self-deprecation so commonly expressed by the melancholic subject due to the "impoverishment of the ego on a grand scale" after the loss of the object (Freud 1917, 246). The world may become "poor and empty" in the eyes of those who mourn and yet for the melancholic subject, it is his ego that has turned barren and meaningless instead (ibid: 246). The subject's grief is especially prolonged if he unconsciously establishes the original love-object as unique and above all, irreplaceable (Carel 2007, 1074). In doing so, he chooses to remain faithful not only to the lost object but also to the agonizing relationship with the loss itself. In a brutal state of melancholia, the subject sabotages his own healing by allowing his psyche to be affixed on the loss and thus, remains in a perpetual anguish.

At first glance, Tun appears to have moved on despite having witnessed the traumatic event that involves Natre being raped. Jane is ostensibly the new object he has chosen to reinvest his cathectic energy on. He seems also oblivious to Natre's death in the first half of the film until he discovers her preserved corpse in her mother's home. To his knowledge, Natre has only left Bangkok for her hometown after the tragedy. He does not palpably display the characteristic modes of melancholic response to a love-object's demise. Natre's position as a love-object and her ensuing absence is sufficient, however, to engender a sense of loss within Tun, albeit covertly. This melancholic loss is only conceptual as the subject is mostly unconscious of *what* he has lost in the love-object rather than *whom* he has lost (Freud 1917, 245). Freud himself concedes that the "inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely" (ibid: 244-45). Tun's lack of acknowledgement, sorrow and guilt in response to the loss of Natre further indicates that there is a possibility for him to pass over the crucial stage of mourning altogether. In fact, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok assert that the "refusal to mourn" is "the refusal to reclaim as our own the part of ourselves that we have placed in what we lost," which will later result in the incorporation of the love-object into one's ego (Abraham and Torok 1994, 127).

In masking his melancholic position, Tun denies Natre's existence firsthand and ultimately represses certain 'undesirable' memories of her. A crucial precondition for denial is the presence of repression (Ver Eecke 1977, 13). Freud describes repression as a defense that appeases and safeguards the conscious part of the ego by excluding unpleasant thoughts and painful memories of events (Freud 1915). A subject may retract and desert his memory of a particular trauma yet retains the event in the unconscious; in doing so, he remains in denial and more so unwilling to face his past history. Both repression and denial are considered by Freud to be pathological and primitive; the latter likewise stems from resisting to accept the reality of loss (Lavie and Kaminer 2001, 123). Tun's ego enacts repression despite encountering Natre's ghostly presence in several occasions, especially in the darkroom where he ended their relationship. Clearly, Tun suffers from being haunted by Natre's spirit yet he still resists the need to acknowledge her as his love-object, someone whose life he has destroyed.

The disavowal of the painful memory will eventually lead to the negation of the love-object's existence in the subject's psyche, thus explaining why Tun takes a longer time to re-conjure the connection he has had with Natre in the past. His defense is marginally shattered the moment Jane learns of his past involvement with Natre upon discovering old photographs of them in a yearbook. When questioned, he reluctantly discloses his relationship with Natre to Jane yet continues to harbor the repressed memory of photographing her rape. The ending of *Shutter* reveals the photographic accounts of Natre's rape which Tun has kept in his apartment despite claiming to Tonn that he has

already disposed of them. The fact that the photographs are kept hidden in his apartment is suggestive of Tun's repression of this memory. He must confine the pain of losing his love-object to the unconscious because reality can never bring her back. Tun chooses to confine the pain of losing his love-object to the unconscious and preserve her photographs in maintaining the impression that she has not left. In doing so, he unconsciously becomes more 'devoted' to Natre, thus intensifying his melancholic suffering.

At this point, repression and denial are measures which Tun has set for himself in order to endure the loss of his object. For the repressed, the pain of desiring the love-object is confined to the unconscious because the dead can never return. By repressing this desire, the conscious mind turns to restrict the memory of the lost object because of the guilt that the subject actually feels. Tun's denial is simply a means of assuaging his own guilt feelings for his (in)actions while in a relationship with Natre. This point is what Jeffrey M. Jackson understands as a state where the subject is propelled to succumb to what he calls a "manic transgression," thus summoning up relentless blame against himself for being responsible for the loss (Jackson 2008, 304). *Shutter* subtly reveals Tun's form of self-reproach in the scene that takes place in his apartment after admitting to Jane of his past relationship. The high angle shot exposes Tun's vulnerability and silent remorse as he lays his head on Jane's lap. "We always say we would turn back time just so we could reverse all our wrongs," he gloomily ponders aloud. The scene at the hospital where Tun goes for a check-up for the neck pain he has been suffering from also takes on the symbolic value of his repressed guilt. The sequence detailing his x-ray session parallels with common filmic representations of a mug shot taken as a standard criminal procedure. The 'ghostly' x-ray photographs unveils the guilt and shame are embedded within his psyche and almost impossible to discern with the naked eye.

Furthermore, a melancholic subject often accumulates hatred toward the love-object for leaving or dying. Tun may resent the fact that Natre is no longer around and this hatred concomitantly regresses into guilt. Above all, the subject is likely to think, "How can I ever hate the one I love the most?" and regrets his detestation because of the tremendous attachment he has for the departed object. His propensity for photography mirrors the melancholic desire to preserve his overwhelming commitment to loss. After all, photography was once of great importance in their relationship. Tun has helped Natre to take photographs of her lab specimen in his pursuit of a love-object. The development of their relationship, in fact, is captured on photographs as Jane later discovers. This repetition provides an explanation as to why Tun continues to engage in photography after the rape incident. Photography is no longer a leisurely pursuit for him but has now turned into a career. Many scenes depict his fascination with photographs as objects. He becomes engrossed with the photographs of violent car crashes exhibited at the local police station. He also studies the original and doctored spirit photographs intently at the editor's

office. After his client's graduation ceremony, Tun is seen developing a photograph he has captured with precision, bathing it in chemicals until the image slowly manifests under the red light. The darkroom in his apartment becomes an intimate hideaway for him to concentrate on processing, compulsively, more photographs.

Owing to this obsession, Tun naturally 'possesses' certain photographs (including the ones where Natre is violated) and especially those taken in his younger days. The film's opening credits establish this fact: pictures of Tun and his friends during happier times in college are shown dissolving into one another, depicting a seamless transition from youth to adulthood. These images make plain of his popularity as a student involved in many societal clubs and surrounded by many friends, including Tonn. Yet, as if foreshadowing the horror to come, the strong red light permeating the photographs seems representative of a metaphorical bloodbath. Each photograph suggests that Tun's happiness will soon be obliterated by a haunting which, in actuality, is his own psychological disturbance. For Susan Sontag, the practice of photography is a ritual of "recording the disappearing world" (Sontag 1977, 76). The "disappearing world," in this case, refers to the past that can never be retrieved; due to this, photography substitutes as a tangible connection to what is lost through the "passage of time" (ibid: 71). Sontag also views photographs as "melancholy objects" primarily because they function to document the "unrepeatability" of time (ibid: 71). This, as a result, reinforces the fact of human mortality (Gibson 2004, 295). The camera itself is an object—or more so, a melancholy object—that signifies the lost time in a subject's life. Drawing on Donald Woods Winnicott's (1971) concept of the transitional object, Margaret Gibson argues that the melancholy object can refer to other articles apart from photographs (Gibson 2004). Any particular object that reminds the self of his lost loved one ultimately becomes an "object of mourning and symbol of loss" (ibid: 289).

In Tun's case, the camera acts as a transitional object because it mediates the loss of Natre and enables him to establish a form of corporeal contact with her. The camera is a great reminder of both Natre's compassion toward him prior to the rape and her anguish during the tragedy. However, as Gibson suggests, the camera serves as a melancholy object, like the images it produces (Gibson 2004). Melancholy objects, Gibson observes, also signify the "incompletion of mourning—a reminder that grief never entirely goes away" (ibid: 289). Moreover, the desire to capture photographic images and view them is to satisfy what Sontag sees as nostalgia (Sontag 1977). To surround oneself with melancholy objects is to deepen one's wistful (sentimental) longing and affection for the past. Nostalgia, in Marshall Battani's viewpoint, refers to the "yearning for a more perfect time in the past" and photographs are able to provide the false impression of reproducing "a real vision of the world" (Battani 2006, 152). In this light, photographs distill a reality but that which is conditioned by the subject's consciousness. In this regard, the subject can deny

loss by recollecting only the favorable impressions that the image conjures in his consciousness. This is what Battani means when he argues that photographs are melancholy because they inspire “nostalgic delusions” (ibid: 152). Here, the photographs primarily function on the basis of the need to document our existence and transform such images into (sentimental) objects. Despite the idealization of past memories, photographs are melancholy because of their potentiality to induce a particular sadness and remorse within the subject.

As melancholy objects, photographs have a great capacity in inducing symptomatic emotions that are similar to that of melancholic suffering. A photograph, on the surface, may stimulate the conscious memory of its referent but Sontag also contends that it also works as a “reminder of death,” thus making the subject aware of his imminent demise (Sontag 1977, 71). As such, I argue that Tun’s melancholic suffering is visible due to his fixation on the unconscious desire to not only conserve but memorialize an ‘ideal’ past through his photographs. In this context, the photographs are perceived as mirrors which reflect the images of what he has lost from his better days in college. The fear of deterioration in vigor and life is compelling for the living and as such, to view time lost and traces of youth through photographic means only heightens this dread. In the end, these images become material traces of a life that is now slouching toward cessation. Tun also knows that he is unable to retrieve this past that is profoundly associated with Natre. That she is now dead due to his fault merely accentuates the profundity of his loss—one that is complicated by love, hate and guilt.

This obsession shows just how pathological Tun’s melancholic condition is that it has become a narcissistic neurosis since he is no longer able to escape his ego’s ambivalence. By allowing the rape to happen and photographing the act itself, he has shown a significant psychological “self-preservation” that helps to structure the ego and shield the self from external threats (Freud 1914b, 87). In his writing “On Narcissism,” Freud suggests that such excessive self-love originates from “the libido that has been withdrawn from the external world” and “directed to the ego” on which it is fixed (ibid: 75). In primary narcissism, the libido is invested inward and the subject becomes embellished with a desire to satisfy his own needs. Freud recognizes melancholia as a fundamental example of a narcissistic defense as “the idealized love-object is coveted as a mirror of the self” (Freud 1917, 249). It is a state in which the subject forms an identification with an (external) love-object that echoes parts of himself. The perpetual grief from having lost object is, in truth, a form of self-obsession that is thinly disguised as self-denigration.

Freud also observes that the narcissistic subject will choose an object-choice who can “love in a way that compensates for the impossibility of self-love” (Freud 1914a, 34). The subject demands to be ‘loved’ and thus, will keep possession of the object-choice only to placate the ego. Narcissism can also be described as a failure to transfer the love for one’s self onto another object that is apart from his own. *Shutter*’s narrative can therefore be read as a study of

object relations when it comes to Tun's desire for Natre as his narcissistic object-choice. In a flashback sequence, the audience is introduced to Natre, an unassuming girl from the countryside who moves to Bangkok to study biology. Though brilliant in her scientific scholarship, she lacks social skills due to the amount of time she spends in the lab. Tun later enters the picture and offers her friendship. His voice-over confesses, "We all thought she was weird so I felt sorry for her." This relationship gradually develops into romance as they spend more time together. During courtship, he demonstrates a tendency for photographing her. In one scene, Tun is seen capturing her beauty with his camera while Natre remains coy without looking directly at him. At this point, it is apparent that Tun is becoming attached to her, an object that exists essentially to invest his masculine libidinal energy on and reinforce his self-centeredness.

Natre is a strong object-cathexis for Tun's libidinal needs as her timidity and submissiveness strengthen his sense of superiority in a relationship in which he dominates. A strong indication is found in the scene where Tun approaches her for sex and his voice-over narration discloses, "She loved me very much." A high-angle shot is placed to provide an omniscient point-of-view of the lovers lying on the bed. Tun is turned away from Natre as she tenderly caresses him from the back. The scene is shot at an oblique angle to visually imply the skewedness of their relationship of which Natre loves him unconditionally more than he does her, if at all. Their lying position foregrounds the impending sexual violation where he will turn his back on her. Another comparable scene shows Natre buying him a camera as a gift to replace his old one so that he could pursue photography. In an ironic twist, he will later use this very same camera to photograph her rape to guard his self-worth among his peers.

Most of Tun's libidinal energy is, hence, concentrated on his ego. He shows signs of having a stronger ego-libido than object-cathexis that is characteristic of the Freudian state of primary narcissism. As such, it is his narcissistic-ego that compels him to end his relationship with Natre. In the following flashback scene, we see Natre being harassed by Tun's friends inside the elevator. Tun remains passive in the background, realizing that his love-object is not accepted by his peers. Despite her pleas, he ends their relationship after having an argument in the darkroom. This is the moment in which his libido "return(s) from the object to the ego" to restore what Freud has described as "a real happy love"—the kind of 'love' in which all libidinal energies are re-directed inward toward the self (Freud 1914b, 100).

Natre later attempts suicide in hopes of winning Tun back. Unable to cope up with the pressure of Natre's desire to die, Tun asks his friend Tonn for help. As a result, Tonn, along with a few others, sexually harasses Natre in the lab; the harassment culminates in her rape. Tonn forces Tun to take photographs of the deed so that "she doesn't blab." Obliging to his friend's request, Tun clicks the shutter of his camera in lieu of saving his love-object from shame. The

scene of her brutalization is shot with the use of close-up on Natre's agonized face as she is being photographed. With her eyes wide open, she silently endures the 'voyeuristic' gaze of Tun's camera lens. She is, at that moment, transformed into a fetishized object and compelled to bear the burden of her lover's gaze, which represents a thinly disguised misogyny.

As the producer of these images, Tun subscribes to Roland Barthes' viewpoint that the "Photographer" is able to turn the subject into an "object [that does] not struggle" (Barthes 2003, 23). The subject, according to Barthes, is often at the "mercy" and "disposal" of the Photographer, as well as ever "ready for the subtlest deceptions" (ibid: 23). Despite the camera being the focal source of his guilt, Tun continues to utilize it to capture the 'truth' as he wants to see it but strictly, from his point-of-view. According to Anne Marsh, the camera can be read as a totalitarian "weapon" for the photographer to pursue his "voyeuristic narcissism" that is predicated on "power, control and supremacy" (Marsh 2003, 43). Through the photographic eye, Tun subjugates his object to serve the pleasure of his male gaze. His deployment of the camera echoes Sontag's view that photography involves a "certain patronizing reality" where the world is reduced to an object – the "inside" of photographs – instead of acknowledge it as subject – as a "being out there" (Sontag 1977, 80).

Such is the power of the photographer with his camera as 'weapon'; by photographing Natre in such a state, Tun 'objectifies' her into a pawn that can continuously bolster his ego. The safeguarding of the disturbing images of Natre at her most vulnerable during the rape is suggestive of Tun's preservation of his ego surfeit. Her powerlessness, as captured in these photographs, only accentuates his self-serving proclivity. Her ghostliness is, indeed, a metaphor of a man's primitive relationship with his own psyche and self. Unable to 'escape' from the confinement of his photographs, Natre is condemned to serve his narcissistic-ego even after death.

But if narcissism has induced Tun's misdeed of photographing Natre's rape, why is he affected by her loss? According to Freud, the melancholic subject often experiences a "conflict of ambivalence" toward his departed love-object (Freud 1917, 251). As a consequence, the loss of the love-object becomes the loss of a vital part of the subject himself. It is important to note here that Tun's narcissistic-libido is so deep that he lapses into melancholia once Natre is no longer in the picture and consequently ceases to foster his egotism. To counteract such loss, the ego begins to form a primary narcissistic identification with the lost object-choice "as a living entity within its own psychic topography" (De Lauretis 2008, 36). Identification remains central in melancholia as the ego incorporates traces left by the object, thus allowing it to internalize the subject's own distorted perception of what the object was. In her foray into the territory of melancholia, Judith Butler views identification as the subject's "strategy of magically resuscitating the lost object, not only because the loss is painful but because [of] the ambivalence" toward the love-object; this course, nevertheless, will be "retained until the differences are

settled” between them (Butler 1990, 83). Fundamentally, narcissism and melancholia are related because the desire to ingest the departed loved-object is really a means of self-preservation.

This is made clear in a brief scene approaching the climax of *Shutter* as Tun returns from a visit to the hospital. He sits alone in his living room while studying a number of photographs scattered on the table. The photographs are from his client’s college graduation of which he took earlier, all of them ruined by strange white shadows. In the background, a documentary on the mating process of grasshoppers is reflected on the television. The translated voice-over narration goes: “It’s rarely seen when grasshoppers begin mating...the female’s response is surprising. The male becomes her prey. She slowly eats off his head while they are mating. Eventually, the male succumbs to death.” The image of an insect consuming its mate articulates what a melancholic subject does to his loved-object—he mercilessly ingests a lost love-object in order to satisfy his own desires. The process of incorporation corresponds to the “cannibalistic phase of libidinal development” and in that mode of grief, the lost object is “devoured” or appropriated by the subject (Freud 1917, 241). This takes place when the subject equates the love-object with his own ego and in doing so, begins to unconsciously usurp the mannerisms and gestures which elucidate, to some degree, the object’s otherness. The object is thus denied “the opportunity to be heard” even as an “other” (Brisley 2013, 60). Incorporation, in effect, causes Tun to live permanently in Natre’s ‘shadow.’

The ending of the film reveals that the cause of Tun’s unremitting neck pain and mysterious weight gain (post-accident) is the spectre of Natre herself, perching on his shoulders. Tun learns of this when he takes Polaroid pictures of his living space in his attempt to locate Natre. He discovers that she has been a ‘part’ of him all along. In other words, there may have been no ‘difference’ after all between them. Tun’s ego is, hence, split into two and confirms Jackson’s view that the melancholic desires to “be the other” in order to “have the other” (Jackson 2008, 292). As Tun’s libidinal energy is transferred from Natre, the object, to his ego, he begins to sublimate some of that energy into the creation of her ghost. Since Tun has entirely eschewed the grieving stage to repress his ego, what is left of him is an unconscious yearning for the love-object to exist as part of him. The cremation ceremony scene is also particularly useful for exploring the persistence of Tun’s melancholic incorporation of Natre. He now imagines that her restless spirit can be appeased and his guilt expiated. However, as Tun sits while staring at the coffin during the ceremony, he is suddenly grabbed by what seems to be Natre’s presence from behind. As such, it could be argued that despite all his efforts, Tun will never be able to divorce his libidinal cathexis from the object. After all, the melancholic subject rarely foregoes incorporation as the lost object is already “sequestered” and stays affixed within the ego (Roussillon 2010, 832). His ego-libido, in fact, has grown so strong that he becomes trapped in his own ambivalence, hence foreshadowing his eventual incarceration in the asylum.

Once the subject's internalization deepens, the fragmentation of the self simultaneously occurs; the love-object is now both the subject's double and a "mirror" that reflects his fractured ego (Freud 1919, 235). In *Shutter*, the theme of narcissism and incorporation are set by evoking this mirror image. The trope of the mirror as a visual cue appears repeatedly in the narrative. Prior to Tun's suicide, Tun is seen looking into a cracked mirror on the wall of the former's apartment. While driving to Natre's hometown, Tun checks the rearview mirror only to find Natre, or rather his ego, staring before him. The night before Natre's body is cremated, Tun gazes intently at his own image reflected in the bathroom mirror. He appears to be engulfed by his own reflection, which in turn, parallels the myth of Narcissus who could not look away from his image mirrored in the surface of the pond due to his relentless self-love. In the climactic scene toward the ending, a shot of a mirror reflects Tun's expression of horror as Natre stays mounted on his shoulders. Tun has, indeed, created an imago of his love-object to be with her for eternity; that they appear inseparable is only because they are one.

As an incorporated loved-object, Natre ultimately takes on a monstrous, corporeal materiality as an externalization of Tun's overpowering mania that has been unleashed through photographs. For Barthes, death is the "eidos" of the photograph and photographs are a means of "resurrection" for the subject, especially if he or she is already dead (Barthes 1984, 24). The first time we see Natre manifesting before Tun's eyes, for example, is during the photography session at his client's college graduation. As he gazes through the camera's lens to look for the best composition, he unexpectedly meets the gaze of Natre (now fully incorporated into his ego), standing among the graduates. This metamorphosis of Natre's apparition in the photographs and her tangible self that is released into the living world represent how Tun's repression of his split ego is now mediated. The somewhat overbearing behavior of Tun is essentially a projection of his own narcissistic ego: he only becomes his love-object out of his desire to have her continuously reinforcing the primary narcissistic expectations of his. To be Natre, in other words, is to have his self-love persist.

Natre's return, in fact, can be interpreted as Tun's hysterical yet unconscious reaction against his new object-cathexis, Jane. While Freud describes the melancholic subject as having lost the capacity to find a new object of desire, how does one explain Jane's position in Tun's life? It is crucial to note that Natre returns at the moment when Tun tells Jane how beautiful she is. The lovers are driving one night and as Tun compliments Jane, they accidentally hit what is seemingly a lone woman on the road. When they disembark from the car to locate the 'victim', no trace of a body is to be seen anywhere. The accident is likely to be a violent representation of Tun's malignant self-love and internal fracture which resulted from his attempt to re-invest in a new object. This is a pivotal moment in the narrative: Tun's narcissism is under threat due to his growing affection for Jane. Not only does

narcissism imparts all cathexes to the ego and espouse the fallen ‘shadow’ of the love-object, but it also “erases or attempts to erase” any external influences which may threaten this state (Roussillon 2010, 822).

To counter this, Tun conjures up Natre so that ‘she’ will ensure that the new love is doomed. Tun’s praise of Jane’s beauty and the way he longingly gazes at her signify his overvaluation’ of Jane; this, in return, transforms Jane from ‘object’ to subject. As a melancholic who is unable to renounce his incorporation of Natre, Tun is actually risking his narcissistic-ego simply by being in love with Jane. He conjures up Natre’s ghost so that ‘she’ will ensure that Tun and Jane’s love is doomed. By falling in love, a narcissistic subject desists from focusing on himself, which leads to self-impoverishment as part of his ego is transferred or displaced onto another individual (Freud 1914; Jackson 2008). Otto Kernberg’s development of Freud’s theory demonstrates how narcissists have great difficulties extending love to another person because they often feel “overexposed,” which then threatens their “partially fragmented” egos (as cited in Battegay 1990, 36). In *Shutter*, Natre’s ghost is precisely the means by which Tun achieves this.

It is important to clarify, however, why Jane poses such a threat to Tun. As a woman and a lover, the image of Jane contrasts starkly with Natre. As seen in the film’s opening scene, Tun seems proud to have Jane by his side as he mingles with his friends at Tonn’s wedding reception. She is highly inquisitive, energetic and emotionally stronger than Natre, who is often portrayed as pliable, socially inept, and above all, dependent on Tun. As a strong-willed woman, Jane is the epitome of the modern Thai woman as opposed to the more traditionally configured Natre. It is apparent in the opening scene that Tun genuinely finds Jane attractive, and in this regard, the qualities that she possesses also seem to aggrandize his narcissistic-ego in the company of his friends. Furthermore, Jane is readily accepted by Tun’s social circle compared to Natre, thereby testifying further to her strong individuality. As such, if Natre was ‘loved’ because she fundamentally bolsters Tun’s ego, Jane actually incurs the opposite effect on Tun.

Throughout the film, Jane is depicted as the dominant partner in the relationship, frequently taking the lead in decision making and especially during their investigation of the haunting. She makes arrangements for a meeting with the editor of the spoof magazine, for example, to learn about the existence of spirit photography. She also makes the connection between Tun’s clientele photographs with the lab building where Natre used to study and consequently discovers the former relationship between the two. Later in the film, Jane also uncovers the negatives depicting of Natre’s rape in his apartment. Tun almost always remains the passive partner, signified by the many scenes where he stands in the background while Jane is shot in close-up. Tun may also affect passivity in order to prevent Jane from discovering the truth, but in doing so, his ego is also increasingly becoming overshadowed by

Jane's assertiveness and independence. Clearly, his narcissism and self-preservation are at stake.

A similar argument that can be posed is that Jane acts as a 'parental' figure to Tun, causing his ego to regress. Bela Grunberger introduces the idea of non-conflictual regression, which to some degree contributes to the development of ambivalence within a subject while allowing the possibility for him to be "loved in a limitless manner" (as cited in Gibeault 2010, 143). Grunberger also asserts that this particular regression, indeed, leads the subject back to narcissism as it establishes a "transference relationship" that is mostly represented by object-relations (as cited in *ibid.* 143). The narcissistic subject, according to Freud, can be attracted to those who have the ability to feed, care and protect his instinct of self-preservation (Freud 1914b). In truth, the subject is "plainly seeking" himself "as a love-object" and all object-choices exist to nurture this need (*ibid.*: 88). This is especially evident in the scene where the two of them are conversing after Tun's admission to knowing Natre. During their conversation, Tun is curled up on Jane's lap in a fetal position. Jane seems to be an anaclitic love for Tun in lieu of narcissistic object-choice (as Natre is)—his libidinal investment in her seems to be governed only by the hope that she, as an object of desire at this point, will fulfill his ego-libido needs as a mother would to a child. Part of Tun's reason for choosing Jane is also due to his ego's avoidance of confronting the haunting (or more so, his guilt) that is associated with his past and now lost love-object. He becomes desperately reliant on her as the haunting escalates and Jane, in turn, 'protects' him before unearthing the cause of Natre's wrath.

The narrative also suggests that their friends are coerced by Natre's spirit to commit suicide in a similar manner as hers in the past. It is important to reiterate how she is only a projection of Tun's melancholia while his threatened ego is fundamentally the monster. On one hand, the reason for their deaths is merely because they accept Jane as Tun's lover, which merely serve to further devalue his narcissistic-ego. The positive reception given by Tun's friends of his new relationship presents him with the opportunity to relinquish self-love. Tun's friends, or rather, their affirmation of him and Natre are both part of Tun's ego construct. While one part of the ego (his friends) is obviously damaging its own preservation of self-love, another part of it (Natre) must be invoked to offset this by removing the former. In a curious twist of circumstance, Tonn and others' encouragement of Tun's love for Jane unwittingly serves to doom them all.

However, it is evident that the ones who died due to a violent encounter with the monstrous Natre are also her past violators who caused her to take her own life. Likewise, the deaths of Tun's friends are ruled as suicide, which is far from indiscriminating. Their position as Natre's victims can possibly be symbolic of Tun's striking melancholic ambivalence. Despite his prominent role in the 'instigation' of driving Natre away, Tun also despises how his friends have extended the harassment to rape. At the same time, he feels guilty

for extending her humiliation by photographing her. In part, Tonn and the others have relatively precipitated his regression into melancholia during the rape. Above all, he is too faithful to his lost object and has to murder each of the perpetrators, regardless of their long-term friendship. This complex attitude of Tun's "self-abasement" and uncertainty represent, as Jennifer Radden argues, a "form of rage toward the once-loved object...redirected toward one part of the ego" (Radden 2004, 224). In this sense, the incorporation of the loved object allows "the self to attack the object within it", effecting great conflict within the ego (ibid: 224).

To further extend my point, I will turn to the most important scene in the film that reveals Tun's capacity of physically projecting his melancholic tendencies through Natre. This occurs at the moment when he receives a surprise visit from Tonn at home. Tonn, clearly terrified, comes out from the dark in Tun's living room to demand "her photographs." At this point in time, it is unclear for the viewers as to which photographs of Natre he is referring to (the photographs are later revealed to be of her rape). However, during the confrontation, Tun convincingly informs Tonn that he has no knowledge of such photographs and proceeds to call Jane. Tonn leaves while Tun is on the phone. The subsequent scene shows Tun looking through his possessions in his living room, making an attempt at finding the photographs of which he supposedly has no recollection of. He immediately puts an end to his search as soon as Jane enters his apartment. Disconcerted by his friend's strange request, Tun decides to check on Tonn in his apartment. Here, he finds scattered photographs of his college days on the coffee table. Once Tun realizes this in alarm, we see in rack focus of Tonn jumping from his balcony in an unguarded manner and crashes onto the ground.

Natre remains as a violent expression of his increasingly disturbed mind. As a spirit, she can be considered as an external force that carries Tun's bidding in perpetrating the suicide of his friends. Tonn's suicide, as initiated in the scene outlined, is potentially caused by the old photographs he procured from Tun. Tun, in a heavy state of melancholia and denial, is present when the suicide occurs, almost as if he is there to witness the violent 'work' of his mind. The fact that the film only constructs, following this scene, a montage of shots showing the shadows of his friends' leaping off high-rise buildings further suggests that Tun, as his monstrous double Natre, could initiate their deaths after all. Moreover, he denies having knowledge of his other friends' suicides when he is confronted by Tonn's wife in the subsequent scene. When those involved in the rape begin to die one by one, Tun blames this on Natre and is thus absolved from any responsibility. In protecting his narcissistic-ego, Tun feels the need to remove his friends or rather, to obliterate the possibilities of having his self-love withdrawn.

Parallel to Natre and his friends's deaths, Tun near the end of the film throws himself out of the window to escape from the monstrous 'double' of his psyche. He is, for once, shocked at his own realization of his true (internal)

condition and selfhood. He falls to the ground unconscious but survives, and is later confined in the asylum. Here I argue that Tun's fall is figurative of his own suicide attempt—an act that occurs the instance he encounters the image of his introjected self 'Natre' in the Polaroid picture and mirror. While it may seem to be direct, purposeful or even a self-punitive act to end his suffering, the deed itself echoes the tragic end of Narcissus. Without self-recognition but instead a love so great for his own image in the water, Narcissus attempts to embrace the reflection only to drown.

Freud states the possibility for the ego to 'kill' itself but only if "it can treat itself as an object" and direct "against itself" and all aggression toward the object in the first place (Freud 1917, 252). Tun may have incorporated Natre into himself to maintain a sense of self-serving biasness but when he later projects her outwards in the guise of a monstrous female, he is also signaling his hatred for her, which, ironically, is also a form of narcissistic gratification. The melancholic subject often identifies with the loved-object in a negative way: he feels love, hate and guilt all at once, albeit unconsciously, toward the love-object, yet these feelings are also heavily targeted at himself (Carel 2007, 1073). Lucy Brisley concurs by suggesting that the ambivalent rage arises from the subject's "ambiguous relationship" with the lost other is "invariably inflicted upon the self" as the ego has "adopted the guise of the object" (Brisley 2013, 63). Moreover, Esther Sanchez Pardo views such ambivalence amassed toward the lost object can indeed culminate in suicide, which can be read as a "gesture of love" in order to "save and preserve his object from his own sadism and hate" (as cited in Brisley 2013, 67).

This accumulated resentment toward the introjected object in the ego can overwhelm the melancholic subject, thus driving him to suicide and in Tun's case, an attempt toward death. For all human beings, Freud asserts, the conflicting forces of life and death drives are "struggling with each other from the very first" (Freud 1920, 61). The Freudian death drive specifically, according to De Lauretis, refers to a form of hostility and violence that are directed both "outward, toward the other, or inward, toward the self" as a final aim of life (De Lauretis 2008, 37). In the Freudian view, such aggression toward the object and masochism toward oneself "must be regarded as sadism that has been turned round upon the subject's own ego" (Freud 1920, 54). Tun's suicide attempt has a similar function: his ego is so overwhelmed by traces of Natre, the lost love-object that he begins to turn within himself only to lose her once and for all in (an attempted) death.

Like many Thai horror films, *Shutter* portrays the embattled status of Thai women within a patriarchal-inflected symbolic order, which has remained unchanged for centuries (Knee 2005; Fuhrmann, 2009). In exerting his control over Natre, Tun is directly complicit in the young woman's destruction and his refusal to acknowledge this advances the haunting. On the surface, however, Natre's character appears to rehearse the oppressed women in existing patriarchal structures who, only in the afterlife, can find empowerment to

punish the men who have ill-treated them. Alive, Natre merely serves to energize Tun's egotistical streak: she loves him unconditionally, and submits willingly to his desires. In death, she continues to safeguard his narcissism by becoming projected as the violent other who wreaks doom.

The film also reinforces the Buddhist tenet that in order to escape suffering, one must relinquish desire (Fuhrmann, 2009; Prosser, 2004). Arguably, Tun dismisses what he sees and knows because he is, after all, the perpetrator of violence and the source of haunting. His refusal to acknowledge the haunting is associated, to a point, with a repression of guilt but more so a denial of wrongdoing. The manifestation of Natre is metaphorical for Tun's reincarnated self precisely because his clinging onto his (narcissistic) desire entraps him in the perpetual cycle of rebirths and suffering. Despite the film's depiction of Buddhist practices, as shown in scenes where the characters visit temples and attend a traditional funeral service held to appease Natre's malevolent spirit, Tun himself appears to be rather irreligious. This merely attenuates the point for his apathy towards Buddhism is what ultimately denies him liberation from his trauma. Clearly, these ideological resonances cannot be separated from the film, because the two are intrinsically connected as the narrative relies on established beliefs and traditions specific to Thailand's context.

Female suffering in Thai society, according to Knee, has long been buried within institutions of marriage and motherhood and is in dire need to be eternally acknowledged (Knee 2005, 146). In *Shutter*, the suggestion of woman as property continues beyond death, for Natre continues to serve Tun's need to protect and reinforce his ego even in the afterlife⁶. She becomes the "eternal" victim who is raped, abused and dominated in an unjust patriarchal society in which she has no identity beyond her objectification. In *Shutter*, Natre is clearly depicted as a submissive woman, and as such, illustrative of traditional Thai femininity. Even Jane, who does not conform to such a predestined role, returns to Tun, if only to oversee to his needs. The closing image of Natre perched on Tun's back may imply that she may never cease haunting him, but it could equally suggest that Tun remains adamant in his refusal to relinquish her in order to sustain his sense of superior male-ego. The resolution of the film suggests the power of patriarchy is too imposing to be defeated and thus the female become subjected to it, albeit passively.

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