

Cultural Symbolism in Vietnamese Horror Films

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Abstract

Vietnamese horror cinema has carved a niche in the global film industry, distinguished by its use of cultural symbolism to evoke fear. This study scrutinizes the intricate ways in which Vietnamese horror films incorporate indigenous beliefs, customs, and folklore to instill a profound sense of dread among local viewers. It revolves around three pivotal questions: the method by which these films infuse cultural symbols to craft a fear that is both nuanced and culturally relevant; the degree to which these symbols enhance the films' overarching messages or social critiques, possibly reflecting wider societal concerns or historical accounts; and the contrast in the depiction of these symbols in Vietnamese horror films against those from other national cinemas like Thai, Japanese, or American. The research dissects four acclaimed Vietnamese horror movies: "Thất Sơn Tâm Linh" (Kunmanthong), "Quả Tim Máu" (Vengeful Heart), "Bóng Đè" (The Ancestral), and "Lời Nguyễn Huyết Ngải" (Blood Curse). By analyzing the employment of cultural symbols in these narratives, the study endeavors to enrich the comprehension of Vietnamese horror cinema's unique faculty for tapping into the specific fears and anxieties of its audience, thereby contributing to the genre's discourse. This exploration into the heart of Vietnamese horror aims to unveil how cultural underpinnings shape the genre's impact and resonance with its audience.

Keywords: Cultural Symbolism, Indigenous Beliefs, Social Critique, Vietnamese Horror Cinema, Fear

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Introduction

A group of adventurers incidentally stumble upon an ancient statue, accidentally releasing an evil curse that binds them to a vengeful soul. This scary script is inspired by a legend about Kunmanthong, a Khmer item that is strong and soaked in a dark mystery. It shows the combination of typical folk and horror in Vietnamese horror cinema (Nguyen, 2023).

This unique spirit is mostly defined by a complex picture of Vietnamese culture interwoven in the film stories. Vietnamese horror films utilize a strong tool: cultural image. These images, permeated by religious beliefs, long-standing traditions and chilling legends, hit the Vietnamese audience's psyche and evoke gentle scary feelings (Le, 2018). Though they are the scenes of votive paper burning, prayer whispering, or the angry return of an ancestor who has not yet rested, each symbol exploits a scary source and cultural belief, transforming the familiar into the terrifying.

This paper delves into this enthralling domain, exploring the following inquiries:

RQ1: How do Vietnamese horror films utilize specific cultural imagery to evoke a layered sense of terror for Vietnamese viewers?

RQ2: How do the cultural images employed in these films contribute to the overarching themes or social critique conveyed in the narratives?

RQ3: In what ways does the utilization of cultural imagery in Vietnamese horror differ from its portrayal in the horror cinema of another national cinema (e.g., Thai, Japanese)?

Through an examination of four prominent contemporary Vietnamese horror films – Kumathong (That Son Tam Linh, 2019), Vengeful Heart (Qua tim mau, 2014), The Ancestral (Bong de, 2022) and Blood Curse (Loi nguyen huyet ngai, 2012) - This research aims to clarify the power of cultural image in Vietnamese horror films and its role in shaping fear and social discourse.

Literature Review

Unveiling Cultural Depths: Exploring Symbolism in Vietnamese Cinema

Horror cinema operates by going deep into fear and insecurity of humans. Scholars in horror genres, such as Robin Wood (1986), argue that these films play a vital role in allowing them to face this fear in a controlled and safe environment. This discovery is based on usual cultural themes, distorted and twisted to evoke insecure feeling (Clover, 1992). Besides, horror stories often use specific archetypes such as "Other" or a weak girl who has an accident to stir up terror and explore deeper themes (Carroll, 1990).

Cultural symbols wield significant influence in horror cinema. Leveraging viewers' shared comprehension of their cultural significance, these symbols can evoke a nuanced sense of fear (Le, 2018). As Clover (1992) notes, horror often capitalizes on the "monstrous-feminine" archetype to evoke anxieties surrounding gender roles and societal norms. Similarly, when religious symbols, folklore entities, and customary practices are presented within a horrifying narrative context, they can tap into profound fears and beliefs specific to a particular culture (Silver, 1999).

Vietnamese horror cinema has garnered local acclaim in recent years for its distinctive amalgamation of cultural motifs and chilling storylines (Tran, 2020). These films harness the potency of cultural symbolism to evoke fear that resonates deeply with Vietnamese audiences (Le, 2018). By incorporating symbols derived from Vietnamese spiritual beliefs, ancient traditions, and eerie legends, these movies delve into a reservoir of cultural anxieties, transforming the familiar into the terrifying.

Unraveling Cultural Fears: Exploring Vietnamese Cultural Beliefs in Horror

Vietnamese cultural heritage presents a diverse array of beliefs and customs that seamlessly intertwine with the horror genre. Unlike Western horror, which is often about the realm of the supernatural and demonic, Vietnamese horror frequently describes the realm of spirits and the delicate equilibrium between the living and the departed (Le, 2018).

Central to Vietnamese culture is the profound reverence and homage paid to ancestors. This reverence profoundly influences horror narratives, often portraying the phenomenon known as "bóng đè" (literally translating to "pressing shadow"), where a malevolent spirit believed to be a restless ancestor weighs heavily on the sleeper's chest, inducing paralysis and dread (Tran, 2017). The disregard for ancestral customs or the failure to honor the departed properly can unleash vengeful spirits, a recurring motif explored in films.

Vietnamese animistic beliefs, which posit that all living beings possess a soul ("vía"), underpin apprehensions regarding soul deprivation and malevolent spirits. Horror movies may depict malevolent entities stealing the "vía," resulting in illness or even death (Nguyen, 2016). Moreover, the concept of "vía" is intricately linked to the dichotomy of "dương" (positive energy) and "âm" (negative energy) forces, central tenets in Vietnamese cosmology. The disruption of this equilibrium, often through acts of violence or transgression, can invite malevolent spirits into the mortal realm.

Vietnamese folklore is replete with chilling narratives that serve as fertile ground for horror storytelling. Films like "Thất Sơn Tâm Linh" (Kunmanthong) (Lê Bình Giang, Trần Hàm, Phan Gia Nhật Linh, 2019) draw upon the legend of the "Kunmanthong," a potent Khmer artifact reputed to harbor sinister powers. These legends act as cultural touchstones, enabling filmmakers to tap into existing fears and beliefs within the Vietnamese audience (Tran, 2020).

A Comparative Exploration: Vietnamese Horror and the Fear of the Unseen

This study looks at the influence of cultural symbolism on Vietnamese horror films, specifically examining how it cultivates a distinct sense of fear among local audiences. To grasp the unique essence of Vietnamese horror, it is imperative to juxtapose it with another national cinema renowned for its robust horror tradition. In this instance, we turn our attention to Thai horror and Japanese horror, celebrated for its eerie portrayals of vengeful spirits seeking retribution.

Thai horror frequently depicts the notion of "phi," malevolent spirits driven by a profound sense of injustice or violent demise. Works such as "Pee Mak" (2013) by Banjong Pisanthanakun blend humor with horror, narrating the tale of a lingering spirit unable to depart until his wife acknowledges his true form. These narratives often probe themes of karma and the repercussions of misdeeds, wherein the deceased return to exact suffering upon those who have wronged them (Vajdowicz, 2008).

This thematic focus on vengeful spirits contrasts with the approach taken in Vietnamese horror, which goes deeper into apprehensions surrounding the delicate equilibrium between the living and the deceased, ancestral reverence, and the spiritual realm. Although both cultures employ ghosts and spirits in their narratives, the underlying fears and motivations animating these entities diverge significantly.

Japanese horror presents a stark contrast to Vietnamese fears through its portrayal of the infamous vengeful spirits known as "Onryō" (Chow, 2004). These specters, driven by intense fury and a profound sense of betrayal, often appear as pale, wrathful apparitions bent on avenging past wrongs. Works like "Ju-On: The Grudge" (2002) directed by Takashi Shimizu exemplify the formidable power of the "Onryō," whose malevolent curse spreads like wildfire, afflicting torment upon anyone unfortunate enough to cross its path. This thematic emphasis on wrath and the relentless pursuit of vengeance generates a unique atmosphere of terror distinct from Vietnamese horror. While both cultural narratives incorporate vengeful spirits, the "Onryō" epitomize a ferocious wrath and a thirst for retribution, juxtaposing the Vietnamese preoccupation with disrupting ancestral harmony and apprehensions regarding the spirit realm.

Methodology

Unveiling Fear: A Qualitative Inquiry Into Cultural Symbolism in Vietnamese Horror Cinema

This study is about the realm of Vietnamese horror cinema, with a specific focus on the utilization of cultural symbols to evoke fear and convey nuanced messages. Adopting a qualitative research methodology, this investigation will engage in a meticulous examination of four prominent Vietnamese horror films: "Thất Sơn Tâm Linh" (Kunmanthong) directed by Lê Bình Giang, Trần Hàm, and Phan Gia Nhật Linh, "Quả Tim Máu" (Vengeful Heart) by Victor Vũ, "Bóng Đè" (The Ancestral) by Lê Văn Việt, and "Lời Nguyễn Huyét Ngải" (Blood Curse) by Bùi Thạc Chuyên.

Adhering to established principles in film studies methodology (Branston & Stafford, 2000), this analysis will entail a thorough examination of various cinematic elements encompassing narrative structures, visual imagery, sound design, and mise-en-scène. Emphasis will be placed on the portrayal of Vietnamese cultural symbols, including spiritual beliefs, rituals, customs, and folklore. By closely scrutinizing the integration of these symbols within the films' narrative frameworks, visual aesthetics, and auditory compositions, this research aims to elucidate the multi-faceted sense of fear they elicit among Vietnamese audiences (Nguyen, 2016). Through this detailed exploration, the study seeks to unveil the manifestation of specific cultural anxieties and beliefs, thereby illuminating the distinctive brand of horror inherent to the Vietnamese context.

Results

Fear Through the Familiar: Unveiling the Power of Vietnamese Symbols (RQ1)

Thất Sơn Tâm Linh (Kunmanthong) intricately weaves elements of Vietnamese cultural imagery to evoke layers of fear specifically tailored for its Vietnamese audience. The film is about concerns related to ancestral reverence and the vindictive tendencies attributed to departed spirits. Notably, it explores the significance of "bùa hộ mệnh" (amulets) within

Vietnamese folklore. While traditionally viewed as protective talismans against malevolent forces, the film portrays instances where these amulets, when corrupted or mishandled, bring about calamity, reflecting apprehensions regarding the reversal of their intended safeguarding.

Moreover, the narrative exploits the Vietnamese ritual of "cúng cô hồn" (offerings to wandering spirits) to heighten tension. Scenes depicting neglect or improper execution of these offerings instill a sense of disquietude. Vietnamese viewers recognize the imperative of appeasing these spirits, and the film accentuates the dread of incurring their ire through negligence in observing these rituals. A poignant illustration occurs when a character displays disrespect towards an offering, triggering a harrowing encounter with a wrathful spirit. Through these cultural motifs, *Thật Sơn Tâm Linh* depicts deeply ingrained beliefs, crafting an atmosphere of dread that surpasses the conventional jump scares prevalent in typical horror cinema.

Victor Vũ's *Quả Tim Máu* (Vengeful Heart) skillfully integrates Vietnamese cultural elements to evoke a haunting ambiance resonant with themes of societal hierarchy, broken commitments, and the lingering potency of resentment. Central to the film's narrative is the notion of "oán linh," spirits of vengeance stemming from unresolved animosity. This narrative device taps into Vietnamese beliefs concerning the afterlife, where intense negative emotions can materialize as vengeful entities seeking restitution. A pivotal moment illustrating this occurs when the protagonist, Minh, breaches a solemn pledge made to his departed wife. Through poignant flashbacks and symbolic imagery such as a shattered locket, the film underscores the gravity of this oath. Subsequently, Minh is besieged by nightmares and inexplicable phenomena, suggestive of the wrath of the "oán linh."

Moreover, *Quả Tim Máu* adeptly employs the cultural motif of "bùa hộ mệnh" (amulets) in a duplicitous manner. Initially presented as a safeguard for Minh, the amulet becomes a conduit for the malevolent spirit's influence. This manipulation of a trusted symbol instills apprehension by underscoring the potential hazards of placing undue reliance on external protections. A chilling sequence depicts the amulet ominously aglow, presaging the escalating grip of the malevolent spirit. By subverting these cultural symbols, the film cultivates a climate of unease and skepticism, prompting viewers to question the veracity of safeguarding measures and the repercussions of betraying sacred commitments.

Le Van Viet's *Bóng Đè* (The Ancestral) strategically incorporates Vietnamese cultural motifs to evoke a deeply personal and disconcerting sense of fear. Drawing from Vietnamese folklore, which suggests that the soul can momentarily detach from the body during sleep, rendering it susceptible to spiritual assaults, *Bóng Đè* exploits this belief to depict characters grappling with terrifying hallucinations and a sense of helplessness while immobilized. An illustrative instance occurs when a character awakens to find themselves paralyzed, confronted by a menacing, shadowy presence. This evocative portrayal capitalizes on the cultural apprehension surrounding "bóng đè," instilling an immediate and palpable sense of dread.

Moreover, the film interweaves the significance of "cúng cô hồn" (offerings to wandering spirits) to heighten its horror elements. Scenes depicting neglected ancestral altars or improper observance of these rituals contribute to a mounting sense of unease. Vietnamese viewers, cognizant of the imperative to appease ancestral spirits, are sensitized to the amplified fear of repercussions when these ceremonial practices are neglected. A poignant narrative strand might involve a character grappling with nightmares or inexplicable

phenomena following their failure to adhere to the prescribed "cúng cô hồn" rites. By adeptly employing these cultural symbols, Bóng Đè crafts a domestic horror narrative wherein the source of terror emanates not from external entities, but from the potential disruption of the delicate equilibrium between the living and the ancestral realm.

Bùi Thạc Chuyên's *Lời Nguyễn Huyét Ngải* (Blood Curse) tells the intricate fabric of Vietnamese spiritual beliefs to instill a sense of apprehension rooted in the ramifications of meddling with forbidden realms. The film prominently features the concept of "ngải," a potent manifestation of black magic believed to harness formidable spirits for personal ends. This exploration taps into a pervasive Vietnamese apprehension regarding the perilous implications and moral quandaries associated with such esoteric practices. A pivotal juncture within the narrative might portray a character clandestinely engaging in a "ngải" ritual, underscoring the clandestine nature and societal taboo surrounding such acts. Visuals characterized by darkness and foreboding, coupled with unsettling incantations or musical accompaniment, serve to intensify the prevailing sense of disquiet.

Moreover, the film intricately examines the notion of "oan linh" (vengeful spirits) in a novel light. Rather than solely focusing on spirits wronged by the living, *Lời Nguyễn Huyét Ngải* posits that the vengeful spirit could emerge because of the "ngải" ritual itself. This narrative device taps into the apprehension surrounding unintended repercussions and the potential for malevolent forces to recoil upon their wielders. A chilling sequence might depict a character initially reaping the benefits of "ngải" magic, only to later find themselves besieged by nightmares or haunted by a vengeful specter. This reversal of fortune underscores the film's underlying commentary on the hazards of manipulating forces beyond human comprehension.

Beyond Chills: Social Commentary Embedded in Cultural Symbols (RQ2)

The selected Vietnamese horror films adeptly employ cultural symbols not merely to instill fear but also to convey poignant messages and social critique. This infusion of cultural anxieties into the narrative fabric transcends the realm of pure horror, offering profound insights into contemporary Vietnamese society.

An overarching theme across these films revolves around the significance of ancestral reverence and adherence to traditional rituals, evident in works like *Thất Sơn Tâm Linh* and *Bóng Đè*. These narratives underscore the repercussions of disregarding age-old customs, tapping into societal apprehensions concerning social hierarchy and filial obligations. Scenes portraying neglected ancestral altars or improper offerings serve as more than atmospheric embellishments; they serve as a critique, underscoring the imperative of upholding these traditions to preserve harmony between the living and the deceased—a concept deeply ingrained in Vietnamese cultural ethos.

Moreover, the portrayal of vengeful spirits in films such as *Quả Tim Máu* and *Lời Nguyễn Huyét Ngải* transcends conventional jump scares, intertwining themes of broken promises, societal pressures, and historical injustices. For instance, in *Quả Tim Máu*, the emergence of a vengeful spirit may symbolize the repercussions of a character's unkept pledge, accentuating the enduring impacts of human actions. This narrative device serves as a social commentary, encouraging viewers to contemplate the significance of social accountability and honoring commitments.

Eerie Landscapes: Insightful Social Commentary in Vietnamese Horror Cinema

The selected Vietnamese horror films ingeniously employ cultural symbols not solely to evoke fear but also to interweave nuanced yet impactful social commentary. By showing themes encompassing environmental degradation, historical wounds, and societal disparities, these cinematic works present a profound critique of Vietnamese society.

In *Thất Sơn Tâm Linh*, for instance, the majestic beauty and spiritual resonance of the Thất Sơn mountains serve as a poignant backdrop for a narrative addressing greed and ecological devastation. The portrayal of corrupted amulets and misappropriated spells subtly critiques the exploitation of natural resources for personal enrichment. Moreover, the depiction of vengeful spirits and their ensuing repercussions can be construed as a cautionary narrative regarding the perilous consequences of disrupting the fragile equilibrium between humanity and the environment. A chilling scene could depict a character desecrating a sacred site to unearth powerful minerals, only to be met with a vengeful spirit symbolizing the mountains' retribution. This interweaving of environmental anxieties with the misuse of cultural symbols creates a potent message about the consequences of disrupting the natural order.

Bóng Đè's exploration of sleep paralysis mentions deeper the realm of historical trauma. The film's unsettling ambiance and exploration of suppressed anxieties may serve as a reflection on the enduring scars of Vietnam's tumultuous past. The utilization of the "bóng đè" phenomenon may symbolize the weight of unresolved conflicts and the specters of history haunting subsequent generations. A scene showcasing a character experiencing "bóng đè" amidst nightmarish visions of war and violence exemplifies this connection. The "bóng đè" spirit could be interpreted as a manifestation of unresolved historical trauma, haunting the present generation through sleep disturbances and anxieties. This approach utilizes a familiar cultural symbol to address a complex social issue.

Lời Nguyền Huyết Ngải's chilling depiction of "ngải" magic transcends mere supernatural intrigue. The film's portrayal of characters resorting to forbidden practices can be interpreted as a commentary on societal disparities and the desperation they engender. The allure of "ngải" as a shortcut to success may reflect anxieties stemming from navigating a swiftly changing social milieu, where economic pressures and aspirations for upward mobility can lure individuals into perilous paths. Through its portrayal of the dire consequences of such choices, the film offers a critique of societal frameworks that render individuals powerless and vulnerable. A scene depicting a character struggling financially resorting to a secret "ngải" ritual, only to face devastating consequences, exemplifies this theme. By portraying the "ngải" not just as a source of power but also of potential social ruin, the film offers a commentary on the desperation that can arise from a society grappling with economic disparity.

These examples underscore the depth of Vietnamese horror cinema, wherein cultural symbols serve as conduits to explore intricate social issues. Beyond eliciting scares, these films offer a unique perspective through which to contemplate contemporary Vietnamese society.

A Tale of Two Terrors: Comparing Vietnamese and Thai and Japanese Horror (RQ3)

Vietnamese horror films, exemplified by works such as *Thất Sơn Tâm Linh* and *Bóng Đè*, place a strong emphasis on ancestral reverence and societal harmony. These narratives underscore the significance of upholding traditional rituals and respecting ancestors, with

disruptions to this delicate equilibrium serving as primary sources of fear. By delving into anxieties surrounding social order and filial piety, Vietnamese horror uniquely blends cultural symbols with social commentary to evoke a distinct sense of dread.

In contrast, Thai horror cinema often draws upon Buddhist concepts of karma and reincarnation to craft its narratives. Films like *Shutter* (2008) and *Pee Mak* (2013) frequently feature vengeful spirits seeking retribution for past injustices, reflecting a deep-rooted belief in cosmic justice. Additionally, Thai horror is characterized by its exploration of the grotesque and macabre, utilizing elaborate ghost lore and unsettling visuals to evoke fear and unease among audiences.

Japanese horror, epitomized by classics such as *Ringu* (1998) and *Ju-On* (2002), depicts psychological terror and the uncanny. These films often exploit social anxieties and personal vulnerabilities to create chilling atmospheres, blurring the lines between reality and the supernatural. Masters of the genre, like Kiyoshi Kurosawa, adeptly manipulate audience perceptions, leaving viewers questioning the nature of existence itself in works such as *Pulse* (2001) and *Cure* (1997).

Shared Haunts: Exploring Cultural Symbolism Across Borders

Vietnamese horror cinema, while possessing its own distinct identity, shares thematic resonance with both Thai and Japanese horror traditions. In examining these cinematic realms, I uncover common motifs and divergent applications of cultural symbols that evoke fear across national boundaries.

Across Vietnamese, Thai, and Japanese horror films, a recurring motif is the presence of vengeful spirits seeking retribution. Vietnamese works like *Quả Tim Máu* depict spirits driven by a desire for revenge, akin to the vengeful ghosts depicted in Thai classics such as *Pee Mak*. Likewise, Japanese films like *Ju-On* portray spirits fueled by anger and unresolved grievances. This shared emphasis on vengeful apparitions taps into a universal fear of the unresolved and the consequences of transgressing societal norms.

Both Vietnamese and Thai horror narratives underscore the importance of honoring the deceased, albeit with cultural nuances. Vietnamese films like *Bóng Đèn* underscore the repercussions of neglecting ancestral rituals, highlighting the significance of maintaining harmony between the living and the dead. Conversely, Thai horror often portrays vengeful spirits driven by specific grievances, as seen in the poignant portrayal of longing in *Pee Mak*. This divergence in cultural interpretation enriches the narrative tapestry of each tradition.

Despite shared thematic elements, Vietnamese horror distinguishes itself by addressing anxieties specific to its social context. Films like *Thất Sơn Tâm Linh* portrays the misappropriation of cultural artifacts, reflecting concerns about environmental exploitation. Similarly, *Lời Nguyễn Huyết Ngải* explores the allure and perils of "ngải" magic, serving as a commentary on societal disparities amid rapid modernization. This interweaving of cultural symbols with social commentary is a hallmark of Vietnamese horror, offering audiences a reflection of their own societal fears.

In Vietnamese horror cinema, the utilization of cultural symbols serves to evoke both universal and uniquely Vietnamese fears. While echoing themes such as vengeful spirits and ancestral reverence found in Thai and Japanese horror, Vietnamese films imbue these

symbols with a distinct socio-cultural context, providing audiences with a haunting reflection of their own societal anxieties.

Vietnamese horror, exemplified by films like *Bóng Đè*, underscores the significance of adhering to proper ancestral rituals and offerings. Disruption of this delicate equilibrium between the living and the deceased emerges as a source of fear, reflecting cultural anxieties surrounding filial piety and the maintenance of familial harmony.

In contrast, Thai horror often portrays vengeful spirits driven by unresolved grievances, such as broken promises or violent deaths. Works like *Pee Mak* exemplify this theme, where the ghost's pursuit of resolution or retribution underscores a cultural belief in the transmutation of earthly injustices into supernatural vengeance.

Vietnamese horror transcends mere frights by utilizing cultural symbols to convey social commentary. *Thất Sơn Tâm Linh*, for instance, employs corrupted amulets to symbolize concerns about environmental exploitation. This narrative approach distinguishes Vietnamese horror from its Thai counterpart, which typically leans toward the macabre and eerie imagery of vengeful spirits.

Japanese horror, while featuring vengeful spirits akin to those in *Ju-On*, often depicts psychological horror and the uncanny. Works like *Ringu* delve into societal anxieties and blurred boundaries between reality and the supernatural. This emphasis on psychological horror diverges from the Vietnamese focus on cultural norms and societal commentary.

Discussion

Eerie Familiarity: Exploring Cultural Symbolism in Vietnamese Horror Cinema

Vietnamese horror cinema distinguishes itself by adeptly employing cultural symbols to craft a nuanced cinematic experience that extends beyond mere frights. These symbols highlight deeply ingrained beliefs and societal anxieties, evoking fear that resonates on personal and communal levels.

Works such as *Thất Sơn Tâm Linh* and *Bóng Đè* draw upon familiar cultural practices and beliefs to instill fear. The misappropriation of amulets or neglect of ancestral rituals serves as catalysts for horror, underscoring the potential ramifications of disrupting the societal and spiritual equilibrium. In *Bóng Đè*, the phenomenon of sleep paralysis, associated with "bóng đè" spirits, transcends its medical origins, symbolizing the enduring traumas of Vietnam's war-ravaged history.

Vietnamese horror ventures beyond conventional jump scares by utilizing cultural symbols to convey social critique. *Thất Sơn Tâm Linh* employs corrupted amulets as metaphors for concerns about environmental degradation, while *Lời Nguyễn Huyét Ngải* describes the ramifications of "ngải" magic as a reflection of social inequities amidst rapid modernization. By showcasing the dire consequences of cultural transgressions and societal desperation, these films offer poignant critiques of contemporary Vietnamese society.

While sharing thematic elements such as vengeful spirits with Thai and Japanese horror, Vietnamese films deploy these symbols in distinct ways. Vietnamese horror emphasizes the importance of maintaining harmony with the deceased, as evidenced by its focus on proper

ancestral rites, contrasting with the Thai emphasis on vengeful retaliation for unresolved grievances. Additionally, Vietnamese horror prioritizes social commentary over the grotesque visuals prevalent in Thai horror or the psychological terror explored in Japanese horror.

The Influence of Cultural Symbolism: Unlocking Vietnamese Horror

At the core of Vietnamese horror lies the profound influence of cultural symbolism, serving as a conduit between the supernatural realm and the deeply entrenched fears within Vietnamese society. Through the adept utilization of familiar beliefs, customs, and legends, these films craft a multi-dimensional sense of terror that strikes a chord with Vietnamese audiences on a visceral level.

Primarily, cultural symbols draw upon shared societal perceptions to evoke fear by underscoring the potential repercussions of disrupting established norms. For instance, in films like *Thất Sơn Tâm Linh*, anxieties surrounding environmental exploitation manifest through the misuse of amulets, traditionally regarded as protective talismans. Through these symbols, a sense of disquietude is cultivated, emphasizing the significance of maintaining equilibrium between the physical and spiritual realms and within the social fabric.

Moreover, cultural symbols serve as potent instruments for social commentary within Vietnamese horror narratives. Works such as *Lời Nguyễn Huyét Ngải* confront the darker facets of "ngải" magic, a potent form of sorcery. The allure of "ngải" to attain success mirrors anxieties surrounding social inequalities and the desperation engendered by a swiftly evolving society. By illustrating the dire repercussions of succumbing to such practices, these films critique societal structures that engender feelings of powerlessness, offering profound insights into the contemporary social landscape of Vietnam.

Constraints and Future Inquiries: A Deeper Examination of Vietnamese Horror

While this examination provides valuable insights into the employment of cultural symbols in Vietnamese horror cinema, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, the scope of this study was confined to an analysis of four specific films. A broader selection of works could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse ways in which cultural symbols are employed throughout the genre. Additionally, this investigation relied primarily on existing analyses and interpretations of the films. Engaging in audience reception studies would furnish firsthand insights into how Vietnamese viewers perceive the utilization of cultural symbols and their efficacy in instilling fear and conveying social commentary.

Subsequent research endeavors could delve into the evolutionary trajectory of cultural symbols within Vietnamese horror cinema. How have these symbols adapted to mirror the shifting social and cultural milieu of Vietnam over time? Furthermore, a comparative exploration that shows the anxieties explored in Vietnamese horror films vis-à-vis those depicted in other national cinemas could yield even richer insights. For instance, a comparative study scrutinizing the portrayal of ancestral spirits in Vietnamese horror alongside films from other Asian nations with robust ancestor veneration traditions may unveil intriguing cultural subtleties.

Conclusion

To summarize, cultural symbolism serves as the very essence of Vietnamese horror cinema. It grants filmmakers access to a shared reservoir of beliefs, fears, and societal truths, thereby crafting fear that reverberates on both individual and communal levels. Through the adept utilization of familiar rituals, folklore, and spiritual motifs, Vietnamese horror transcends mere frights, offering a poignant reflection of Vietnamese society's essence. It delves into environmental concerns, the enduring scars of historical trauma, and the trials of adapting to a swiftly evolving world.

Moreover, the distinctive treatment of cultural symbols in Vietnamese horror sets it apart from its regional and global counterparts. The emphasis on upholding harmony with ancestors, the integration of social commentary with supernatural elements, and the exploration of uniquely Vietnamese apprehensions all contribute to its singular cinematic allure. As Vietnamese horror garners increased international attention, comprehending the significance of cultural symbolism is pivotal in recognizing the depth and sophistication of these eerie tales.

Vietnamese horror cinema, marked by its potent amalgamation of cultural symbolism and societal critique, stands as a distinct contributor to the global horror genre. By intertwining universal fears with Vietnamese beliefs and traditions, these films transcend geographical confines, resonating with audiences of diverse backgrounds. Core themes such as societal pressures, the repercussions of tradition disruption, and the yearning for spiritual connection strike a chord universally.

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