



Missing Codec



Incantation (2022)

July 11, 2022 Posted in Cinema, Review.

There's a dynamic in *Incantation* that I found interesting: in the exchange between Ruo-nan (Hsuan-yen Tsai) and her psychiatrist during flashbacks, the psychiatrist suggests introspective methods for Ruo-nan to counter her "fears." The psychiatrist believes that what Ruo-nan was experiencing were visual manifestations of the mental images conjured by some trauma. A scene ultimately summarized this method: the psychiatrist suggests to Ruo-nan that she "forms" the world according to her will; that her world can change if she wills it.

This dynamic plays a really important role to form a critical distance from this film, which attempts to suture its audience on every chance it gets, like a persistent curse. The relationship of Ruo-nan and the psychiatrist gives an important glimpse on the contradictions of the discourse of *Incantation*.

The first contradiction the film has placed is the role of the horror presented by Old Gods (or Demons) in contrast to the suggestions of how Asians received psychiatric science. A common trope in this conflict is an inverted deployment of idealism and materialism. In the west, it is expected for religion to reside within idealist confines, and for science to at least provide glimpses of materialism in its solutions (as seen also with western approach to “psychological horror” films where the horror gets commonly resolved with a detective-like exposure of some mental disturbance that can be proven by psychometrics).

Incantation is representative of an Asian cinema approach to a kind of unconscious cynicism towards western psychiatric science (this approach can similarly be found on Anwar’s *Satan’s Slaves*, Kurosawa’s *Pulse* and Nakata’s *Ringu*): Ruo-nan was seriously afraid of something she knows is explicitly outside her, however, her psychiatrist only opted to make her talk through how only her mind can solve the horrors she experienced. While religion, on the other hand, provided things that can actually solve her very predicament, straying away from it just made her life harder.

A similar attitude is also present in Ruo-nan’s relationship with her former vlogging colleagues, the Ghost Busters. Six years prior to the film’s narrative, Ruo-nan, her then boyfriend, Dom (Sean Lin) and his cousin Yuan (RQ) went to a family gathering to perform a ritual to a deity called “Mother Buddha.” They try to document their trip and stay which ended up with them breaking a taboo. In one of the heightened scenes, Ruo-nan and Dom attempted to save a girl, insisting that they leave right away, but Yuan, still cynical of everything, persisted that they must document the whole ritual and go where they were forbidden to go. Yuan’s cynicism – and annoyingly persistent vlogger attitude – got them all to break the taboo.

From a cynicism of western psychology to distrust of western-influenced postmodernity, it seems that the Old Gods feared by horror films such as *Incantation* are taking revenge against postcoloniality (i.e. post-World War II conditions that made possible the imperialist import of western psychology and postmodernity). But between the Old Gods and postmodernity, it seems that the former does not have any issue adjusting to the latter. The curses that were inflicted by the Mother Buddha affects the people it af-

flicts with particular misfortunes fitting to their contemporary lives: the taboo haunted Ruo-nan and affected her life, livelihood, and relationships.

This conflict between Old Religion (imagined or otherwise) and postmodern technology present in Asian films have been the core of a particular niche of contemporary horror since Hideo Nakata's adaptation of *Ringu*. What *Incantation* successfully did with this tradition is to synthesize its thematic to a commentary on contemporary participative social media.

The film itself is unapologetically edited as though you are watching a very long vlog, changes in video quality and framerate included. This brought a really different sense of cinematic realism that recalls seeing fleeting moments in people as though we are peering into something deeply personal and yet distant. In effect, the seeming personal touch of the work makes you sutured more effectively to where it is trying to bring you, no matter how obviously contrived its methods are.

Incantation's filmmaking exposes to us what we already know but never really explicitly speaks of due to certain values we associate to "creation" or "creative process" of contemporary aesthetic objects. First, the contrived nature of social media manipulation, particularly of vlogs that deliberately selects footages (no matter how seemingly "random" they are) that sways its audience to a particular goal whether materially or mentally. Second, is how cinema is not really a part of the enlightenment's containment of the so-called art, but is the progenitor of vlogs: that Cinema has always been deliberate, manipulative and is one way or another, lead a certain search for "truth" into ways that benefits Old gods rather than an ideal liberation. In short, *Incantation* exposes to us what Cinema has always been: propaganda.

Looking into the conclusion of cinema as propaganda, we go back to the scene we discussed earlier: the encounter between Ruo-nan and the psychiatrist. Ruo-nan's post-rehab life gives a great allegory on a contemporary predicament concerning propaganda: that an "enlightened" fix of a "distant objectivity" can never beat through mere persuasion the mind haunted by visceral specters. Weirdly enough, and a slightly fitting definition of "disinformation": the more you know about Mother-Buddha, the more its curse afflicts you. This parallelism, perhaps, gives us a hint on what really is at stake on

our contemporary problems concerning propaganda: that it is indeed, a struggle between Old-Gods which is felt more from their curses and a certain contemporary approach to science which careless and mindless deployment drawn the afflicted away from the very curse that they need to dispel.

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