ADADOL INGAWANIJ

London Consortium (Birkbeck, Tate, Architectural Association, Institute of Contemporary Arts)
University of London

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HYPERBOLIC HERITAGE: BOURGEOIS SPECTATORSHIP AND CONTEMPORARY THAI CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

The thesis traces the construction of bourgeois spectatorship in contemporary Thai cinema. Since the late 1990s, industrial Thai cinema has attempted to discard its old identity as a plebeian form of mass culture to claim a place in the prestigious bourgeois public sphere. Popular, provincial-identified audiences were left behind with the emergence of the urban multiplex and as the industry adopted the high concept mode of film production and promotion.

Thai national cinema aspires to connote Thai difference from the West, while also attaining an accepted 'universal' (*sakon*) standard of filmic quality. Contemporary heritage films inscribe the figure of the bourgeois spectator through a hyperbolic rhetoric of international comparability and 'post-hypernationalist' sentiments. Textually, these films display the aesthetic idiom of the nostalgia film, emphasising the Thai attainment of an imputed *sakon* film aesthetic. Thus, it is the sight of aesthetic rather than political Thainess that is inscribed into this form of spectatorship, as it promises the thrill of '*go inter*' [going international]. Thai bourgeois spectatorship is determined across textual and extratextual realms. While the urban multiplex and the Bangkok International Film Festival are emblematic of the extratextual, on a textual level, the previously popular teen cinema was disavowed to assert a mature *thai sakon* [Thai (yet) universal] cultural sphere.

Recently a small number of Thai films have entered international circulation, either as part of the emergent terrain of transnational blockbuster world cinema, or as a new addition to its modernist enclave. When these different interests are mediated back into the Thai bourgeois public sphere, and reshaped by the sensibility of bourgeois narcissism, they come to signify the enraptured eyes of the world on 'world-class Thainess'. This projection has been growing in register and scale as the belief in wealth through neo-liberal globalisation was destabilised by the Asian economic crisis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

For whose pleasure is the sight of two white men brought to a standing ovation by the *ranad-ek*[1] prodigy of turn of the twentieth century Siam? This is an image in a key sequence in *Hoam rong* (The Overture, dir. Itthisoontorn Vichailak, 2004),[2] one of the most nationally prestigious Thai films in recent years. Embraced in the public sphere as a film of international calibre, which powerfully brings back to life the nation's largely lost musical heritage, *Hoam rong* is based on the life of the classical Siamese musician Luang Pradit Phairoh (Sorn Silapabanleng).[3] Through parallel editing, the film juxtaposes the youthful ascendancy of the protagonist Sorn, who came under the patronage of a prince with a taste for artistic iconoclasm during the royal absolutist period, and the twilight of his days around the Second World War, now a venerated maestro whose art threatened to die with him under a military regime portrayed by the film as hell bent on modernisation. The sequence containing the image mentioned, the only one in the film in which the white men appear, narrates the moment of the young Sorn's triumph over the crowned maestro, Khun In, in a two-man contest held at the palace of Sorn's patron. Consisting of a whole array of exaggeratedly stylised shots, quickly edited, it conveys the close rivalry between the prodigy and the older man, as well as the tension brewing among the small audience gathered – from extreme close-ups of the agitated expressions of Sorn's loved ones as they root for him, to water rippling in a glass indicating the tightrope atmosphere on the stage, to the high-angle fast-motion shot of the *ranad-ek* sticks flying over the wooden bars. The sequence climaxes when Sorn outplays Khun In so drastically that the latter suffers a temporary seizure, and can no longer continue his part in the deciding duet. The visiting prince, besuited patron of the older musician, then concedes the mastery of the prodigy in a dramatic fashion, by slowly rising from his seat, his hands brought together in a slow, respectful clap. At this point there is a

[1] The *ranad-ek* is a wooden xylophone whose bars are strung together then hooked to a barge-shaped box, making a curve.

[2] If a film has its own designated English title, I indicate so in brackets in this manner. For films without English titles, I provide a rough translation in inverted commas. For films that are as well known in English as Thai, I refer to both titles simultaneously.

[3] The musician is better known by his bureaucratic appellation. His birth name is given in brackets.

medium close-up of the white men, seated side by side toward the front of the audience. They imitate the prince's gesture of respect by rising up, heartily clapping, their faces the expression of dumbstruck awe.

This cutaway is a variation on a pattern of narration evident throughout the film's key sequence. As the contest gets under way, there are repeated cuts to close-ups of the main characters in the story world – the princes, Sorn's music teachers, his loyal childhood friend, his future wife – whose expressions and gestures correspond to their function in the narrative, since in their different ways each has something invested in the outcome of the contest. In contrast, the close-ups of the white men are superfluous, insofar as they are not characters in the story world, but appear only here as anonymous spectators in the frame. As the contest progresses, their shifting reactions to Sorn's performance – from scepticism when his *ranad-ek* goes out of tune, to interest as he is allowed to replace the string of wooden bars and begin his solo again, and finally to resounding admiration – do nothing to contribute toward narrative progression as such. Instead, their figuration displays Western admiration for Thai cultural heritage, and is in this sense a symptomatic moment in the film's overall pattern of narrativisation[4], suggesting that *Hoam rong* addresses a certain type of spectator over others. That is to say, the sight of two white men enraptured by royally sponsored Siamese musicianship encapsulates a fantasy that structures Thai bourgeois sensibility in the contemporary period. This is the fantasy of enthralling the world with Thai heritage. *Hoam rong* addresses the subject of this fantasy by offering up the pleasure of witnessing – not simply the return of a lost musical heritage as is generally assumed about the film – but more surreptitiously, the pleasure of witnessing one's Thai heritage in an aesthetic idiom which also appears to attract the admiration of 'the eyes of the world'.

The effectiveness of the textual construction of the spectator must of course be tested in the domain of reception. In this case at least, the public embrace of *Hoam*

[4] I am largely following Tom Gunning's terminology for specifying film form and content. Narrative or narrative discourse can be characterised as the "means of expression of a story". Filmic narration, and the filmic narrator, refers to the overall creation of "a hierarchy of narratively important elements within a mass of contingent details". Gunning clarifies narrativisation as the process "which binds the narrative discourse to the story and rules the narrator's address to the spectator". See Tom Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 17-18.

rong seems to reverberate unusually closely with the spectator so implied. In what is often described as the mouthpiece of the Thai middle class: the mass media and especially the press,[5] the film's release was greeted by a multitude of favourable articles in such respectable press publications as *Matichon Sudsapda*, *Nation Sudsapda*, and *Siamrath Sapda Wijarn*. None of these weekly current affairs magazines are usually known to prioritise film writing. Yet an exception was made for this nationally prestigious product with long, even cover page articles praising *Hoam rong* for its representation of Thai cultural heritage in a fashion that, as a columnist puts it, has all of a sudden instilled in him a new kind of pride in "*khwampenthai* [Thainess]", a *spontaneously felt and emotionally overwhelming* pride quite unlike the deadening effect of the state-produced didactic nationalist messages which littered his childhood.[6] Writers such as this columnist were responding to the fact that on its theatrical release, the film's domestic standing was substantially raised by the spontaneous effect of word of mouth (initiated in internet chatrooms), helping to secure for it a longer run in largely Bangkok-based multiplex cinemas than would otherwise have been the case. That its satisfactory box-office performance seems to have been achieved by means other than bombastic marketing was occasion for gratified remarks that after a long spell of cultural amnesia, Thais were finally coming home to rediscover their own cultural heritage.[7] The act of seeing *Hoam rong* at the cinema came to acquire this connotative layer of meaning: its visibility in primarily Bangkok multiplex cinemas was a gratifying 'sign' of the renewed collective appreciation of Thai culture. That this layer of meaning was taken up, reproduced, and amplified through the respectable, opinion-making end of the 'national' media, accounted for the rapturous air of its reception. And here, much turned on the accompanying vitalisation of the hyperbolic discourse that this is the film all Thais ought to see, even those with little interest in Thai films generally.

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[5] Nidhi Aeusrivongse, "*Chat niyom nai khabuankarn prachathipatai* [Nationalism in the Democratic Movement]," in *Chat thai, muang thai, baebrian lae anusaowari: wadua watthanatham, rat lae roopkan jitsamneuk* [The Thai Nation, Thailand, Textbooks and Monuments: On Culture, State and Forms of Consciousness] (Bangkok: Matichon, 1995), 184-5.

[6] Prachuab Wangjai, "*Thammai tong du Hoam rong* [Why Watch *Hoam rong*?]," *Nation Sudsapda*, 23 February 2004, 40.

[7] See Thanet Charoenmuang, "*Hoam rong paen din mae (jop)* [Overture of the Motherland (Concluding Part)]," *Matichon Sudsapda*, 19 March 2004, 71.

The culture critic Mukhom Wongthes has characterised the rapturous excesses of the public reception of *Hoam rong* as one example of the middle class taste for "nationalistic kitsch".[8] Its mode of expression consists in extravagantly affective responses to clichéd works that nonetheless pretend to represent the height of refinement of Thailand's cultural tradition. In this case such expression took the form of declaring overwhelming pride and shedding exquisite tears in response to the sensorial stimulation of a film that circulated in the market for mass cultural goods as an uplifting exemplar of 'national cinema'. In her diagnosis, the rush to embrace *Hoam rong* on the basis of its '*ranad-ek* noise' easily identifiable to the unschooled ear as 'traditional music', whose functions are to advance or accompany narrative development, is a symptom of the yearning for Thainess among the culturally uprooted middle class in the current period of globalisation. To this extent she compellingly calls the public generated by *Hoam rong*'s multiplex release one engaged in the "invention of [national] tradition".[9] Yet at the same time, alongside the thrill of 'remembering' one's heritage through the film, the public sphere brought into being upon its reception was also engaged in projecting Thai global ascendancy. Its most potent, and naturalised, sign is the ubiquitous manner of speech used to describe *Hoam rong* as a Thai film of exceptionally high quality: *nang thai radab sakon* [a Thai film of 'international' calibre]. Among the champions of the film in the press, the more an author wished to emphasise his admiration for its presentation of Thai heritage in a 'universally' acknowledged form – as, crudely put, a glossily produced film – the more he seems drawn to such hyperbolic projection anticipating its prospect of global acclaim. "This is a film which is likely to appeal to the *sakon* [international, implying Western] market"; "it will probably win prizes both domestically and internationally".[10] Translated into practice, the notion that *Hoam rong* must surely be rewarded with global admiration for its Thai accomplishment, helps to account for why the film was Thailand's 77th Academy Awards entry for

[8] Mukhom Wongthes, "Kitsch, " in *Promdaen thodlong* [Experimental Boundaries] (Bangkok: openbooks, 2005), 78-93.

[9] Mukhom Wongthes, "*Hoam rong hoam krapue khwam kluang thai* [*Hoam rong*: The Crescendo of Thai Hollowness]," *Matichon Sudsapda* 5 March 2004, internet edition.

[10] Pon, "*'Hoam rong' na ja hoam khwamruseuk thai dai mak kwa ni rue mai* [Could *Hoam rong* Have Inspired Greater Feelings for Thainess?]," *Matichon Sudsapda* 20 February 2004, 91.

Best Foreign Language Film, as well as the centrepiece of a special screening jointly organised by the Foreign Ministry and the Culture Ministry for ambassadors to Thailand. And sure enough, after the screening an article appeared in one of the respectable weekly magazines reporting that the audience of ambassadors and dignitaries erupted in spontaneous applause lasting minutes long as the film came to an end. This diplomatic reaction in turn compelled the writer of this 'special report' to commend the production team of *Hoam rong* for representing Thai cultural heritage to such a degree of excellence that "*farang mang kha tang chuenchom pen siang diaw kan* [Westerners were united in their admiration]".[11] The projection of 'international' or 'Western' admiration of this sort, then, can be regarded as a symptom of the yearning for global visibility as *thai sakon* [Thai (yet) universal], which defines both the bourgeois imaginary of national cultural prestige and the economically neo-liberalising state's concern for commodifying Thainess, or, in currently fashionable parlance, profiting from *thun watthanatham* [cultural capital]. The structuring term of this sensibility is narcissism, a term that extends the analytical focus from taste or the penchant for nationalistic kitsch, to the formative condition of that taste itself: the investment in attracting the world's admiration and awe for 'our distinctive yet world-class culture'.

That the logic of narcissism is dreamlike is nicely encapsulated in the following snapshot. While the eyes of Bangkok were busy conjuring up the fixation of the eyes of the world on *Hoam rong*, the international success of the other Thai film that same year, *Sat pralad* (Tropical Malady, dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004), caught Bangkok unawares. Among its many astonishing achievements, Apichatpong's infinitely mysterious take on the shapeshifting tiger legend poses a profound challenge to the presumption that the condition of possibility for *thai sakon* artistic excellence are the energies and memories of metropolitan cultural forces. Consequently, when it transpired that the 'strange beast' (the literal translation of this film's Thai title) awed the film world in the way that the bourgeois heritage film was meant to have done, by winning the Special Jury Prize at Cannes 2004; the lens out of

[11] Samutjorn Burapha, "*Hoam rong 'thun watthanatham'* [*Hoam rong* 'cultural capital']," *Siamrath Sapda Wijarn* 27 February 2004, 69.

which Bangkok peers for a sense of its place in the world were temporarily turned down side up. After Cannes the following year, a respectable Thai-language newspaper reported "*khwam jing an na tok jai* [the shocking truth]" that quality films which overwhelmingly caught on in the domestic market, such as *Hoam rong*, were of no interest at all to the international market.[12] Meanwhile, Cannes's recognition of Apichatpong presented something of a double bind, which the majority of the bourgeois press settled by overwhelmingly promoting his winning of the prize as the success of 'one of us' on the global stage.[13] Any in-depth discussion of the film itself was bracketed by the same press, and the film itself was ignored by multiplex-going consumers as, probably, too self-consciously 'international' for Thais.[14]

The bourgeois public sphere and Thai cinema

This study explores the spectatorship of heritage cinema, in order to highlight contemporary cinema's influential, but under-examined role today in creating the bourgeois public sphere engaged in the narcissistic projection of Thainess in a global setting. In domestic discourse, the heritage film is the most prestigious genre of industrial Thai films to have emerged since 1997. The marker here signals both the economic crisis and the beginning of international interest in Thai cinema, which occurred amid the urban multiplex boom and the conglomerate monopoly consolidation of the Thai film industry. In this period, the concentration of high-production value films that present Thainess as visual attraction, whose point of visual reference are often historical personages and traumatic episodes in the biography of the Thai nation, has never been greater. In fact, if one takes the textual mode of heritage films into account, especially their claim to 'verisimilitude' defined as an emphasis on archival visual details signifying national heritage, there is a strong

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[12] "*Khwam jing kong nang nai meuang cannes: rao ja pai thang nai kan dee?* [Movie Truth from Cannes: Which Way Should We Be Heading?]," *Matichon*, 29 June 2005.

[13] May Adadol Ingawanij and Richard Lowell MacDonald, "Blissfully Whose? Jungle Pleasures, Ultra-Modernist Cinema and the Cosmopolitan Thai Auteur," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 4, no. 1 (2006).

[14] For an article that takes issue with the defensive notion that *Sat pralad*/Tropical Malady is 'not a film for Thais', see Kong Rithdee, "*Chumlae "Sat pralad"* [Taking Apart the 'Strange Beast']," *Nang: Thai* [Thai Film Journal] 13 (2004). See also Ben Anderson's analysis of why the film is 'difficult' for middle class Bangkokians, "*Sat pralad arai wa?* [What Goddam 'Strange Beast' is This?], *Sinlapawatthanatham* July 2006.

case to be made that they constitute a new mode of Thai filmic textual configuration altogether.

My overall framework for tracing the industrial context of production, textual features, exhibition practices and discourses of appreciation of this new genre of 'quality' Thai film, is to highlight their respective part in the construction of a new spectator figure: the Thai culture loving Thai enraptured as never before by his or her national film. The underlying term of its configuration is the narcissistic investment in arresting the eyes of the world with exemplary Thainess of a kind both unique and world-class – a daydream condensed in the trope of *thai sakon*. In focusing on the question of spectatorship, my aim is to demonstrate how the category of the heritage film was mobilised by industrial film producers and multiplex exhibitors in the effort to woo middle class consumers to attend and endorse Thai films at these newly gentrified cinemas. They created a culturally legitimate body of 'national films' and promoted an attendant mode of film viewing to appeal predominantly to the sensibility of society's culturally authoritative group and biggest consumers of cultural commodities. In this sense, the film industry's construction of the discourse of the *sakon* quality Thai heritage film that all Thais should watch, in other words establishing heritage films at the apex of the hierarchy for film goods, provides the initial ground for asserting them as part of the bourgeois public sphere. At the same time, on their release the reception of the films themselves, and secondarily the responses to their promotional hype, provide a separate momentum of publicness, resulting in expressions of values, sentiments and desires that may conform to those condensed within the inscribed figure of the Thai spectator, or may indeed exceed and even undermine them.[15]

[15] In this context the study aims to methodologically extend two seminal writings on Thai cinema history, which draw attention to the importance of the public spaces of film viewing but do not theorise spectatorship. (In other words they do not explicitly identify the pattern of identification a particular groups of viewers bring to this or that body of films.) Scot Barmé's cultural history of the Bangkok bourgeois public sphere in the early twentieth century, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex & Popular Culture in Thailand*, explores the early days of cinema during late royal absolutism as a lively, and often fraught, "intermediate zone between "polite society" and the demimonde". Nidhi Aeusrivongse's article "*Khwam lam leuk khong "nam nao" nai nang thai* [The Depth of 'Trashiness' in Thai Films]", published in 1981 as an intervention against the dismissal of popular post-war Thai films as *nam nao* [trashy, melodramatic, literally 'fetid water'] and backward compared to Hollywood, conceptualises the cinema as a different horizon of interaction from the bourgeois public model.

The chapters develop the argument in the following sequence. Chapter 1 outlines the major determinants of the heritage film through an explanatory overview of the key concepts used in the study. These are: new bourgeois narcissism, Thainess, *sakon*, and spectatorship.

Chapter 2 describes the differentiating textual features of heritage films made primarily between 1997 and 2005, and highlights one area of ambiguity underscoring the claim to quality made on their behalf. This is the slippage between their approximation of the ideal of the *thai sakon* film – the legitimising discourse of Thai filmic quality – and the hyperbolic rhetoric that conjure up an aura of 'resounding international admiration' for them simply because at the domestic level they embody the apex of cultural nationalist quality. Ironically, what helped to sustain such slippage was the recent global profile of *other kinds of 'go inter'*[16] *Thai films*, either those aesthetically minority films that gained critical acclaim on the film festival circuit, mainly Apichatpong's oeuvre, or exemplary films from exportable lowbrow genres that became one-off hits in commercial markets abroad, such as the kick-boxing action comedy *Ong-Bak* (dir. Prachya Pinkaew, 2003) and the *kathoey* [transgendered male] sports comedy *Satree lek* (The Iron Ladies, dir. Yongyoot Tongkongtoon, 2000).

Chapter 3 broadens the focus from the film text and the discourse of filmic quality to the public space of film exhibition. It traces the novel appearance of the

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Through autobiographical detail and resonant images, rather than historical research as such, he reconstructs the margins of a localised rural cinema, which he situates as having existed on the periphery of Thailand during the three decades since the Second World War. In this setting, the cinema was not "an institution displaying the modernity of the community". People did not flock to the cinema, he claims; rather, the cinema was an informal gathering that "came to us". In terms of physical space, the modest screen and open shack structure meant that the film experience was not divorced from the theatre experience; the screening of a film in any given evening was a 'neighbourhood' event. Accordingly, Nidhi reframes the post-war *chao baan* ['plebeian'] cinema as a communal sphere, a point of contact among people of the locality as well as between the viewers and the screen. The events on the screen were in this sense just one among a whole host of events occurring around, in front of, or behind it, within an overall culture of interactive, communal reception. See respectively Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 69. And Nidhi, "*Khwam lam leuk khong "nam nao" nai nang thai* [The Depth of 'Trashiness' in Thai Films]," in *Khon, Carabao, nam nao lae nang thai* [The Khon Dance, Carabao, and Thai Film Melodramas] (Bangkok: Matichon, 1995), 78-96.

[16] This Thailish shorthand for 'going international' is a slang referring to something or someone of an 'international' calibre. It can be uttered admiringly, or given a sarcastic inflection suggesting a provincial wannabee. The slang seems to have emerged with the globalisation of the Thai economy from the mid-1980s.

'world-class' multiplex primarily situated in Bangkok from the mid-1990s, since the efforts of the new multiplex exhibitors to secure urban white-collar middle class consumers through the combined rhetoric of gentrification and global prestige both prefigured the emergence of the heritage film genre, and consolidated the public profile of the films themselves through promotional hype and saturated circulation. This chapter also addresses the fashioning of the country's biggest film festival, pointing to a parallel logic underpinning the Bangkok International Film Festival (BKK IFF) and the heritage films, in terms of their projection of global admiration and the exaggerated claims of their own international calibre in conformity to bourgeois narcissistic sensibility.

Chapter 4 takes a small step back in time to address the anxiety at the heart of the 'scandal' of the teen movie genre, which dominated the market for Thai films for a decade from the late 1980s before fizzling out as heritage films rose to prominence. Perhaps the most stylistically 'globalised' of the recent genres of lowbrow Thai films, the phenomenon of the teen movies brought to the fore concerns about the correct mode and degree of 'international calibre' Thai films in general should display, and highlights the problem of who possesses the cultural authority to define that correct distance. The industrial film monopolists' subsequent turn away from making teen movies in favour of heritage films, a key moment of transition, is contextualised here in terms of the bid to legitimise, and thereby domestically maximise Thai film consumption, by appealing to the dominant cultural sensibility.

Chapter 5 narrows the object of study to a phenomenally successful remake of a ghost legend, *Nang Nak* (dir. Nonzee Nimibutr, 1999), and traces how the 'shock of the new' of its visual register, along with its equally novel promotional tactics, successfully drew viewers to the multiplex on a scale quite unlike any other Thai films of the 1990s. And this in turn generated a public sphere consisting of various reports, comments and reviews, incorporating professional film critics and journalists, intellectuals and amateurs, assessing the basis of *Nang Nak*'s groundbreaking success. The chapter speculates that it was the rhetoric of the 'Thai' attainment of the desired 'international calibre', configured through textual and extratextual means, more so than *Nang Nak*'s claim to an attentive representation of national heritage,

that gave momentum and expressive shape to the public constituted at the point of its reception. In this respect, the publicness of *Nang Nak* can be regarded as an exemplary moment revealing the cinema's renewed power to externalise the bourgeois fantasy of the Thai attainment of a comparable status with the 'global standard-bearer' (configured in this case as Hollywood), and to provide an expansive site of identification with this fantasy.

Its most compelling form of expression, the projection of the admiring eyes of the world upon the 'world-class' display of Thai heritage, is highlighted in chapter 6, whose object of analysis is the royal vanity film *Suriyothai* (dir. Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol, 2001). Through tracking the combination of hagiographic discourses glorifying the film's aristocratic director and the unbridled exaggeration of its prospect of global conquest, I emphasise that there is something quite 'typical' in the creation of the official public sphere of *Suriyothai* appreciation, even as the scale of hype and the production budget of the film itself could be described as a rare exception to the norm of industrial Thai film production. The conjuring of this officially captivated public sphere rests successfully to a certain extent on the tightly woven web of royalism, the fantasy of global capitalist prestige, the media event as 'cinematic' spectacle, and the inculcation of the passive, narcissistic spectator. Yet its hyperbolic pitch in turn unleashed an altogether more unruly public, whose momentum resided in unofficial responses to the official face of this event. Accordingly, the chapter assesses the two publics of *Suriyothai* as ultimately an exercise in finding a sufficiently observant way to analyse the reception of mediated, demonstratively royalist spectacles in this late period of the ninth Chakri reign, King Bhumibol, where the question of the future of the dynasty casts an anxious shadow.

The last chapter shifts to considering the emergence of an alternative heritage cinema. Through two exemplary films, *Monrak transistor* (dir. Pen-ek Ratanaruang, 2001) and *Fahtalayjone* (Tears of the Black Tiger, dir. Wisit Sasanatieng, 2000), I discuss the differentiating features and thematic or aesthetic preoccupations of this strand of quality Thai films, and identify a limiting parallel to the mainstream, or 'official', heritage films in terms of their sentimental, infantilising signification of *chao baan*, a potent term for 'the people' which incorporates the urban mass, rural

labour, smallholders and peasants. This chapter ends with a brief remark on other possible future forms of alternative, or ‘unofficial’, heritage films.

CHAPTER 1. Determinations of the heritage film

Middle class ascendancy

The growth of narcissism as a characteristically Thai bourgeois sensibility might be situated as a late by-product of the modern capitalist transformation of the country, dating from the early 1960s. In the first decade-and-a-half of this period, the economy grew rapidly thanks to a combination of import-substitution policies and the inflow of foreign aid and investment, provided primarily by the United States in return for the complicity of successive military dictatorships in its regional anti-communist operations.[1] One of the consequences of this state engineered, urban oriented boom was the unprecedented expansion and proliferation of middle class formations. As James Ockey summarises, during this interval the middle class position in the social structure extended beyond the historically applicable categories of "small traders, intellectuals and bureaucrats".[2]

The new middle class formations contained those whose background, livelihood, lifestyle and prospect, were sufficiently differentiated from the peasantry, the urban working class and the declining aristocracy, and in some cases paralleled those of senior bureaucrats. The most economically successful of these were what Benedict Anderson calls the "extra-bureaucratic bourgeoisie", namely the largely Sino-Thai proprietors of businesses and banks, along with the provincial entrepreneurs and notables who benefited from the growth of commercialisation in provincial areas, and in many cases were able to turn themselves into large-scale landowners after the lifting of the restriction on legal landholding. The most significantly expanded in terms of size were the "middle bourgeoisie", primarily white-collar state or business employees of urban origins, and the "petty-bourgeoisie", or those who sought their livelihood in the service sector of the urban

[1] According to Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, during this interval the economy grew at around 8% per annum, with the urban economy growing faster still. See their *Thailand: Economy and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 144.

[2] James Ockey, *Making Democracy: Leadership, Class, Gender, and Political Participation in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), 156.

economy as small-scale entrepreneurs and employees.[3] Like the capitalists, a substantial proportion of the middle and petty bourgeoisie, especially those concentrated in Bangkok, were ethnic Chinese. The expansion of higher education, one of the key legitimising features of Cold War modernisation, encouraged new middle class groups to begin to define themselves as an upwardly mobile 'new class'; since unprecedented access to higher education nurtured their ambition of achieving continuous social advancement through the educational prospects of their children.[4]

Politically, however, in this period of military authoritarian rule the new class could not assume leadership. The big Sino-Thai capitalists positioned themselves as dependent allies of leaders of the military and civilian bureaucracy. The middle and petty-bourgeoisie formed a volatile, 'popular' mass: many of them supported the student-led demonstrations that toppled the dictators in 1973, yet became susceptible to the anti-communist propaganda that led to the brutal massacre of those branded as radicals and leftists in 1976.[5] Nor did the new class of this interval play a leading part in cultural life. They remained subjected to the state's institutionalisation of official nationalism, propagated through a combination of ideological inculcation and censorship. The symbolic heart of this discourse is the myth of the ethnically uniform Thai people who owe the independence of their nation to the leadership of enlightened, selectively modernising royal and military heroes, and whose role is to unite under the leadership of such father figures to ensure continuing national independence.[6] Since a very substantial number of the new bourgeoisie were Sino-

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[3] Benedict Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms, " in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London; New York: Verso, 1998), 148; "Murder and Progress in Modern Siam," in *The Spectre of Comparisons*, 180-1.

[4] Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms," 149-52.

[5] Ibid., 153-67. See further elaborations in the section 'After hypernationalism: uniquely Thai and/or *thaithai*'.

[6] Official nationalism was codified during the reign of King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925) to sustain his effort to establish authority over an absolutist regime much weakened since the reign of his father, King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910). As Anderson points out, Vajiravudh sought to affirm "the identity of dynasty and nation" primarily by projecting the Chinese as a threat, and "dramatiz[ing] himself as his country's 'first nationalist'". See his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 100-1. Barmé clarifies that Vajiravudh's nationalist discourse inflected the British patriotic slogan of God-Country-King with the ancient, Buddhist-derived concept of kingship, which associates social harmony with the moral rule of chosen kings. Propagating the slogan *chat-sasana-phra mahakasat* [Nation-Religion-King], which had tentatively begun to surface in the royal milieu a decade or so prior to his reign, Vajiravudh's official nationalism upholds the throne as the embodiment of the nation, and emphasises Buddhism's centrality

Thai, or have roots in other stigmatised ethnic origins, the pressure to assimilate and assume the subject position of the good Thai for the sake of personal advancement took precedent over the production of and participation in anything that might approximate the description of a confident, 'extra-bureaucratic' bourgeois cultural renaissance.

It is worth briefly remarking on the historical pattern of Sino-Thai social mobility, given that the urban middle class today – the majority of which are concentrated in Bangkok – are largely of Chinese descent. (And for this reason they are sometimes known as *lukjin*, or 'children of the Chinese'.) As indicated above, a fundamental feature throughout much of the twentieth century is the tension between the economic mobility of Chinese settlers and *lukjin*, and their political containment along with enforced cultural Thai-ification. This was in some degree of contrast to the pre-modern period up to the late reign of the absolutist King Chulalongkorn, during which Chinese migrants were treated as a welcome source of labour, trade and tax income for the crown and aristocracy.[7] Chinese settlers and migrants did not appear to be regarded as 'foreign' or 'alien'; and the extent of intermarriage was such that the 'Siamese/Thai' kings of the Chakri dynasty themselves had Chinese blood.[8] Moreover, as the main agents of trade expansion during the nineteenth century, Chinese entrepreneurs in effect acted as a buffer against greater economic penetration by the European imperialists.[9] The open doors policy toward Chinese immigration

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in linking the two. Furthermore, the discourse plays on the association of the word 'Thai' with the notion of 'freedom' and 'independence', thus connoting Thainess as the unity of a martial race under its "chief warrior" – the morally rightful monarch and visionary agent of selective modernisation. See his *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 27-29. Since official nationalism defines Thainess as simultaneously an ethnicity, a project of modernisation under paternalistic leadership, and a national essence under threat – that which is articulated to alienate perceived enemies or challengers of the established order at any point – Kasian calls it an "ethno-ideology". See his *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture, 1927-1958* (Kyoto and Melbourne: Kyoto University Press and Trans Pacific Press, 2001), 189-90.

[7] See the first full-length study of the history of Chinese settlement in Thailand. G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), chaps. 1 & 2.

[8] On the argument concerning the Chinese blood of Chakri kings, see Ibid., 26-27.Charnvit Kasetsiri, *Prawat karn meuang thai 2475-2500* [Political History of Thailand 1932-1957] (Bangkok:The Foundation for the Promotion of Social Sciences and Humanities Textbooks Project, 2001), 223-4.

[9] Charnvit, *Prawat karn meuang thai 2475-2500* [Political History of Thailand 1932-1957], 226.

meant that when the 'first nationalist' King Vajiravudh came to the throne in 1910, an estimated 9.5% or 792, 000 of the population were Chinese settlers or *lukjin*.[10] In terms of geographical settlement, a great number of the ethnic Chinese were concentrated in Bangkok, constituting as many as half the royal capital's total population (and the majority of its working-class). Bangkok during the early twentieth century, in G. William Skinner's phrase, "had the stamp of a Chinese city".[11]

It was during the early twentieth century, however, that the attitude of rulers toward Chinese immigrants began to grow hostile. Hailed as Siam's first nationalist in recognition of his codification of official nationalism, Vajiravudh could at the same time be described as the country's first Sinophobe (see also fn. 6). The conception of Thai identity asserted by this absolutist king was directed above all against those he attacked as the "Jews of the Orient"; his official nationalism was an ethno-ideology shaped in response to the presentiment provoked by a domestic revolt and a revolution abroad. These events were, namely, a general strike against a new head tax by Chinese merchants in Bangkok, which occurred only a few months before Vajiravudh came to the throne; followed the next year by the Chinese Republican Revolution.[12] However, in spite of Vajiravudh's expressed anti-Sinicism, in practice no real attempts were made to stem the tide of Chinese migrants, which reached peak between 1918 and 1931; and in this sense during his reign the open doors policy was maintained.[13] Anti-Sinicism, dressed up as assimilation or Thai-ification measures, did not acquire a legalistic framework until the post-absolutist period, which began in 1932 after the overthrowing of the government under King Prajadhipok (r. 1925-1935), Vajiravudh's successor. It was especially during the constitutionalist dictatorship of Plaek Phibunsongkhram (also known as Phibun) – the military leader who played a leading part in overthrowing royal absolutism and subsequently became prime minister between 1938-44 and 1948-57 – that the

[10] Ibid., 93.

[11] Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*, 88. The estimate is drawn from Marc Askew, *Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation* (London; New York: 2002), 29.

[12] For details of the circumstances of the strike see Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*, 159-65. See also Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 100-101.

[13] Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*, 172-74.

leadership made to Thai-ify the economy and turn the *lukjin* into ethno-ideological subjects.[14] The measures announced by the first Phibun government included making Thai-language education compulsory and excluding ethnic Chinese from certain trades.[15] Initially, as Charnvit Kasetsiri points out, this was a strategy with two intended effects. The domestic agenda was to legitimise Phibun's rule by exploiting the dissatisfaction felt by a large number of the ethnic Thai mass upon perceiving that the ethnic Chinese dominated trade at every level. The international dimension of Phibun's calculation, influenced by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, was to use the containment of the Chinese as a basis for building a special relationship with Japan.[16] After the Second World War with the Communist takeover of Mainland China in 1949, the anti-Sinicism of the Thai state acquired a distinctly anti-communist hue. Beginning with the second Phibun regime, and constituting a key part of the leader's newfound strategy to demonstrate alliance with the United States, it was from this point that police raids, intimidation, surveillance, mass arrests and murders came into regular effect as measures to suppress the communists/Chinese.[17]

At the same time, as Skinner points out, by the beginning of the Cold War the Chinese who had settled during the previous waves of migration were already on the path of upward mobility. Writing in the mid-1950s, he notes that "many of the immigrants and their descendants who came in the two main waves of Chinese laborers before and after the First World War have since raised their occupational status to mid-low or mid-high"; and "it would appear that the growth of the Thai "middle class" is based primarily on upward mobility through education of

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[14] Under Phibun's leadership, official nationalism was re-articulated in order to endow the military, rather than the throne, with the greatest symbolic power as defender of the nation. Its reinvention during his rule partly accounts for its continuing, residual presence throughout the Cold War and the contemporary period. See the section 'After hypernationalism: uniquely Thai and/or *thaihai*' for further discussion.

[15] But note that the announcement of new laws to 'nationalise' the economy did not necessarily result in effective or serious implementation. Pasuk and Baker point out that the military leader's policy of economic nationalisation was often not implemented by the civilian wing of his government, since it contradicted the other interest of striking up alliances with private entrepreneurs to boost political as well as personal capital. See *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 120-25. See also Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*, 251-52.

[16] Charnvit, *Prawat karn meuang thai 2475-2500* [Political History of Thailand 1932-1957], 233-34.

[17] See Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*, 322-45; also Kasian, *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture*, *1927-1958*, esp. chaps. 4-6.

descendants of former freemen and on assimilation of descendants of nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants".[18] Compared to the early twentieth century picture, ethnic Chinese settlers, especially in Bangkok, were now substantially middle rather than working class; and this was reinforced by migration of capitalists and bourgeois anti-Communists from the Mainland fleeing the Mao Tse-tung regime. The point to emphasise about Sino-Thai mobility from the mid-twentieth century is this: given that the military authoritarian state regarded the Chinese as a political menace, it was not surprising that the bulk of upwardly mobile immigrants and Thai-born *lukjin* adapted by conforming – or at least being seen to conform to – Thai subjectivity according to the ideology of official nationalism.[19] At the most immediately demonstrable level, this took the form of assuming Thai names, attending Thai schools, or 'unlearning' Chinese. When the "American era"[20] proper came in with the absolutist dictatorship of Sarit Thanarat (1958-1963) – the crucial point of capitalist transformation referred to at the beginning of the chapter – there was already a sizeable proportion of ethnic Chinese poised to benefit from the rapid urban development and expansions of higher education that defined the period. The price of their path of continuing upward mobility was political and ethno-cultural Thai-ification.

The middle class's social ascendancy in the fuller sense – entailing their acquisition of political and cultural leadership – can be identified with the more recent interval of capitalisation. For a decade from the mid-1980s the economy grew at double-digit rates, due to the transition to export-oriented industrialisation, financial liberalisation and the expansion of the tourism, services and speculative sectors. As a result of this shift toward greater integration with economic globalisation, the middle segment of the extra-bureaucratic bourgeoisie – those who benefited the most from the investment in higher education of the American era – swiftly expanded. In Ockey's estimate, the percentage of the white-collar middle class in the total workforce, concentrated especially in the sales, technical and

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[18] Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History*, 305.

[19] Or conversely they became Thai radicals, socialists and Marxists. See Kasian, *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture, 1927-1958*.

[20] For a full discussion of this periodising term see Anderson, "Introduction," *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*, trans. and eds. Benedict Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1985), 9-87.

services sectors, doubled from 9.85% in 1960 to 20.2% in 1990.[21] Correspondingly, urbanisation took place on an intensive scale, and the number of the urban middle class more than tripled. During the 1970s, Bangkok was already being transformed into a place unto itself, divorced from the rest of the nation through sheer size, expansion, population, class component and wealth. By the turn of the 21st century its population had grown further to over 10 million, or four times bigger than the early 1960s, and the city itself became a mega-site.[22] A significant feature of the 'bubble economy' was the growth of the market for consumer goods contributing to the cult of conspicuous consumption, as embodied in the spread of suburban mega-malls and luxurious city-centre shopping centres, as well as the rapid growth of the advertising sector.[23] Meanwhile, income distribution deteriorated: the top percentage of earners grew wealthier during the boom as did Bangkok compared to the rest of the country.[24]

Politically speaking, these almost continuous intervals of rapid economic growth consolidated bourgeois power in two distinct and often conflicted ways, each facilitating the ascendancy of different segments within the class. The extra-bureaucratic bourgeois capitalists gained parliamentary power for the first time. The educationally elite urban bourgeoisie in white-collar professions acquired public voice to define, interpret or impose the national will, yet on the whole lack effective parliamentary representation.[25] The tension between their authority over political

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[21] Ockey, *Making Democracy: Leadership, Class, Gender, and Political Participation in Thailand*, 156.

[22] Kasian Tejapira, "Toppling Thaksin, " *New Left Review* 39 (2006), 11.

[23] Total annual advertising expenditures rose from 1.5 billion baht in 1979 to 49 billion baht in 2000, much of which was concentrated in television. See Ockey, *Making Democracy: Leadership, Class, Gender, and Political Participation in Thailand*, 162.

[24] By 1996 the share of national income of the top quintile of the population was 57%, up from 49% in 1976, while the share of the lowest quintile decreased from 4% to 2%. The number of credit card holders rose six-fold between 1983 and 1988 to around 300,000. See Kasian, "Toppling Thaksin, " 11; Kevin Hewison, "Emerging Social Forces in Thailand: New Political and Economic Roles," in *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile Phones, McDonalds and Middle-Class Revolution*, eds. Richard Robinson and David S.G. Goodman (London: Routledge, 1996), 152. Credit card use has since shot up. A newspaper report dated early 2004 estimated that, with the easing of credit card regulations during the first term in office of the Thaksin Shinawatra government, the total number of credit card holders increased to 6 million. See Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004), 106.

[25] This point is adapted from Kasian's article "Imagined Uncommunity: The *Lookjin* Middle Class and Thai Official Nationalism," in *Essential Outsiders: Chinese and Jews in the Modern*

discourse and their sense of impotence in terms of political representation is a significant if indirect determinant of the heritage film phenomenon insofar as it heightens urban middle bourgeois investment in other representational realms, implicating especially those areas of culture or ideology concerned with articulating national ideals – especially ideal Thainess in globalisation – and identifying moral figures of national leadership. To this extent, a brief word on the basis of the 'intra-bourgeois' political tension of the past two decades is helpful.

The extra-bureaucratic capitalists' gaining of direct political power began with the institutionalisation of a parliamentary system Kasian Tejapira defines as an "electocracy", operative for around two decades from 1979 before its eclipse by the authoritarian-populist elected regime of the telecom tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra (prime minister between 2001 to 2006).[26] Under electocracy, parliament was dominated by provincial bosses turned MP, who sought the electoral route to transform mafia-style influence accumulated during the Cold War expansion of the frontier economy into political power. Securing their seats through local patronage and 'money politics', the provincial *jao phor* ['godfather'] capitalists came to dominate parliament during the 1980s and for much of the 1990s.[27]

The other main group of extra-bureaucratic capitalists, namely the Bangkok-based owners of big businesses, gained parliamentary domination at a later interval, a few years after the 1997 Asian currency crisis. The severity of the recession – which made a million unemployed and pushed three million more below the poverty line – was partly blamed on the inability of unstable, *jao phor*-controlled, multi-party governments to manage an increasingly complex, globalising economy. (The recession was also seen as the fault of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for

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Transformation of Southeast Asia and Central Europe, eds. Daniel Chirot and Anthony Reid (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 86.

[26] Kasian, "Toppling Thaksin, " 12-15.

[27] In the first phase of electocracy there was an elected lower house, an appointed upper house, and a non-elected prime minister. What came to be known as 'semi-democracy', or the power sharing compromise between the military-civilian bureaucracy and elected politicians, was for the most part led by General Prem Tinasulanond, a well-respected military man and favourite of the palace who became prime minister between 1981-8. He was replaced by an elected party leader, Chatichai Choonhavan, whose three-year tenure as prime minister symbolised the parliamentary domination proper of provincial bosses turned elected MPs. See Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, 340-54. See also Anderson, "Murder and Progress in Modern Siam," in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*.

prescribing unsuitable monetary and fiscal policies, as well as attached a psychologically powerful cultural nationalist explanation pointing to 'Westernised' consumerism as its root cause.)[28] In response, several urban tycoons who survived the crisis with reduced fortune clubbed together under the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, founded by Thaksin. Concentrated in the telecom, services (including media and entertainment), real estate, and domestic consumer goods sectors, their aim was to directly control parliament in order to use state apparatuses to facilitate the expansion of their domestic monopolies while managing the risks of further globalisation, and to engineer a political and social climate conducive to the pursuit of their underlying interests.[29] Under Thaksin's centralising leadership, this played out as a combination of "big money politics",[30] and populist measures partly aimed at neutralising street protest politics, and partly to divert the majority of electorates' localised support for locally influential MPs to mass support for a national party. The latter, several of which were measures (or rhetoric) that tapped into the concerns for welfare and resource redistribution of the non-middle class electoral majority, endowed the founding TRT leader in particular with a degree of mass support unmatched by previous elected leaders.[31]

Yet by 2005, the same year that TRT was re-elected for a second term with an increased majority, Thaksin had lost legitimacy in the eyes of the urban middle class. What motivated their change of heart were the flagrant corruption of his inner circle and certain aspects of his authoritarian grip on power, primarily media censorship, his nepotistic appointments of key personnel in the major state organs, and intervention in the functioning of the judiciary and other independent monitoring bodies.[32] A

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[28] The figure comes from Kasian, "Toppling Thaksin, " 23. For further discussions of the different search for an explanation as to the cause of the crisis, see his "Post-Crisis Economic Impasse and Political Recovery in Thailand: The Resurgence of Economic Nationalism," in *Critical Asian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002): 330-35; Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand's Crisis* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2000), chap. 8.

[29] See Pasuk & Baker, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand*, 69-74.

[30] This refers to a combination of logrolling existing electocrats and securing seats from the newly established category of party list MPs in order to win a clear majority and 'stabilise' parliament. See Ibid., chaps. 3 & 6.

[31] Examples of the populist measures associated with Thaksin include: price cap on hospital visits, farmers' debt moratorium, and extension of micro-credit. See Ibid., chap. 3.

[32] What is striking to note is that the 2004 massacre of Malay Muslims in the Deep South (along with the policy failures there) and the extra-judicial killing of thousands in the name of the fight

public protest movement to expel Thaksin from office rapidly gathered pace, and after a turbulent period which saw a snap election in early 2006, followed by a speech by King Bhumibol encouraging the judiciary to invalidate its result (another TRT victory), Thaksin was deposed in a bloodless royalist coup in September the same year.

Several elements were at play in the downfall of the tycoon, but the decisive factor was the urban middle class's investment in overturning an elected though increasingly undemocratic regime in the name of preserving an ideal of 'indigenous' democracy with the monarch as the moral fount of political legitimacy.[33] Their political intervention took two main forms: reviving the traditionalist notion of the royal prerogative for resolving political crisis, a key terms of the anti-Thaksin discourse articulated by media figures and public intellectuals with credentials in extra-parliamentary grassroots politics. This was supplemented by the enthusiastic mass support of anonymous members of the urban middle class for the anti-Thaksin media events and rallies.[34] Such exercise of extra-parliamentary political agency is a significant example of the recently acquired power of this bourgeois segment to affect political outcomes through greater capacity to form 'public opinion' and territorialise its claim to national representativeness. This has been a consistent pattern operative since electocracy, where the main political role of the urban white-collar middle class has taken the form of mobilising their authority in discursive domains, especially the media, and the capacity to make themselves visible there, to de-legitimise corrupt, incompetent or authoritarian elected and unelected governments.[35] In this respect, a

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against drugs – the biggest state crimes committed under the Thaksin leadership – did not figure substantially for this social group as the reason for his loss of legitimacy. See Kasian, "Toppling Thaksin," 29-31.

[33] For further discussion of royalism see the section 'After hypernationalism: uniquely Thai and/or *thaithai*.

[34] This discussion is drawn from Sirote Klampaiboon's analysis of the September 2006 coup. See "*Samphas phiset Sirote Klampaiboon ton thi 1: 30 pee 6 tula prachathipathai phae laew?* [Special Interview with Sirote Klampaiboon First Part: 30 Years after 6 October 1976 the Defeat of Democracy?], in *Prachathai Online* (www.prachatai.com, 2006).

[35] Accordingly Kasian characterises their political subjectivity as those who possess a "liberal authoritarian" political inclination strongly guided by the ideal of a clean and benevolent leadership symbolised above all by King Bhumibol; who are consequently mistrustful of the military, elected politicians felt to fall far short of the democratic ideal, and mass-democratic political participation whether through the electoral market or direct activism; and who admire business tycoons so long as

crucial contributing factor to the instability of recent parliamentary systems in Thailand is the fact that the white-collar middle class tend to feel unrepresented by the bourgeois parliamentarians, yet wield sufficient voice to create a climate of public dissatisfaction powerful enough to bring the latter out of office. The urban middle bourgeois' position as the politically unrepresented segment of the dominant class contrasts with their newfound claim to authority in the domain of culture, and endows the latter with added significance as the realm in which the national imaginary and ideas of consensus, morality, tradition, history or progress are expressed in their collective self-image, which in certain cases constitute the referential frame of their claim to critical authority in the domain of politics proper.

New bourgeois sensibility

The urban white-collar middle class's claim to personify cultural authority, a role that has been the preserve of royals and state ideologues for most of modern Thai history, was largely facilitated by globalising market expansion. The symbolic moment of this transition was the 1992 bloodshed, when mass demonstrations in Bangkok followed by the intervention of the monarch defeated a military faction's rearguard seizure of political power from an elected government de-legitimised as corrupt. Although by no means exclusively a middle class affair, the protests quickly became mythologised as a 'mobile-phone mob' led by gadget-laden yuppies in careers emblematic of globalisation, whose outward-looking commitment to democracy made them instinctively hostile to military meddling in politics. Articulated in this way as a 'middle class revolution', the event acquired enormous symbolic power as 'evidence' of the unshackling of the urban middle class from their previous role as docile subjects of authoritarian modernisation, for their proper historical role as agents of political and economic progress in globalisation.[36] By a similar logic, the configuration of globalising middle class agency in a rapidly expanding market enhanced their claim to authority over public culture.

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they are not blatantly corrupt. See his "Post-Crisis Economic Impasse and Political Recovery in Thailand: The Resurgence of Economic Nationalism," 330.

[36] See Nidhi's critique of this hegemonic interpretation of the 1992 bloodshed in "*Chat niyom nai khabuankarn prachathipatai* [Nationalism in the Democratic Movement]".

The group that best embodies this new figure of cultural authority consists of the well-educated Bangkokian, largely second or third generation *lukjin* born in the 1950s and 1960s, which came of age just in time to take advantage of the growth of prestigious professional jobs and respectable entrepreneurial opportunities in the new (and mostly private) economic sectors during the globalisation boom. In particular, the broadening of the production base for image-oriented industries – primarily service, tourism, sales, media, television, advertising and other more recent realms of the culture and creative industries – secured their presence as leading local producers of cultural or lifestyle commodities. Meanwhile since the boom, and notwithstanding the late 1990s recession, the urban middle class have emerged as the group with the greatest purchasing power in the national market. Complementing their role as the main domestic producers of cultural commodities, therefore, is their status of being the biggest consumers of such commodities, especially of the kind that possesses the veneer of the conspicuously world-class – domestically produced or otherwise. Their market agency counts as the other major stimulant, apart from attracting foreign tourists, of commodity images and experiences that speak of globalising Thailand, and more specifically of world-class Bangkok, which have been proliferating with increasing intensity over the past two decades or so.

To address urban middle bourgeois cultural authority in such a way as to emphasise issues of aesthetics – especially visual fascination – and spectatorial identification, it is helpful to speak of the sensibility of this new bourgeois strata as that which, as a consequence of economic globalisation and the retreat of military authoritarianism, has come to play a leading part in shaping public culture.[37] The defining feature of this terrain, now primarily a market driven one which nonetheless bears some of the residual features of culturally authoritarian state practices, is the

[37] My usage of sensibility draws from the complementary discussions of the term by Raymond Williams and Lawrence Grossberg. Williams emphasises that sensibility directs attention to "social generalizations of personal qualities", with its references to aesthetics and the attempt to delineate the "a whole way of perceiving and responding, not to be reduced to either 'thought' or 'feeling'". Grossberg specifies the term as a structuring logic of particular cultural formations: "It defines what sorts of effects the formation produces and what sorts of activities and attitudes people within the alliance can undertake". See Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1976), 280-83, quotation on 282-83; Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992), 69-74, quotation on 398.

investment in the veneer of the world-class. In other words, new bourgeois sensibility articulates otherwise distinct aesthetic practices, thematic preoccupations, discourses of quality or prestige and patterns of response, into a public world whose expressive value is embodied in the trope of *thai sakon*, or whose surface appearance and affective possibility sustain the desirability of the 'Thai (yet) universal'. The rest of this section defines narcissism as that new bourgeois sensibility which structures contemporary Thai public culture, and contextualises its growth as the product of the market expansion of the mass cultural realm, especially the realm of visual fascination, amidst the climate of increasing psychological insecurity. To put it slightly differently, new bourgeois narcissism is fundamentally connected with the visual turn in the national cultural field, with the emergence of a 'world-class' culture largely divorced from any literary or historical roots. The next sections deal with the related issue of *thai* and *sakon* connotations, emphasising in the definition any relevant shifts that have taken place regarding their possible range of meanings and highlighting the extent to which bourgeois narcissism depends on the power of ambiguity of these terms when they are conjoined.

The contradictory source of the narcissistic sensibility is what Kasian conceptualises as schizophrenia: the simultaneous pull of the desire for Thainess and the desire to overcome Thainess in the name of globalising agency, a tension which for him both constructs yet destabilises urban middle class subjectivity. In this conceptual frame, the transcendence of Thainess is desired on two accounts. It signifies a trajectory of progress into a future state of first-world capitalist wealth. In other words, Thainess is here associated with an economic backwardness that globalisation promises to leave behind. Secondly, globalisation implies the market eclipse of institutionalised national identity, especially of the kind fostered by military authoritarianism. Market agency opens up the possibility of acknowledging those aspects of lived experiences rendered illegitimate by the ethno-ideological interpellation of official (militaristic) Thainess, thereby the potential to elude or challenge the historical form of repression of the culturally authoritarian state under the official nationalist pretext of creating unified, docile Thai subjects. As I discuss in

more detail in the next section, over the past two decades this commodifying logic has had a momentous effect in elevating Sino-Thainess into an 'out and proud' status.

Yet despite the desirability of overcoming Thainess, the desire for Thainess persists in some form or another – if not as the replica of the official nationalist discourse – due to a combination of urban middle bourgeois social ambition, cultural uprootedness, and increasingly, psychological insecurity. The first of these has to do with the general dynamic of an economically successful class's quest for distinction, which in this case tends to be played out as the adoption of conspicuously 'cultured' leisure or aesthetic practices traceable to royal precedents.[38] Here, the actively present tradition of royalism in official nationalism – sustained by the 'anti-colonial' myth of independence under royal leadership and reinforced in recent decades by the revival of royal prestige during the reign of Bhumibol – nurtures the image of royalty as exemplary taste and culture makers. The second driving force, the search for roots, applies in particular to socially successful migrants who have been subjected to standardised Thai education and state assimilation policies, and can no longer trace much meaningful connections with their ethnic or regional roots. Thai-ified, Bangkokianised and 'globalising' in this sense, the upwardly mobile urban bourgeois, especially those of Chinese origins, have arrived at a point of possessing the means and willingness to invest in those 'invented' national traditions that celebrate their 'Thai bourgeois' aspirations, in other words to invest in the kind of heritage or cultural nationalist discourses and products that reflect their idealised collective self-image of ownership of Thai culture, and their agency in advancing Thai prestige in globalisation.

Of the three psychological drives nurturing the desire for Thainess, however, the one that has acquired the greatest urgency since the 1997 economic crisis is insecurity. Despite the fact that their status as the mediating figure of globalisation has endowed the urban middle bourgeois with a newfound claim to authority over cultural and ideological realms, their exposure to globalisation has also led to an

[38] This point is drawn from Nidhi, "*Watthanatham khong khon chan klang thai* [The Culture of the Thai Middle Class]," in *Chon chan klang bon krasae prachathipatai thai* [the Middle Class on the Path of Thai Democracy], eds. Sungsidh Piriyarangsan and Pasuk Phongpaichit (Bangkok: The Political Economy Centre, Chulalongkorn University and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1993), 49-65.

increasingly intense status anxiety concerning Thailand's marginal global place, which implies their own limited ability to shape those external economic and cultural influences that their ascendancy in the national sphere to a certain extent rests on. This anxiety had been present for some time prior to 1997, usually articulated in the form of the 'Thai culture in crisis' discourse entailing the scrutiny of youth; but it took the force of the economic crisis to unleash its full momentum. As Kasian describes it, the shock of the worst economic crisis the country had experienced since the last days of royal absolutism came especially hard for the class that had benefited most from the bubble economy, since it suddenly forced upon them the recognition that the hand that had brought so much personal prosperity could also sweep everything away. Its psychological effect was to exacerbate urban middle bourgeois status anxiety in the world arena of globalisation, bringing to the fore the underlying tension of their self-definition as its mediating figure for the mission of national progress. Accordingly, as he puts it, a major consequence was "the transformation of [middle class] collective imaginings of 'globalization'" characterised by a "newfound hesitancy and ambivalence" toward it.[39] With newfound hesitancy then came the surge of desire for Thainess, whose re-imagining in terms of the partial reworking of official nationalism provides the key theme of this study; and whose reliance on the medium of surfaces for its expression, primarily media spectacle, film, TV, advertising, visual arts, or graphic design, is one reason for conceptualising heritage cinema as emblematic of middle bourgeois wish-fulfilment. The jolt of the crisis, a psychological rupture revealing the flimsy architecture of their projection of continuously ascendant trajectory in globalisation, is also the moment at which bourgeois narcissism gained ground.

To underscore the close link between the narcissistic sensibility and wish-fulfilment, it is useful to point out that the psychological destabilisation of the new urban middle class found powerfully contradictory expressive forms: a resurgent love for Thainess at once invested in the monarch's conservative anti-capitalist critique of globalisation, yet alternating with a new daydream of charting a less insecure, more

[39] Kasian, "Post-Crisis Economic Impasse and Political Recovery in Thailand: The Resurgence of Economic Nationalism," 331.

profitable course in globalisation through commodifying Thai 'cultural capital'. In the first case, the white-collar middle class (along with many other groups) eulogised King Bhumibol's influential speech at the end of 1997, which cryptically proposed the solution to the crisis in terms of his 'new theory' of returning to the national economic heritage of agricultural self-sufficiency and subsistence living.[40] Yet it is highly unlikely that the homage of the newly insecure bourgeois to the self-sufficiency discourse could in all seriousness extend beyond seeking emotional solace in the regressive reawakening of the Thai pastoral myth, to supporting such policies as land redistribution or measures to make energy usage reflect its real, long term environmental costs. In any case, during their honeymoon period with the first Thaksin government, urban middle class attention was divided by the 'Thaksinomics' rhetoric of regenerating wealth by moving up the value chain of global production: the promise to prioritise indigenous skills, culture and artistry in the traditionally non-productive or the new highly skilled sectors in order to leave behind the era of growth through cheap unskilled labour.[41] Since the early 2000s, developments such as the circulation of that new catch phrase *thun watthanatham*, the growing number of articles explaining the idea in the press, and recently the publication of a pocketbook on the topic by the well-known political economy academic, Rangsan Thanapornpan, indicate the extent to which this other 'new theory' has been gaining currency.

These simultaneously intensifying tendencies: the ambivalence toward globalisation while yearning to achieve first-world capitalist status in it, the desire to be liberated from the institutionalised subject position of Thai national identity while

[40] The king's 'new theory' draws on the pastoral myth of the contented population under the rule of an enlightened monarch. His speech was seized upon by a range of activist groups, variously radical-communitarian or conservative-communitarian in political persuasions, since it provided an authoritative vantage point to criticise neo-liberal capitalist globalisation and legitimise their own alternative visions of a fairer, less consumerist, and sustainable society for the future. See Kevin Hewison's critique of such strategies of legitimising discourses of anti-capitalist globalisation in "Responding to the Economic Crisis: Thailand's Localism," in *Reforming Thai Politics*, ed. Duncan McCargo (Copenhagen: NIAS Publishing, 2002).

[41] See Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin: the Business of Politics in Thailand*, chap. 4. A closely related dimension of Thaksinomics, the rhetoric of deepening capitalism by extending entrepreneurial opportunities, was targeted at the non-middle class. Its acknowledgment of the majority electorate's desire to participate in and gain personal advancement through deepening capitalism goes a long way to explain the willingness of the popular classes to continue voting for Thaksin, despite fierce middle class opposition to him. Many political commentators have also identified this element of populism as the major threat that Thaksin posed for the old power base.

affirming certain fundamental tenets of official Thainess (see next section), produce a fantasy world whose material presence consists of separate practices that nonetheless articulate a distinct terrain through their common investment in 'Thai yet world-class' surface attractions. Bourgeois narcissistic sensibility plays out as 'patriotic pride' in experiencing objects, effects, and above all spectacle projecting an internationally viable form of exemplary Thainess, an affective investment that celebrates the spectator's voluntary and spontaneous (rather than enforced) self-recognition as a Thai loving Thai. This narcissism implies a distinct logic of spectatorship whereby the object of looking is not Thainess in its representational glory as such, but the spectacle of 'already watched' Thainess upon whose surface attractions is inscribed the trope of the astonished global gaze. The promise of spectatorial pleasure lies here in 'witnessing' the enraptured eyes of the world upon world-class Thainess, or experiencing one's presence, seeing one's 'self-reflection', in the figurative eyes of the admiring global audience.

The chapters that follow demonstrate how the heritage film genre and the reception of its canonical films exemplify this narcissistic logic. But to give an indication of its expansive territory, it is worth mentioning a few other examples. The name of Thaksin's party, *thai rak thai* [Thai(s) love Thai(s)], self-consciously aligns itself with this sensibility; the very image the name conjures up situates the spectator as one who takes pleasure in showing the world our common patriotic feelings. The rhetoric of *lok taleung* [the world's astonishment], widely reproduced in Thai media coverage of the monumental 2006 celebrations of Bhumibol's Diamond Jubilee, conjures up an image of the global audience's awestruck gaze at our spectacular display of love for our glorious monarch.[42] A similar logic can be traced in the royal barge procession marking the 2003 Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) meeting in Bangkok, whose combination of Disneyfied spectacle and crudifying imitation of a pre-modern ritual is characterised by Mukhom as nationalistic kitsch

[42] See for instance the special edition of the Thai-language *Hello!* magazine commemorating the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, whose coverage consists primarily of pages of photographs of royal guests from the dwindling pool of the world's remaining monarchies. This 'photo-montage' configures the admiring eyes of global royal representatives for 'our beloved monarch', while glossing over potentially disquieting facts such as why the UK sent 'only' Prince Andrew. In *Special Issue* supplement of *Hello!*, 6 July 2006.

and an invented tradition. On one level organised to impress the visiting global dignitaries, yet given the scale of its mediation through television broadcast and photographic reproductions, the attraction of this spectacle in the more suggestive sense was the display of 'already watched' heritage, or the projection of the astonished global gaze figured here as the attending leaders and dignitaries of APEC's member countries.[43] Elsewhere, the semiologist Pracha Suweeranont identifies a parallel dynamic underscoring a recent advertising art workshop called, in English, Inter Goes Thai and, in Thai, *farang oeung thai* [the Westerner's astonishment upon encountering Thai excellence], a statement projecting the 'international' advertising world's newfound admiration and respect for Thai-produced and Thai-style advertising aesthetics.[44] Another similar dynamic of projection can be found in Elle Thailand, October 2004 issue, whose cover announces in upbeat English-language caption We Love Bangkok. Inside the reader finds several special features showcasing world-class 'Thai' things that make 'Bangkok' – the site of world-class Thainess according to this logic – loveable. One of these is an article entitled Siamese, If You Please, featuring a selection of locally produced cosmetics, accessories, knick-knacks, food, clothes, craft and art, whose claim to distinction rests on the apparent veneer of their world-wide popularity. They include: the Ratchanikorn brand of scented candles, featured because they are stocked by Harrods; the parrot green brand of soap with gaudy wrapping, Nok Kaew, once regarded as naff but featured because it is now undergoing something of a retrochic revival as certified by the French Elle; the crispy noodle snack *mi krop*, included since, Elle Thailand reminds its readers, "fans of the hot TV series *Sex and the City* will probably remember that Carrie [the heroine] ordered this, her very favourite Thai dish, from a Thai menu"; and the ubiquitous household spirit shrine, featured because "although *farang* [Westerners] may not be able to grasp our belief in the guardian spirit of places, the sheer artistry of these shrines has turned them into desirable

[43] Mukhom, "OCOK – One Country One Kitsch: *kitsch thaithai kap apec fair* [OCOK – One Country One Kitsch: Thai-style Kitsch and the APEC Fair], " in *Promdaen Thodlong* [Experimental Boundaries], 133-61.

[44] Pracha Suweeranont, "*Inter Goes Thai: samneuk mai nai tua phim* (1) [Inter Goes Thai: A New Consciousness in Fonts (Part 1)]," in *Matichon Sudsapda*, 27 October 2006, 113; and "*Inter Goes Thai: samneuk mai nai tua phim* (2) [Inter Goes Thai: A New Consciousness in Fonts (Part 2)], " *Matichon Sudsapda*, 3 November 2006, 89.

objects for *farang* tourists".[45] Worth noting too in this context is the transformed aesthetic of the logos of film studios and production houses in recent years, many of which now claim 'global prestige' with a combination of an icon that symbolises Thainess and an English name or a name transliterated into English letters. The logo of the production house partly responsible for making *Hoam rong*, for instance, consists in a short animation sequence featuring children in arcane pigtails and pantaloon, playing with a toy shaped to look simultaneously like a film reel and a traditional bamboo hula-hoop. The sequence ends with a still image featuring the 'traditional Thai children' icon above the name of the production house, Filmhanza, rendered with both Thai and English fonts, in a colour scheme that refers to the red, white and blue combination of the national flag.

In each of these examples, the configuration of the trope of arresting the eyes of the world implies an already present 'foreign' gaze upon the surface objects or effects themselves, and inscribes a spectatorial position as one for whom the sight of exemplary Thainess in the astonished global or foreign gaze constitutes the pleasure of voluntarily 'patriotic' self-recognition. A feature they have in common is the gap between the actual terms of Thailand's global presence and their idealisation of the global prestige of the Thai yet world-class. In the scenario of the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, for instance, the trope of *lok taleung* produced a wishful image of the awestruck global audience that concealed the world's indifference to the event, and papered over a less complementary kind of foreign astonishment at the monumentality of the celebrations amid a global context of monarchical decline.[46] The royal barge procession spectacle projected international admiration for Thai heritage, though the popularity of tacky beach resorts among foreign tourists tells a different story. And although the Thai advertising industry has attracted a degree of international interest to parallel 'new Thai cinema', Pracha observes that the wishful image projected by the workshop's name, the phrase Inter Goes Thai, suggests a

[45] See "Siamese, If you Please, " in *Elle Thailand*, October 2004, 192-96.

[46] This idea comes from an 'unpublishable' article by Mukhom, which traces the eruption of the logic of "self-congratulation" during the Diamond Jubilee celebrations. According to this logic, King Bhumibol is the world's uniquely great monarch; King Bhumibol is the personification of Thainess; ergo, Thainess is uniquely great. See "*Rat(phithi)mahorasop* [Theatre (Cult) State], " unpublished article.

degree of international enthrallment and Thai global influence that resides in the realm of dreams rather than an already attained reality.[47] New bourgeois narcissism can be defined as wish-fulfilment in this sense; it is a compensatory dynamic that disguises the insecure recognition of the country's marginal place in globalisation, which crucially licences the spectator-subject to experience the fantasy world of Thai global prestige as the true world.

After hypernationalism: uniquely Thai and/or *thaithai*

As noted earlier, a crucial component of urban middle class cultural self-assertion lies in signalling the decline of the official nationalist subjectivity institutionalised by post-absolutist and Cold War military dictatorships. Sometimes defined as hypernationalism, this ideology first took shape during the late 1930s under the dictatorship of Phibun.[48] With the overthrowing of dynastic absolutism in 1932 the monarchy was thrown into crisis, and during Phibun's premiership played a very marginal role in public life.[49] In the bid to sustain this status quo and legitimise military constitutionalist rule, Phibun's hypernationalism both reproduced and reshaped King Vajiravudh's official nationalist discourse, preserving in effect its paternalistic and ethnicising underpinning while shifting the focus from conceptualising the monarchy as the personification of the nation, to identifying the military as the chief protector of the throne and representative of the nation.[50] Its ideologue, Luang Wichit Wathakan, combined the mythic repertoire of Thainess substantially influenced by Vajiravudh's official nationalism with, as Craig Reynolds points out, a notion of modelling the modern Thai subject on Western bourgeois subjectivity, albeit reworked in an acutely appearance-obsessed fashion.[51] Much of

[47] See Pracha "*Inter Goes Thai: samneuk mai nai tua phim* [Inter Goes Thai: A New Consciousness in Fonts (Part 1)]".

[48] Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity*, esp. chap. 6. I discuss Phibun's mobilisation of the film medium for this task in chap. 2.

[49] After the abdication of the last absolutist king, Prajadhipok in 1935, the country did not in fact have a residing monarch for over a decade.

[50] Accordingly in 1939, as a gesture of Phibun's new dawn, the country's name was changed from Siam to Thailand.

[51] Craig Reynolds, "The Plot of Thai History: Theory and Practice," in *Patterns and Illusions: Thai History and Thought*, eds. Gehan Wijeyewardene and E. C. Chapman (Canberra: Australia National University, 1992), 321-25.

the aim was to project a demonstratively modern and unified Thai public sphere through the regulated enactment of Western bourgeois values such as civility, orderliness, progress, industriousness, self-improvement and market enterprise – in other words to provide justification for the Phibun regime in the name of modernising, militaristic nationalism.[52] Soon a father figure cult came to be constructed around the leader – an effort to concentrate the symbolism of the national will upon his person rather than the monarchy or the constitution that he had helped to bring into being.[53] The un-Thai other against which militaristic hypernationalism was directed was of course the Chinese.

If Phibun's hypernationalism was a mass-oriented effort at nation building, and to that extent a universalising though fascistic ideology, during the mid-1970s hypernationalism took what Anderson describes as a self-consciously rightist, militant turn. Its drift into an explicit "ideological club of highly specific social formations"[54] was a symptom of the ideological crisis of the Cold War ruling clique, consisting of leaders of the military and bureaucracy, the dependent bourgeois capitalists, and a monarchy restored to influence after the fall of Phibun, and constituted the rearguard bid of this ruling clique to preserve military-bureaucratic authoritarianism in the face of radical nationalist challenge and political upheaval in the region.

The revival of the monarchy began at the instigation of Phibun's successor, Sarit, that is, over a decade after the current monarch Bhumibol came to the throne in 1946. Unlike Phibun, who for most of his leadership tried to contain the symbolic role and minimise the political role of the monarch, the military leader Sarit actively heightened the latter's sacred symbolism as the embodiment of national unity, and the moral, disinterested source of legitimisation of his own absolutist dictatorship. This was achieved through reviving spectacular royal rites and pageantries, sending the royal couple on prestigious international visits, promoting royal visibility on a

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[52] Key measures to achieve this goal include issuing mandates on etiquette, dress, and behaviour, and (European and Japanese) fascist-inspired techniques of ideological inculcation such as radio propaganda and a youth soldier movement. See Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity*, chap. 6.

[53] Ibid., 170.

[54] Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms, " 142.

national scale through the media, establishing royal presence in remote, poverty-stricken areas to neutralise ethnic conflicts and contain the spread of communism.[55] Another significant aspect of the revival was to encourage royal contact with the middle class, especially through such 'a-political' settings as attending the wedding ceremony of elite middle class families and presenting degrees at university graduation. It was also during this period that the image of royalty as exemplary figures for middle class emulation began to be cultivated – with uneven results – in large part through media manipulation and censorship. Its most persistent legacy is the still heavily reproduced cliché of the multi-genius, selflessly devoted king – an image that mirrors in turn middle class aspirations and values. In Ockey's description Bhumibol is portrayed "as an engineer, a musician, an expert sailor…a painter, a photographer, and master of many languages – all middle class type activities. He is described as industrious, innovative, sincere, interested in the welfare of his people, diligent, loving…and his lifestyle is clearly portrayed as middle class".[56] The successful restoration of monarchical aura under Sarit's dictatorship laid the foundation for Bhumibol's securing of moral and cultural leadership in subsequent periods of parliamentary rule; what Kasian terms "royal hegemony".[57] As I discuss below, this is an aspect of monarchical restoration that has eclipsed the complicity of the palace in engendering militant right-wing hypernationalism, and which papers over the enormous uncertainty over the future of the institution itself.

The ruling bloc that, since Sarit, upheld royalty as the basis of its legitimacy found itself on the defensive after the toppling of his weaker successors, Thanom Kittikajorn and Praphat Jarusathien, by the massive student-led demonstrations in 1973. This uprising, the point of collective efflorescence of a radicalised, anti-state

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[55] See Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Karnmeuang rabob phor khun uppatham baeb phadetkarn* [Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism] (Bangkok: The Foundation for the Promotion of Social Sciences and Humanities Textbook Project, 2005), 352-74.

[56] Ockey, "Business Leaders, Gangsters, and the Middle Class: Societal Groups and Civilian Rule in Thailand," PhD Thesis, Cornell University, 1992, 347. It is worth noting here that the royal emulation of middle class self-image can partially be traced back to the 1930s, around the fall of absolutism, with the abandoning of polygamy for monogamous royal coupling.

[57] Kasian, "Toppling Thaksin," 18. He draws the term from Chanida Chitbundid's work on the construction of Bhumibol's hegemony through royally initiated projects.

form of nationalist consciousness,[58] was accompanied by the popularisation of an alternative, anti-military – though significantly not anti-royal – nationalist imaginary, which accordingly articulated the nation as a plural, multiethnic, and rural identity. Against the elitist underpinning of official nationalism, the symbolic heartland of this imaginary shifted to the economically impoverished, culturally rich northeastern region of Isan, whose inhabitants are linked to Laos and other countries in the Mekong region through ethnic and family ties, while Bangkok's military political elites now became branded as 'un-Thai' compradors of American neo-imperialism and American or Japanese capitalists.[59]

The dictators' fall brought a brief interval of liberation distinguished by free elections, the abolition of censorship and workers' activism, which encouraged the student movement to shift to a more explicitly socialist stance. This development, occurring amidst an international context of global recession, America's defeat in Vietnam, and the fall of the neighbouring Laotian monarchy in 1975 – regarded by the Thai counterpart as a close relative – were the main causes of panic among the palace and its military-bureaucratic capitalist clique. Fearing that Thailand would become the next 'domino' to fall, key figures in the alliance resorted to militantly right-wing propagandising, intensifying the air of a country threatened with annihilation from within through the state-controlled media and inciting right-wing controlled paramilitary groups to violence. Nationalism was now articulated

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[58] The anticipatory force of this moment of cultural and political radicalism was the radical public created through small-scale or underground publications of socialist and Marxist works, incorporating both translations and original literary, intellectual and journalistic writings in the decade after the Second World War. The Sarit regime's persecution of dissenting writers and intellectuals resulted in the temporary disappearance of the key works of this decade, which were rediscovered by radicalised university students agitating for the overthrowing of the dictators Thanom and Praphat. This generation of radicalised students were precisely those offspring of the docile new middle class produced by military authoritarianism, including of course many *lukjin*. They drew inspiration simultaneously from the disinterment of radical works within and from 'new left' student activism occurring elsewhere. See Prajak Kongkirati, *Lae laew khwam khleuan wai kor prakot - karn meuang watthanatham khong nak seuksa lae panyachon kon 14 tula* [and Then the Movement Appeared: The Cultural Politics of Students and Intellectuals before 14 October 1973] (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2005), chaps. 4, 5.

[59] Nidhi, "*Chat niyom nai khabuankarn prachathipatai* [Nationalism in the Democratic Movement]," 181. In terms of its cultural impact, the preoccupation with articulating a popular, anti-military imaginary of the nation engendered something of a counter-cultural 'revolution': the proliferation of 'literature for life', folk or protest songs, and 'new wave' films of the third worldist mould.

explicitly as the mission to safeguard Nation-Religion-King against the threat of *khommunit*, and in particular the elimination of 'un-Thai' aliens within the territory in order to protect the throne – the sacred though now vulnerable personification of Thainess.[60] In Anderson's key argument, and as mentioned earlier, the audience of anti-*khommunit* hypernationalism – the 'popular' new ally of the royalist conservative clique – was the recently expanded middle and petty bourgeoisie.[61] This moment of crisis – characterised by the willingness of the power bloc to resort to naked public violence to preserve military authoritarian rule in the name of nationalism – culminated in the horrific massacre of students and protestors branded as communists in 1976, carried out by state security forces and orchestrated lynch mobs.

The massacre laid bare the ideological militancy of royalist hypernationalism, and to this extent also signalled its impending death as a hegemonising nationalist ideology.[62] In this vacuum, each element of the ruling clique adapted to retain its hold on power under electocracy and beyond: the bourgeois capitalists entered parliament; civilian leaders of the bureaucracy learnt to bend with their new elected masters; the military retained its political presence for much of the 1980s through an appointed military prime minister (see fn. 13), until the bloodshed of 1992 restricted its role to that of the king's men; the king reverted back to exerting 'soft' political influence through appointing prime ministers at opportune intervals, and more importantly through the combination of personal prestige bolstered by the protection of intense propaganda. Before elaborating this aspect of Bhumibol's reign, an important point to underline at this juncture has to do with the way that the horror of 1976 lives on, albeit in highly circumscribed form,[63] in subsequent periods. This is the resolve to

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[60] This term comes from Kasian, who clarifies that the signifier extended far beyond socialists and leftists: "anyone who stood in the way of the Thai official nationalist project was, in effect, a *khommunit*" See his *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Modern Thai Radical Culture*, *1927-1958*, 190.

[61] See Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms," 170-3.

[62] See Nidhi, "*Khwampenthai* [Thainess], " in his *Prawattisat chat panyachon* [History, Nation, Intellectuals], ed. Mukhom Wongthes (Bangkok: Matichon, 2005), 106.

[63] For many years the massacre of 1976 remained an unspeakable taboo; and still, as Thongchai Winichakul points out, the terms of its remembrance is highly circumscribed for the challenge that it poses to the current prestige of the throne. See his "Remembering/Silencing the Traumatic Past: The Ambivalent Memories of the October 1976 Massacre in Bangkok," in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Politics of the Past in the Thai World*, eds. Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles F. Keyes (London and Honolulu: Routledge Curzon and University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

make archaic – in Raymond Williams's sense of a discourse formed in the past that no longer retains an active, shaping presence in the present[64] – the sloganising invocation of Nation-Religion-King, in other words, the violently polarising element of hypernationalist propaganda. Such is the context accounting for the desire to overcome Thainess, or the kind of official Thainess associated with the interpellation of the frenzied nationalist subject with bloodstained hands. At the same time, however, an element of amnesia accompanies the post-1976 assertions of 'post-hypernationalist' progress, associating such extremities with what is now deemed to be an antiquated cult of military leadership or a generalised right-wing anti-communism absolved of royal agency. A case in point is *Hoam rong*'s reception as described in the introduction: the rapturous identification with Thai heritage, a mobilisation of affect that associates spectatorial identification with personal taste or aesthetic disposition rather than vulnerability to propaganda manipulation, is at the same time a symbolic gesture of nailing the coffin of hypernationalism – a past now personified in the story world by the coercively modernising military regime that set out to destroy the indigenous musical heritage the aristocrats nurtured and the commoners struggled to preserve.

As for the restoration of the throne's moral leadership, this took place in the light of two related strands of ideological re-articulation whose powerful unifying theme is the association of Thai uniqueness with the monarchy – when it is understood that the latter has increasingly come to entail ambiguity between the monarchy as an institution and the personal prestige of the aged Bhumibol (born in 1927).[65] After 1976, bureaucratic agents responsible for cultural promotion undertook to dissociate Thainess from hypernationalism by emphasising Thainess as a distinctive cultural identity in the global arena over a divisively political one. As Reynolds argues, at this point Thainess became re-articulated by state agents as a set of values, customs, rituals, artistic, folk and religious practices, linguistic heritage and so on, signifying distinctive cultural identity from the West. In this scheme, the state

[64] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 122.

[65] See Putthapol Mongkhonworawan, "*Sathaban phra mahakasat kap panha karn patthana thang karn meuang thai* [The Monarchy Institution and the Obstructions to Thai Political Development]," *Fah Dieo Kan* 3, no. 4 (2005): 122.

asserted its role as the preserver of Thai identity amid the pressure of Western global cultural dominance, while situating the monarchy at the heart of Thai cultural identity.[66]

Meanwhile the cultivation of royal hegemony entailed, firstly, expanding the scale of royal development practices first initiated under Sarit's rule so that the royally initiated projects function as a partial substitution for the welfare state, funded through a combination of state budget and private donations.[67] Secondly, official nationalism was re-articulated to emphasise the ideology of democratisation under royal leadership. What made this manoeuvre possible was ironically the incorporation of, in Prajak Kongkirati's term, the discourse of the democratising king into the revolt leading to the toppling of the Thanom-Praphat duo in 1973. Initially articulated after the fall of royal absolutism to frame that event as the smooth handover of democracy by the visionary King Prajadhipok to his subjects, its assertion of the monarchy's role in safeguarding democracy was revitalised prior to and during the demonstrations to legitimise the anti-military position of the student movement and demonstrators as one of loyalty to the throne, and de-legitimise the dictators as debasers of monarchical wishes.[68] In the aftermath of 1976, state ideologue organs and intellectuals loyal to Bhumibol likewise mobilised the democratising king discourse to represent as a 'democratic' restoration of order the king's intervention to remove the dictators and appoint a relatively liberal government, producing what has since become the public memory of royal conduct in the decade of popular democratic struggle. The affirmation of Bhumibol as the guardian of Thai democracy is combined with the continuing mythologisation of previous monarchs' heroic battles to safeguard the country's independence, especially the glorification of the absolutist King Chulalongkorn as the great moderniser who saved Siam from European

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[66] See Craig Reynolds, "Introduction: National Identity and Its Defenders," in *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand 1939-1989*, ed. Craig Reynolds (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1991), 13-15.

[67] See Kong bannathikarn [Editorial Committee], "*Khrong karn an neuang ma jak phra rachadamri: karn sathapana phra racha-amnaj nam doey Chanida Chitbandid* [The Royally Inititiated Projects: The Making of Royal Hegemony by Chanida Chitbandid]," Fah Dieo Kan 3, no. 4 (2005), 172-91.

[68] Prajak, *Lae laew khwam khleuan wai kor prakot - karn meuang watthanatham khong nak seuksa lae panyachon kon 14 tula* [and Then the Movement Appeared: The Cultural Politics of Students and Intellectuals before 14 October 1973], 464-519.

colonisation. Accordingly designated as royal-nationalism,[69] this contemporary variant of official nationalism provides the ideological cornerstone for what Kasian describes as "the most hegemonic monarch in modern Thai history, effectively far more powerful than most of his absolutist predecessors."[70] Crucial moments of reaffirmation of royal hegemony in recent years were: the king's appointment of a government to end the 1992 bloodshed, which occurred after a televised drama of reconciliation between the protest leader and the general who had appointed himself prime minister, both prostrated at the feet of the royal father figure; and the 'anti-capitalist' self-sufficiency discourse with its theme of independence under the leadership of the wise monarch. Needless to say, royal-nationalism facilitates a special compact between the throne and an insecure urban middle class that yearns for both Thainess, or Thai uniqueness in the face of globalisation, and the security of 'enlightened' moral-political leadership. In this respect they are both its subjects and – a point that highlights the political import of the middle bourgeois dominated terrain of culture – its agents of reproduction.

It must of course be added that royal authority is policed by watchful censorship, lese-majesty law, and, a strategy that is especially relevant in the context of this study, propaganda that relies in no small part on 'cinematic' techniques of interpellation. Especially since the uprising of 1992, there has been an intense build up of propaganda focusing above all on the unique greatness of Bhumibol, cultivating for him a semi-divine stature more or less detached from the rest of the royal family (for reasons discussed below). A rather literal example is the music video of the King's Anthem played in cinemas before the start of every film, requiring viewers to stand in respectful obeisance and see themselves 'reflected' as grateful subjects of the uniquely hardworking, benevolent Thai king; whose dynamic of display and spectator-subject positioning is increasingly reliant on visually spectacular aesthetics, operatically extravagant musical soundtrack, and high production value. The same logic is inscribed in spectacular public celebrations of monarchical achievement such

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[69] Thongchai, "*Prawattisat thai baeb rachachatniyom jak yuk ananikhom amphrang soo rachachatniyom mai rue latthi sadejpho khong kradumphi thai nai pajjuban* [Royal-Nationalist History from the Age of Crypto-Colonialism to the Current New Royal-Nationalism or the Thai Bourgeoisie's Cult of the Father-King]," *Sinlapawatthanatham* November 2001, 56-65.

[70] Kasian, "Toppling Thaksin," 18.

as the recent Diamond Jubilee, along with the more everyday example of public spaces and man-made visual landscape in Thailand, where images of the king gracing billboards, display stands, posters, screens and print media, transform such spaces into a gigantic set for the enactment of loyalty and self-recognition as royal-nationalist subjects.

That royalist propagandising (and in a parallel development as chapter 6 explores further, the commercialisation of royalty by private entrepreneurs whether on a small or industrial scale) has acquired a degree of ubiquity to parallel the magnitude of Bhumibol's personal moral-political leadership is one acute symptom of the anxiety concerning the future of the monarchical institution itself. Its frailty lies in the badly regarded crown prince Vajiralongkorn, the object of salacious gossips concerning his family life and sexual behaviour. His lack of stature in bourgeois eyes is accompanied by a potential succession crisis, since his younger sister Sirindhorn commands far greater popularity and, theoretically speaking, can ascend to the throne. In this context, it is not insignificant to note that the build up of royalist propaganda since 1992 has tended to prioritise Sirindhorn as second to the king in the order of visibility and prestige, implicitly acknowledging her popularity over her mother, elder brother and other siblings. More tangentially, there is also the problem of uncertainty over the line of succession governing the following generation of royalty.[71] What now can only be described as the hyperbolic pitch of royal-nationalist self-congratulating, celebrating Thailand's uniquely good fortune to be blessed with a king projected as one of the greatest in national history and implicitly greater than any remaining monarch in the world, is a wishful expression of the yearning for the eternal longevity of this particular monarch, the anticipation of crisis and its effort of denial. Collective nerves are further jangled by the old and widely known prophecy that the Chakri dynasty will have no more than nine kings.

The neutralisation of hypernationalism in favour of Thainess as a distinctive cultural identity translated easily into the state's other major project from the 1980s: promoting Thailand to the world as a respectably rather than seedily exotic tourist

[71] See discussion in Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2006), esp. chap. 22.

destination. Around a decade later, the drive to attract foreign visitors was supplement by campaigns to increase domestic tourism. As Maurizio Peleggi points out, domestic tourists tend to respond in greater numbers to heritage tourism,[72] the centrepiece of the state's gentrification efforts. The bid to attract respectable (domestic or international) tourism incorporates such measures as the promotion of historical sites and ruins restored according to the governing framework of the royal and Buddhist centred narrative of Thai history; organising spectacular heritage shows in these settings; supporting the restoration of palaces as tourist attractions; and highlighting restoration projects aimed at transforming into upmarket leisure sites tourist towns within the vicinity of royal palaces. In a parallel fashion, private entrepreneurs have been playing a key part in the explosion of the heritage and nostalgia industries since the globalisation boom. Typically their products are glossy publications on antiquity or various facets of royal history and the intrigue of palace lives in the past; architectural restorations of old aristocratic houses as sites with commercial function such as upmarket restaurants or hotels; antique and furniture restoration shops; antique and memorabilia shows or new small museums housing them; including the less royalty infatuated boom in shops or markets selling retro ephemera as collectibles facilitating the fashion for retro interior decoration.[73] Their key consumers are members of the culturally and ethnically uprooted, or Thai-ified, urban middle class as discussed earlier.

To put it in conceptual terms, the developments above signal the turn toward commodifying Thainess, or the displacement of the political category of national identity into a reproducible thing with market value, whose agents are both state representatives and private entrepreneurs. One of the most significant consequences of the capitalisation of Thainess in this sense is to open up the possibility of its dis-articulation from ethnic chauvinism.

In the case of the state's tourism promotion project, a degree of displacement of Thainess from the signification of the monolithically Thai is desirable. As

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[72] Maurizio Peleggi, *The Politics of Ruins and the Business of Nostalgia* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2002), chaps. 4 & 5.

[73] See Thongchai Winichakul, "The Changing Landscape of the Past: New Histories in Thailand since 1973," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (1995): 116-18.

Reynolds puts it, "[i]n the promotion of the country for foreigners it is important to go as far as to dramatize *some* ethnic differences, because they make the tourist adventure more diverse and attractive".[74] The crucial agency of reification here, though, is private entrepreneurs rather than the state, and especially the culture industry monopolists. To capture the stylistic logic of their transformation of Thainess into choice-led commodity experiences accessible through purchasing power, Kasian borrows the vernacular *thaithai* ['Thai-style']: an adjective convention that operates much like the English 'ish' (for instance whitish, or in this case Thai-ish) to designate a thing of loose approximation rather than an essence.[75] Accordingly, Thainess now becomes one among many other kinds of desirable identities circulating in the market. In *thaithai* one finds the 'Thai-style' fusions with desirably European, American, Japanese, Chinese or Korean signs, resulting in foods, fashions, names, music, movies and so on that recognise the consumer's desire to situate his or her 'Thai-style' self in a globally or regionally fashionable idiom.

The *thaithai* logic of cultural commodification simultaneously recognises the desire of the schizophrenic to acquire or consume Thainess whilst overcoming the ethnically chauvinistic interpellation of nationalist subjectivity. The redemptive aspect of its productivity has so far been identified with the de-substantialised acknowledgement of the 'Chineseness' in many Thais through mass and pop cultural forms. Such acknowledgement has tended to take the form of playful or affectively powerful representations of the Sino-Thai experience, implicitly drawing a line under the legacy of popular cultural stereotyping of the ethnic Chinese – primarily as evil balding capitalists who do not speak proper Thai or as sinister communists. (Such pattern of stereotyping is one example of the filtering of state anti-Sinicism into the domain of popular culture during the military authoritarian period.) An infamous example of the playful, pop cultural reinvention of the identity-value of Chineseness

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[74] Reynolds, "Introduction: National Identity and Its Defenders," 15.

[75] Kasian, "The Postmodernisation of Thainess," In *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*. It should probably be noted that *thaithai* in the sense of Thai-ish is pronounced evenly – neither syllable is stressed over the other. The meaning shifts subtly but significantly if the first syllabus is stressed in the raised tone, pronounced as if followed by a question mark i.e. *thai?thai*. Literally translated as 'very Thai', this way of enunciating turns the phrase into a half-mocking, half-affectionate designation of some fallible national essence – to be used sarcastically or ironically in a manner that parallels the phrase 'so bloody English'.

is the Bangkokian hip-hop star Joey Boy, who rose to fame in the early 1990s rapping about 'the association of the slit-eyed' in a spirit of affectionate homage to the Sino-Thai clans that produced his type of urban, hedonistic *lukjin*. Others include a TV soap that gripped the nation around the same time, charting the rags to riches rise of a Chinese tycoon who got off the boat after the Second World War with just a 'pillow and a mat'. This cultural break – the moment of asserting *lukjin* as *thaithai* – was named elsewhere by a public intellectual's writing on his own *jek pon lao* ['chink' mixed with Laotian] ancestral lineage; but it was the culture industry that provided the momentum for consumer identification on a much larger scale, creating in the process a new *thaithai* public culture celebrating the fashionably 'out' Sino-Thai.[76]

Along with the culture industry's de-substantialised recognition of certain styles of 'post-hypernationalist' Thainess, it is worth adding that Pracha identifies a parallel fascination with the *thaithai* in the domain of the visual arts over the last decade or so.[77] In his definition, this aesthetic turn draws inspiration from objects and practices that embody everyday aspects of 'Thai-style' living, but which nonetheless fall foul of the residual hierarchy of cultural-nationalist value. In other words, they have been or would be regarded as valueless in an official nationalist aesthetic scheme that associates the essence of Thainess with the "traditional Thai": the royal and Buddhist art historical heritage now embalmed in museums and temples, and the "folk Thai": the heritage of rural art and craft borne of a way of life dictated by nature.[78] In what Pracha characterises as the creation of an "alternative" aesthetic universe through gestures of reversing what had once been regarded as the lowbrow, tasteless or even un-Thai, the *thaithai* aesthetic mode here entails reworking into art or retrochic – often by known artists or trendsetting production houses – those cultural ephemera from the recent past, or everyday aspects of urban unofficial (and implicitly *chao baan*) culture. Examples include the pastiche of cheap paperback

[76] Generally speaking, it should be added, since the market appropriation of the Sino-Thai signifier spoke especially strongly to domestic consumers with the greatest purchasing power, perhaps the more important question to bear in mind is the extent to which the redemptive potential of market productivity can also engender the recognition of other forms of multiethnic, *thaithai* identities.

[77] Summarised in Patcharee Ankurathassaniyarat, "*Woharn khong phap lae ngan khien: karn meuang thi mong mai hen* [The Rhetoric of the Image and Writing: Invisible Politics], " *Fah Dieo Kan* 4, no. 1 (2006): 58-65.

[78] Ibid., 59.

comics now displayed in a gallery; a greeting card that cites the look of stiff paper bags displaying outmoded graphics and unknown brands used by the underclass; roadside cuisine cooked *in situ* in a London gallery; or advertising films that allude to the style of plebeian post-war 16mm. movies. What they have in common is a fascination with the everyday and ephemeral manifestation of urbanised *chao baan* living, the 'rootless' energy of unofficial culture that eludes the 'dead' or residual legacy of traditional and folk heritage in Pracha's classificatory frame. The *thaithai* in this sense designates the aestheticisation of *chao baan* Thainess, whose value as an alternative cultural domain is explored in chapter 7 in the specific context of the alternative heritage film.

Uniquely royalist Thai, pop culturally hybrid, ethnically (partially) pluralising or everyday *thaithai*: these then are the key terms of post-hypernationalist Thainess in a conjuncture of globalising consumer capitalism and democratisation frailties during Bhumibol's late reign. In comparing them, three points are worth emphasising. The first category stands apart from the rest for its preservation of the tradition of deference, and has far greater political effect especially in the struggle to claim legitimacy. (Whether the rest has the potential to bear political weight greater than well-meant rhetoric of identity politics and postmodern intervention is an important point not covered by this study.) There is no *a priori* antagonism between *thaithai* and uniquely Thai identifications. Some 'cosmopolitan' middle class Bangkokians drawn to Starbucks, especially the branch situated in an elegantly restored colonial mansion in the old quarter of town, just as happily sported the yellow 'we love the king' T-shirt whether to signal resentment against corrupt politicians or to rehearse the pleasure of 'national unity' from physical immersion as human ornament in the gigantic royalist spectacle that was Thailand circa 2006. The producer of *thaithai* retrochic or conceptual installation might find romantic inspiration for striking out against faceless, soulless global pop culture in the self-sufficiency discourse.[79] Lastly, the narcissistic logic of spectatorship structures the aestheticisation of Thainess according to the ideology of the uniquely Thai, but may or may not implicate the *thaithai*. How the signifiers of *sakon* and *thai sakon* facilitate the compact between

[79] Ibid., 63.

the narcissistic sensibility and the royalist articulation of Thainess is where we now turn.

The ambiguity of *sakon*

As the introduction began to suggest, *sakon* is a term with a nicely ambiguous ring. It literally means universal but has come to connote Western, Westernised, or modernity. It conjures up an image of the world, both in the sense of 'the international community', but also in the sense of the scale of things. Insofar as one often hears the phrases characterising something or other as *radab sakon* or *matrathan sakon* [of an international, universal, or global standard], it is often accompanied by a sense of some imposing standard or other originating from somewhere else regarded as more advanced than Thailand. And in this sense, anxieties ensue concerning where the term *thai* ought to fit within the overall *sakon* schema. Consequently, a strand of usage of the term projects *sakon* as the desirable standard to be adopted for the improvement of Thai practices, an utterance which recurs consistently throughout Thai film history and underscores the discourse of Thai filmic quality (see chapter 2). In this sense too the Thai attainment of modernity can be projected through the appropriation of signifiers of the *sakon* fashion or standard.[80] A contrasting application of the term, meanwhile, critically isolates certain groups in Thailand as slavish imitators of Western/*sakon* ways, seen therefore as agents of the debasement of Thai culture.[81] Most challengingly of all, the utopian

[80] In his study of the Sarit era, Thak accordingly decodes a photograph of the despot dressed in military gear and sporting a pipe. The Thai army uniform connotes toughness and decisiveness, while the pipe signals that Sarit is a modern or *sakon* leader. See his *Karn meuang rabob phor khun uppatham baeb phadetkarn* [Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism], 458.

This logic, which associates *sakon* with (Westernised) modernity, was already in place during the rule of Sarit's predecessor. In his account of the Phibun period, Charnvit notes that the compulsory cultural mandates of the early 1940s – a key part of hypernationalism's nation-building project as mentioned earlier – often claimed this or that prescribed etiquette as appropriate for emulation on the basis of their 'universal'/*sakon* value, when these were in fact no more than the leader's idea of being 'civilised' or 'Westernised'. See his *Prawat karn meuang thai 2475-2500* [Political History of Thailand 1932-1957], 219.

[81] For instance, Sulak Srivaraksa mobilises this sense of the term to criticise Phibun's hypernationalist modernisation. He comments that during this period, "anything *sakol* [a different transliteration] meant Western. For instance *suit sakol* means Western dress with trousers, necktie and a jacket, which was to be admired. Anything Siamese was old fashioned, decadent and to be looked down upon. I am afraid this concept still prevails in most fashionable circles in all Siamese cities." See his "The Crisis of Siamese Identity," in *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand, 1939-1989*, 51.

implication of *sakon* universality can be mobilised to challenge Thainess, by asking whether it is capable of transcending national particularity defined in the parochial sense, to offer instead a set of values or practices with universal contribution, and which emphasises cosmopolitan engagement.[82]

An inflection of *sakon* that is most relevant to this study, however, is the conjuring up of the metaphorical world stage on which Thailand/Siam must distinguish herself as equal to yet differentiated from the best of nations. This sense of *sakon*, then, tends to be accompanied by the projection of the admiring eyes of the world upon exemplary national figures, objects or practices. Peleggi describes an instance of this in the emphasis given during the absolutist reign of Chulalongkorn to participating in world exhibitions held in Europe and America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The presence of Siamese exhibits on this "world stage", especially prize-winning ones, was taken as proof of the "civilizing rule" of Siamese royalty, both to convince the royals themselves of their own civilisation/modernity thus membership of the global elite, and to persuade the symbolic centres of civilisation of Siam's own advancement in that direction.[83] Compared to this absolutist moment of projecting Siamese global prestige, the contemporary inflection of *sakon* as a world stage has added ambiguities. The idealisation of the admiring eyes of the world upon exemplary Thainess continues to be implied of course. But now, as the description of the terms of *Hoam rong*'s appreciation in the introduction implies, the signification of the global market has come to accompany the metaphor of the world stage. Consequently the invocation of *sakon* in the here and now conjures up possibilities of exportability and global admiration, and more importantly as if they were intertwined. The upshot is a seductive degree of connotative confusion over exportable Thai products and Thai

[82] This suggestion is drawn from Nidhi's provocation: that elite intellectuals of the modern period have failed to articulate Thainess as a set of national values with universal contribution. He suggests that the official nationalism has only contributed a parochial definition of national identity: "It is only limited to Thais in the Thai nation-state, a set of values specific to a given period and within a particular political situation. There is nothing *sakon* in *khwampenthai*, nothing that speaks of such values as human rights, equality or justice...The pride Thais feel for Thainess is therefore premised on disengagement with the world. It is enough to simply know oneself to be Thai." See his "*Khwampenthai* [Thainess]," 108-9.

[83] Peleggi, *Lord of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), chap. 6.

global prestige. Clarity is further obscured when the 'world stage' of globalisation now entails the reality of expanding global contact and increasing foreign knowledge about Thailand. The general air of visibility accompanying greater contact licences the projection of reality-images by culturally authoritative yet insecure agents within Thailand about the kind of Thai things that arrest the eyes of the world.

The juxtaposition of *thai* and *sakon* – 'Thai (yet) universal' – also carries cultural references. In some cases the reference is neutral, devoid of any implicit hierarchy of value between the two terms. A key example here is the categories of *muay sakon* ['world-style' boxing] and *muay thai* [Thai or kick-boxing], which exist side by side as variations of the same family of sport. More often, however, the juxtaposition of *thai* and *sakon* refers to commercialised cultural artefacts or entertainment forms characterised by the 'Thai' localisation of 'Western' mass cultural styles or techniques. *Thai sakon* artefacts circulate in the mass market, but their production and consumption imply a substantial degree of social distinction, or identification with the claim to the 'advancement' of creating ostensibly Thai cultural and entertainment commodities in an internationally legible, 'Western' idiom. Consequently, *thai sakon* has tended to designate prestige, and prestigious 'Thai bourgeois' cultural forms. Not surprisingly, as the modern mass commercial cultural form of perhaps the greatest degree of international mobility and visibility, the cinema has played, and is now once again playing, a crucial part in constituting the *thai sakon* form of legitimised mass culture. And equally importantly, it has provided a key site for the articulation of the *thai sakon* discourse of quality, which attempts to discriminate among a whole array of market-mediated aesthetics on the basis of projecting an ideal state of proximity or distance between the two terms. We will return to this in the next chapter.

Institutionalising the Thai cinema spectator

The institutionalisation of spectatorship links the cinema to new bourgeois sensibility as outlined above, and provides the condition for its constitution as a public sphere. My theorisation here draws on Miriam Hansen's work on the public dimension of

cinema, so an exposition of her intervention in the conceptualisation of cinema spectatorship is necessary.

Hansen's work on the spectatorship of silent American films at the onset of the institutionalisation of the classical Hollywood cinema introduces a new term of conceiving the relationship between the spectator in the text and the plurality of socially situated viewers. It does so by re-conceptualising the American cinema of this transitional period as a public sphere of non-synchronous elements in the sense highlighted by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's response to Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Through a discussion of the methodological intervention of her book *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, the following section foregrounds the applicability of one of its key terms: the industrial-commercial public sphere, to the study of spectatorship in contemporary Thai cinema, whilst suggesting more generally the value of historicising earlier periods of Thai cinema within this framework – a methodological point discussed in the conclusion.

Departing from the determinist implications of the institutional model of spectatorship, which focused on the spectator in the text as an ideologically constituted discursive effect, Hansen emphasises in this book the necessity of studying "the public dimension of the cinematic institution". In particular this entails "the very moment in which reception can gain a momentum of its own", potentially possesses the capacity to articulate certain kinds of collective imaginary which do not conform entirely to, and which in certain circumstances might have the potential to destabilise, the structurally inscribed ideology of the cinematic institution.[84] Yet, unlike the tendency of the other, empirically inclined models of spectatorship to either bracket the question of ideology altogether or to over-read contingency and individualised acts of interpretation, Hansen's proposition concerning the public dimension of cinema proper foregrounds the latter's potential in shaping "a collective and intersubjective horizon".[85]

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[84] Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 7.

[85] Ibid., 8.

Significantly, she points out that the propensity of the cinema to constitute an intersubjective horizon of experience is likely to be related to the uneven development of different sectors within the institution itself (production, distribution, exhibition), coupled with the unpredictability of cinema's intersection with other realms of social life. To give an example: one of her key methodological interventions is to reconstruct the margin for an "alternative public sphere" during the period of transition from early to classical cinema in economically prospering America in the decade from 1907 – the point of emergence of the classical style.[86] She hypothesises that the structural condition of emergence of this sphere – characterised by the collective participation of certain subordinate social groups based on the recognition of personal experiences of displacement – was the nonsynchronous relationship between the production and distribution sectors, which had developed practices of mass cultural standardisation, compared to an exhibition sector lagging behind in the sense that many of the cinemas still relied on locally bounded exhibition practices whose appeal were spontaneity and particularity. In textual terms, the emergent classical narrative sought to provide a standardised "film experience",[87] irrespective of the class, gender, or ethnic differences of socially plural viewers. Through a strategy of narrativisation which assumes the (nonetheless implicitly patriarchal, white, middle class) spectator as the point of indirect address, the classical narrative sought to order viewing experience as one of complete filmic absorption. Such textual codification corresponded to the monopolistic economic imperative of pre-calculating and universalising film consumption on a mass cultural scale; a goal assisted by new methods of distribution enabling the mass circulation of prints. Yet when it came to exhibition, residual practices of the neighbourhood

[86] Ibid., chap. 3. The defining textual features of the classical Hollywood narrative are the organisation of narrative space and time for action-oriented, causal development and dramatic closure. Filmic narration is primarily motivated by compositional unity and internal coherence. Classical narration assumes the presence of the (implicitly patriarchal, white, middle class) spectator as the hypothetical point of address, and organises narrative elements accordingly. See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). Since its fundamental dynamic is to seek to bind plural viewers into identification with the spectator structurally anticipated in the text, absorption in the film takes precedent over other aspects of the viewing experience, given by the surrounding environment.

[87] Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, 93.

nickelodeon, with its emphasis on live performance, lecture, or music – signs of the valorisation of "theater experience" – went against the textual grain and persisted in providing a public setting whereby the particularities of ethnic or class experiences could still be acknowledged.

By hypothesising that the possibility of alternative formations of spectatorship could be claimed "*because of* and *despite* the economic mechanisms upon which cinema was founded",[88] Hansen's methodology is crucially differentiated from Hollywood's own propagated myth of its 'democratic' origin. As rhetoric legitimising the monopoly practices of the American film industry, this myth emphasises the immigrant and working-class component of the cinema's predecessor, the nickelodeon, and valorises the latter as the origin of an inclusive, 'popular', and intrinsically American art.[89] Against the implication that monopolist producers shared the very same aspirations, values and interests as their film consumers, Hansen draws on Negt and Kluge's intervention into the German debate on the public sphere in order to characterise the cinema as an "industrial-commercial" public sphere.[90] Rather than being a public constructed in the traditional bourgeois model of cultural and political autonomy, critical participation and deliberative communication, cinema constitutes an "immediate branch" of capitalist production, market circulation and consumption. The industrial-commercial public sphere to which it belongs "no longer pretend, like the bourgeois model, to a separate sphere above the marketplace".[91] Seeking to transform all and sundry into consumers, monopolist producers who organise this sphere 'from above' operate with indiscriminate inclusiveness. Their interests are served by 'recognising' certain aspects of living, or dimensions of experiences previously considered private and hitherto invisible, "if only to appropriate and desubstantialize them". This dynamic of rendering visible in order to commoditise accounts for the tendency of the industrial-commercial public sphere to create discourses of experience which are absent from the dominant, legitimised spheres of public life, seemingly speaking thereby more pertinently to those marginal

[88] Ibid., 92.
[89] Ibid., chap. 2.
[90] Ibid., 8-16.
[91] Ibid., 12.

to, or excluded from such spheres. Through this very matrix of recognition, appropriation and desubstantialisation, the industrial-commercial public sphere seeks to economically exploit and ideologically inculcate consumer-subjects for profit maximising gains. And yet, in certain circumstances as Hansen hypothesises about the possibility of cinema's redemptive role in constituting an autonomous public sphere inclusive of immigrants and women in early twentieth century American, insofar as it addresses the concrete needs and experiences of those lacking access to dominant forms of public life, it can also supply a pretext for the spontaneous shaping of alternative horizons of experience.

Situating this potentially autonomous dynamic of the cinema public within an overarching point about the characteristic instability of the industrial-commercial public sphere, Hansen points to the contradiction between the latter's indiscriminate inclusiveness and the need to "graft [itself] upon" those discourses of legitimisation existing in other spheres of public life. Lacking in substance and coherence, the industrial-commercial public sphere has to seek to endow itself with a veneer of legitimacy by appropriating aspects of antecedent forms of publicity, their residual discourses of acculturation, or older forms of cultural organisation.[92] An example here is the myth of origin of American cinema mentioned earlier, which borrowed from the melting-pot rhetoric partly to create an image of cinema in keeping with the bourgeois imaginary of America as an inclusive land of upward mobility. This discourse at once endowed classical cinema with a semblance of legitimacy, assisting in the monopolist producers' courting of middle-class viewers and their efforts to keep the censors at bay, while serving another goal of transforming all members of society – through associating the appeal of film consumption with Americanisation – into an ostensibly homogeneous, upwardly mobile nation of film consumers.[93] While in comparison, early German cinema sought to graft itself onto the remnant of the bourgeois public sphere by appropriating literary-artistic rhetoric of aura and high

[92] See also Miriam Hansen, "Forward," in *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[93] Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, 76-89.

culture, rather than produce discourses about the democratic art of cinema in the American manner.[94]

To apply the concept of the industrial-commercial public sphere's search for legitimacy and its inherent instability to the contemporary Thai case: the Thai film industry is engaged, simultaneously and often in a contradictory fashion, on three fronts. To maximise the consumption of cultural commodities by voraciously encouraging consumption and expanding its possibility further afield; to secure a veneer of legitimacy for itself in the eyes of society's culturally hegemonic force and guardian of official culture; and to accommodate the state's still authoritarian cultural tendency (co-existing with the drive to commodify Thainess). The attempts to institutionalise 'the Thai spectator' can be situated here within this dynamic of monopoly consolidation, and it is worth highlighting the specificity of their exhibition and textual features through some comparisons with the classical cinema of Hansen's study.

In the contemporary Thai case, efforts to integrate multiplex film viewing to a globalising consumerist culture do not rely on the classical narrative text premised on absorption in the film experience, but the institutionalisation of a textual form and viewing experience that responds to, and enhances, new bourgeois narcissistic sensibility. In the extratextual dimension, the multiplex viewing experience is institutionalised as the pleasure of self-recognition on the virtual 'world stage'. Strategies for doing so include the kitschily cosmopolitan architectural design of multiplex cinemas, or promotional rhetoric that emphasise them as highly suitable, safe, clean, fun places for families and yuppies alike, replete with all the trappings of privatised comforts. Most intriguingly, a significant feature of the virtual spatial mobility of the multiplex, due to its novelty, is the programming strategy of lining up films of a 'world-class' calibre – predominantly Hollywood of course – and releasing them more or less simultaneously with anywhere else. Moreover, the surface appearance of cosmopolitanism and global connectedness, deriving from the availability of the latest global releases at virtually the same time as elsewhere,

[94] Miriam Hansen, "Early Silent Cinema: Whose Public Sphere?" *New German Critique* 29 (1983): 164-71.

licences the film textual projection of Thai attainment onto that very same *sakon/*multiplex space. To put it slightly differently, within the setting of the multiplex as the Bangkokianised outpost of global mass culture, a given Thai film of a 'world-class' calibre can be promoted as one module among all films of a comparably international standard, all uniformly on display on the very same replicated world stage.

On this virtual world stage, an observation that the recent ghost film *Shutter kod tid winyan* (The Shutter, dirs. Pakpoom Wongpoom and Banjong Pisanthanakun, 2004), a hit across Asia, might be seen from the inside as too stylistically *sakon* – too reminiscent of the contemporary East Asian horror films – for its own good,[95] demonstrates the impossibly precarious line that all Thai films of a multiplex calibre must walk. They can neither be seen to stray too close to the apparently global; nor – for which the current crop of parodic *chao baan* comedies are being chastised[96] – can they display too local an affinity for a certain style of film or frame of reference, too plebeian a fondness for unexportable humour and stars.[97] The beauty of heritage films in this regard is their promise of appeasing bourgeois anxiety about attaining the correct degree of balance between the *thai* and the *sakon*. At the level of the enframed images,[98] the objects, figures, and set that fill the frame of these films of course

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[95] Siriwan Larbsombooranonont, "*'Shutter kod tid winyan' nang phi thai nai khwam pen sakon* [*The Shutter*: Thai Ghost Film in the *sakon* Style]," *Matichon Sudsapda*, 10 October 2004, 90.

[96] For an attack on the production company responsible for many of these hits, *Phra Nakorn Film*, see Nai Tieng, "*'Nam prik long reau' nang chao baan chao meuang mai kiaew!* [Not One for Urbanites! *Nam prik long reau - chao baan* Movie]," *Nation Sudsapda*, 24 June 2006. The writer adopts an amusing tone of sincere incredulity, wondering how on earth our *chao baan* could be swayed by them.

[97] These comedies emerged during the early 2000s. Striking for their visual gags and highly contemporary, topical verbal humour, they are a showcase for comedy stars who first rose to national fame through television. Some of these comedians have stepped up to write and direct the films themselves. The most successful example is 'Mum Jokmok' or Petchtai Wongkamlao, who played key supporting roles in *Ong-bak*, and its follow-up *Tom-Yum-Koong* (dir. Prachya Pinkaew, 2005). After *Ong-bak* he co-wrote, directed and starred *Bodyguard na liam* (The Bodyguard, 2004), whose title teasingly alludes to Thaksin 'square jawed' Shinawatra. Most recently he directed and starred in *Yaem Yasothorn* (Hello Yasothorn, 2005), in part a nostalgia-parody of the nostalgia-pastiche global festival cult hit *Fahtalayjone/Tears of the Black Tiger*.

[98] Again, I am adopting the terminology set out by Gunning. He argues that the narrative discourse comprises of three interrelated aspects: the pro-filmic, the enframed image, and the editing. The first refers to "everything placed in front of the camera to be filmed", in other words a level of narrative discourse which "embodies a series of choices and reveals a narrative intention behind the choices". The enframed image refers to the transformation of "pre-existent events and objects [the pro-filmic] into images on celluloid". This includes a whole host of aspects such as compositional framing,

connote Thai heritage; and in so doing they promise to transport viewers back into a lost past. But simultaneously, at the other level of narrativisation and technique, vision and hearing are mobilised for the pleasure of witnessing the attainment of an aesthetic state comparable to anywhere else more 'advanced' than Thailand. Through the high-production value, mode-retro look; or to put it more precisely as the next chapter discusses, in adopting an aesthetic mode substantially describable according to Fredric Jameson's terminology of the "nostalgia film",[99] heritage films stake their claim to quality as the Thai mastery of one of the most ostensibly global, and visibly 'refined' film aesthetics of the past several decades. This level of address, which directs the eyes and ears to form or technique rather than plot or the connotative content of the frame, aligns spectatorial pleasure with narcissism: arresting the eyes of the world through the adoption of forms, styles, techniques, or aesthetics that correspond to whatever passes, however superficially, for that which is the most visibly global.

More specifically, as the following pages explore, the case of the contemporary cinema reveals a specific kind of volatility inherent in the industrial-commercial public sphere. The indiscriminate drive of monopoly producers to expand consumption results in the proliferation of mass cultural goods and commodity experiences which have little to do with official Thainess, yet this co-exists with their search for legitimacy through appropriating precisely that discourse. To put it slightly differently, the inclusive drive to turn into consumers those groups of people otherwise excluded from or marginal to established forms of public life, entails playing on the attraction of displacing official Thainess, and occasionally of displacing Thainess altogether. Yet the simultaneous efforts to acquire a veneer of legitimacy depends precisely on returning to official Thainess, this time in an aestheticised idiom which ostensibly connotes the 'progressive' overcoming of hypernationalism. In constructing a new category of spectatorship less controversially

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camera movement, speed, choice of film stock and lens. The third level, editing, involves "the cutting and selection of shots as well as their assembly into syntagmas". See Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*, 19-20.

[99] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodern, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 16-25. And *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London; New York: Verso, 1998), chaps. 1 & 6.

wedded to youth, such subsequent efforts revolve around rhetoric of discernment, cultural uplift, and the entitlement to leisure of the ideal bourgeois family. Finally industrial producers settled on the powerful figure of *khon thai* [the Thai 'in general', the 'good' Thai] whose duty it is as loyal patriot to support those prestigious heritage films of *thai sakon* standard, which are poised for *sakon* visibility.

Such discourse at once appeals to bourgeois sensibility, accommodates the state's authoritarian tendency in cultural control (through the archaic law of censorship, for instance), *and* licences the bid to maximise film consumption across all plural categories of domestic viewers through the positioning of the homogeneously 'patriotic' spectator. In much the same logic as the respective myths of origin of the classical American and early German cinemas, in the Thai case what has been mobilised to try to maximise the consumption of 'quality' Thai cinema is the yoking of patriotism to spectatorship. The patriotic spectator becomes a category ostensibly uniting all viewers across the nation. Because this category entails manipulating the ambiguity latent in it, between cinematic-consumer subjectivity and political-nationalist subjectivity; at the level of reception, therefore, the theatrical release of heritage films can provide a horizon for the intersubjective expression of a particularly hallucinatory imaginary. In the following pages, my exploration of the hyperbolic discourses of public embrace of exemplary heritage films – expressed as the gratified delight in the re-appearance of Thai collectivity, the credulous investment in the endless promotional claim of seriousness of historical interpretation (whether the films themselves warrant this description or not), and the hungry identification of global admiration – poses an underlying question of whether this is the most potent sign so far of a middle class caught in the gap between its own Thai yet world-class self-imagining, and the dissipation of the historical conditions of possibility of its ascendancy.

CHAPTER 2. The *thai sakon* heritage film

This chapter situates the 'official' variant of the heritage film as the dominant contemporary manifestation of the ideal of the *thai sakon* film. It traces the mobilisation of that phrase, firstly, as a periodising term referring to Thai filmmaking up to the beginning of the Second World War, and secondly, as a discourse of Thai filmic quality that judges post-war *chao baan* films as aesthetically sub-standard. Through such manoeuvre, the chapter comparatively highlights the specificity of the contemporary *thai sakon* heritage film. This entails: a new fixation with visualising heritage and with marking this visual register as the bearer of post-hypernationalist progress; and the capacity to project, or license the projection of, the attraction of the world for the kind of Thainess felt to be 'of an international calibre'.

The *thai sakon* film

As a periodising category, the term *nang thai sakon* [the Thai (yet) universal film] positions early Thai filmmaking in the moment of bourgeois cultural ascendancy, occurring in the transitional period between late royal absolutism and military authoritarianism (that is, between the late 1910s and the late 1930s). Nidhi points out that during this period, with political defeat resulting in the weakening of the cultural presence of the monarchy, the emergent Bangkok bourgeoisie could not look to royalty as they had done to set the modern cultural tone, or more specifically, to provide an example as to the desirable mode of consuming and adapting modern mass cultural forms and fashions from Europe and America.[1] Consequently, during this period the small class of upwardly mobile commoners became instrumental in creating a whole array of commercialised, standardised cultural practices, which Nidhi situates as "the origins of the arts and cultural forms of the Thai middle class of today".[2] The most recognisable product of the period is the genre of music known as *phleng thai sakon* or *dontri thai sakon* [the Thai (yet) universal song or music], which

[1] Nidhi, "*Watthanatham khong khon chan klang thai* [The Culture of the Thai Middle Class]," in *Chon chan klang bon krasae prachathipatai thai* [the Middle Class on the Path of Thai Democracy], 61.

[2] Ibid.

adopted Western orchestral instruments and notation combined with the lyrical tradition of classical poetry. Significantly, the rehearsal ground for this music was the 'Hollywood style' Thai film musicals of the interwar years, which probably accounts for the subsequent application of the term *thai sakon* to designate early Thai filmmaking within the same cultural turn.

In Charnvit Kasetsiri and Wannee Samranwet's classification, the interval from 1927 to 1942 is designated as the period of *nang thai sakon*.[3] It began with the making of the first indigenous silent feature film by the pioneering Wasuwat brothers, *Chok song chan* (Double Luck, dir. Khun Anurak Ratthakarn),[4] and ended with the onset of the Pacific War, after which the public cultural terrain was reshaped by the military dictatorship's intervention and control; while the norm of shooting in 35mm gave way to the cheaper alternative of 16mm. In Charnvit and Wannee's summary, this period of early cinema reflected the broader (bourgeois and royal) elite desire to imitate and learn from the industrialised societies of the West. In other words, "this was the era of trying to be *sakon*/Westernised".[5] Accordingly, the filmmakers looked to Hollywood for stylistic and technical precedents.[6] The late Khun Wichit Matra,

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[3] Charnvit Kasetsiri and Wannee Samranwet, "*Phapphayon thai kap karn sang chat: Leuad thaharn thai-Phra jao chang pheuak-Baan rai na rao* [Thai Films and Nation Building: Blood of the Thai Military, the King of the White Elephant, Our Home and Fields]," *Warasarn Thammasat* 19, no. 2 (1993): 93.

[4] The Wasuwat brothers were well-connected newspaper owners, and pioneering figures who introduced up to date techniques and technologies to the 'studio' filmmaking of this early period. See Dome, *Kamnerd nang thai* [the Birth of Thai Films], (Bangkok: Matichon, 1996), 24-37. See also Barmé's book for the significant point about the proximity between the Bangkok bourgeois and aristocratic producers of early cinema. He emphasises that the emergence of cinema "was not a case of one elite displacing another, however, but a rather more complex process marked not only by competition, but also a significant degree of ambiguity, accommodation, and cooperation. Members of the royal elite, for example, played a key initiating role in the creation of the local film industry and, at various points, were actively involved in the running of the cinema business itself". See his *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand*, 43.

[5] Charnvit and Wannee, "*Phapphayon thai kap karn sang chat: Leuad thaharn thai-Phra jao chang pheuak-Baan rai na rao* [Thai Films and Nation Building: Blood of the Thai Military, the King of the White Elephant, Our Home and Fields]," 94, fn. 11.

[6] Shortly after the release of their silent feature debut, the Wasuwat brothers began experimenting with sound technology in the bid to keep up with developments in Hollywood, building their own type of single-system sound camera. In 1932 they released the country's first talkie, *Long tang* (Going Astray), then set about building a "Hollywood style" sound film studio on the outskirts of Bangkok. Upon the completion of their Siang Srikrung Studio, the brothers then introduced a new system for the division of crew labour in the manner of the Hollywood studios, with designated departments for production, cinematography, lighting, sound, set, and so on. See Khun Wichit Matra, *Nang thai nai adeet* [Thai Films in the Past] (Bangkok: Mulnithi Khun Wichit Matra (Sa-nga Kanchanakhaphan), 1998), 24-25.

who had written the screenplays, songs, and directed some of the Wasuwat brothers' musicals, recalled in his pioneering memoir of early Thai cinema that their aim was to come up with a new kind of melody, which would "neither be overly Westernised nor overly Thai, but somewhere between the two, yet stylish in the Westernised way [*hai kaekae baeb farang*]".[7] The 1937 musical directed by him, and to which this remark referred, *Phleng wan jai* (His Sweet Melody), explicitly looked to Hollywood for visual reference and inspiration. Set on an imaginary island whose inhabitants don modern/Westernised clothes such as Hawaiian shirts, shorts and two-piece swimming costumes, its the musical numbers were choreographed for the crane shots "in the style of Hollywood".[8]

In this era of trying to be *sakon/*Westernised, the basis of attraction of Thai feature films seemed primarily to do with how closely they matched the *sakon/*Hollywood (and secondarily European) standard. In Jamroenlak Thanawangnoi's historical account of early Thai cinema, she reproduces a letter sent by a fan of *Phleng wan jai* to a film magazine, asking fellow readers to gauge the male protagonist's performance against the standard set by Dick Powell, John Bowles, Nelson Eddy or Bing Crosby. This fan also encouraged others to adopt the following general criteria of assessing the development of the Thai film industry: by measuring the performance of local stars against those of the American and British, but not the Indian, Burmese or Chinese.[9] Accompanying the notion vividly expressed here, of living up to the West, were the discourses of promotion and reception which marked indigenous feature films as national artefacts through the rhetoric of the fruit of Thai/Siamese endeavour. Dome's book on the production and reception of the first two Thai feature films includes an editorial from the film newspaper, *Khao Phapphayon*, which speculated after the release of *Chok song chan* that the film probably gained more fans than detractors, since: "it is the first Thai film made under Thai initiatives, and was speedily completed by Thais. If the film encountered some

[7] Ibid., 71.
[8] Ibid., 73.
[9] Jamroenlak Thanawangnoi, *Prawattisat phapphayon thai tangtae raek roem jon sin samai songkhram lok khrang thi song* [Thai Film History from Its Beginning to the End of the Second World War] (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2001), 169.

criticisms, these should be taken in the spirit of the well-meaning comment of one Thai to another".[10]

From this, one can begin to establish some basis of comparison with the mobilisation of the term *sakon* in contemporary Thai cinema. During the interwar period, filmmakers could convey their intention to emulate the *sakon*/Hollywood precedent quite respectably as a mark of quality; and their borrowing of the iconographic or aural features of various kinds of classical Hollywood films could be embraced as a mark of *khwam charoen* or the Thai/Siamese attainment of modern development.[11] In some degree of contrast, as the teen cycle demonstrates (see chap. 3), if certain films of the contemporary period display too slavish an appetite for 'imitating' Hollywood and Hong Kong visual icons and generic narratives, this raises the anxiety that the filmmakers and viewers are Thais who have forgotten their roots. Yet at the same time, the overriding criteria of a Thai film of national quality today remains grounded in the fantasy of attaining 'universal' prestige and visibility. Additionally, the basis for celebrating the fruit of Thai filmmaking labour as a national achievement in the present, is strongly conditional upon the textual connotation of Thainess as heritage, rather than the embrace of a whole range of Thai films that display the visual and narrative appeal of living up to Hollywood, whether the visual and narrative elements self-consciously connote Thainess or not.

Of the key films of the *thai sakon* period that do self-consciously connote Thainess, some illuminating comparisons can be made to those that do so now. The

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[10] Dome, *Kamnerd nang thai* [the Birth of Thai Films], 44.

[11] Although one should note another of Khun Wichit Matra's caveats, in a memoir fondly punctuated with memories of 'trying to be like Hollywood', that the wholesale imitation of *farang* ways was not desirable as such. In his ambivalent clarification, it was necessary to keep abreast of "*watthanatham farang* [Western culture]" so as not to appear outmoded, but crucial at the same time to adopt a selective attitude and establish correct distance from it. See his *Nang thai nai adeet* [Thai Films in the Past], 150. In a parallel fashion, the early twentieth elites were anxious that the photographic capacity of the film medium might be used to undercut their projection of Siam as civilised. This was the spirit in which the foreign ministry under the last absolutist monarch, Prajadhipok, decided against the request of the filmmakers Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack that they be rewarded for the global success of the film shot in Siam, *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness* (1927). Whilst the duo justified the contribution of their film as helping to promote Siam to the world; from the vantage point of the Siamese elites, *Chang* resembled films shot in Africa, and was thus in no way – as an aristocrat minister put it – "a propapanda to demonstrate the civilisation of the country". See Jamroenlak, *Prawattisat phapphayon thai tangtae raek roem jon sin samai songkhram lok khrang thi song* [Thai Film History from Its Beginning to the End of the Second World War], 60-61.

feature films associated with the military leader Phibun – *Leuad thaharn thai* (Blood of the Thai Military, dir. Khun Wichit Matra, 1935) and *Baan rai na rao* (Our Home and Fields, dir. Air Cadet Tong-In Boonyasena, 1942) – were intended to promote militaristic hypernationalism. From the remaining written records about these lost films, it appears that they did so by exploiting the medium's propensity for visual spectacle; in other words by connoting Thainess on the screen as spectacle of militaristic modernity. *Leuad thaharn thai* was made by the Wasuwat's Siang Srikrung Film Company at the initiative of Phibun, then defence minister; who ensured the support of the three armed forces in staging scenes of spectacular action involving canons, machine guns, bombs, tanks and fighter planes.[12] Sequences of the modern might of the nation's military were narratively framed within a love triangle plot, involving a navy man, an army man, and a soldier's daughter, all three of whom, in Barmé's description, "dress in modish Western fashions, dance the foxtrot, and drink champagne".[13] The *thai sakon* songs in it celebrate the soldier's sublime love for his nation, and in one case defines Thainess as love for "nation, religion, king and constitution". As Sakdina Chatrakul na Ayudhya points out, the addition of the constitution to the slogan reflects the manoeuvre of the military faction of the post-absolutist leadership to assert the military as representative of the nation, now defined as a constitutional entity.[14] Seven years after *Leuad thaharn thai*, the air force (who had bought a film studio) released its paean to 'the backbone of the nation', *Baan rai na rao*. Scripted by Khun Wichit Matra according to the plot template suggested by Phibun, now prime minister, the film modernises the image of rural farmers with *sakon/*Western attire, including boots, hats, and full-length trousers rather than the traditional knee-length pantaloons. And it celebrates the warrior-like heroism of the people in a narrative in which the farmer hero goes off to fight in an irredentist mission.[15]

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[12] Ibid., 138-42.

[13] Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand*, 244.

[14] Sakdina Chatrakul na Ayudhya, "*Phapphayon kap karn torsue thang chonchan nai huang wela haeng karn phlud phaendin* [Film and the Class Struggle During the Overthrowing of Royal Absolutism]," *Sethasat Karnmeuang* 7, no. 1-2 (1989): 27.

[15] Charnvit and Wannee, "*Phapphayon thai kap karn sang chat: Leuad thaharn thai-Phra jao chang pheuak-Baan rai na rao* [Thai Films and Nation Building: Blood of the Thai Military, the King of the White Elephant, Our Home and Fields]," 103-4. During his first period as prime minister, the

What will be striking to note about the contemporary heritage films, in comparison to the films of the *thai sakon* period, is the displacement of hypernationalism in the sense of celebrating militaristic modernity and the warrior-like Thai people who safeguard the nation's territorial independence. Instead, the dominant tendency displayed by the former is to connote Thainess as visual and narrative enchantment of royal aura, whether this is presented as the aura of the monarch's moral-Buddhist leadership, or the monarch as a divine guiding intelligence, or through enframed images aestheticising royal grandeur and taste discrimination. At the same time, the trope of the warrior-like people who embody sublime love for the nation now shifts to the spectacularisation of the people either as tragic, impotent warriors, or as an abstractedly peaceful force for good in a vulnerable land devoid of moral-patriotic leadership.

Another useful comparison might be drawn by making some reference to the only feature film from the interwar years still in circulation today, *Phra jao chang pheuak* (The King of the White Elephant, dir. Sunh Vasudhara, 1941). This mythological 'epic for peace' was made by the air force's film studio, but now at the initiative of Pridi Banomyong. The politician had been the leading civilian figure and ally of Phibun during the overthrowing of the absolutist monarchy, and served as the finance minister in the first Phibun government. But with the onset of the Second World War, Pridi became increasingly critical of the latter's hypernationalist policies and irredentist claims. Shot with English dialogues, *Phra jao chang pheuak* is set in the ancient land of Ayodhya,[16] whose hero Chakra is a young, peace-loving king with a twinkle in his eyes and a distinctly modern preference for monogamy, in contrast to the old advisors of his court and his buffoonish enemy, the neighbouring Hongsa[17] king (see fig. 1). As Charnvit and Wannee point out, in taking the unusual step of making an English-language film intended for international exhibition as Thailand came under the shadow of war, Pridi's aim was to introduce to the world his image of

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irredentist claim to French territories in Indochina became a central feature of Phibun's nation-building manoeuvres. Especially after the German occupation of France, the claim intensified and received widespread domestic support. See Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity*, 163-71.

[16] This is a reference to the kingdom of Ayutthaya. See fn. 39.

[17] The film calls the enemy king and his neighbouring kingdom Hongsa, though the reference point is Burma.

the country as a neutralist one.[18] The unusual conception of *sakon* underlying this film is worth emphasising. *Phra chao chang pheuak* was meant to contribute in whatever degree to drawing international attention to Pridi's political persuasion, by using film to introduce to the world an unknown land that subscribed to the 'universal' value of peace. The connotation of Thainess, or perhaps more accurately of the Thai yet universal value of peace, was political rather than commercial in its effort at addressing the free world. And in aiming to introduce Thailand to the world, it spoke the language of universality rather than uniqueness.

The heritage films of today differ from Pridi's project insofar as they embody the veneer of the transnational prestige commodity, whose claim to distinction is one of presenting Thainess in an idiom attractive to the global market. In enacting their Thai attainment of the *sakon/*global aesthetic standard, their textual mode of display and surrounding rhetoric of international viability license the fantasy of Thailand's attractive visibility on the world stage. The positioning of heritage films, as Thai films of superior national quality with an international standing combined, may or may not have anything to do with their actual exportability. No matter how heritage films actually fare in the international marketplace, they circulate domestically with the aura of being in the eyes of the world.

Before discussing how it became possible to imagine Thai films as an attractive global commodity, and situating the textual and extratextual features of heritage films within this context, it is helpful to refer to the mobilisation of *thai sakon* as a discourse of filmic quality, or a normative ideal (or term of prejudice) to discriminate among a whole array of Thai films actually made. The usage of the term in this sense, as a goal of heroic achievement and condemnation of actual existing Thai films, most likely emerged after the Second World War, when the introduction of the 16mm film stock to Thailand gave rise to a popular, rural and plebeian identified film culture proper. Its distinguishing features were the production of low-budget 16mm movies, which circulated largely in second-run, third-run or open air exhibition venues, and addressed the *chao baan* mass situated either outside of

[18] Charnvit and Wannee, "*Phapphayon thai kap karn sang chat: Leuad thaharn thai-Phra jao chang pheuak-Baan rai na rao* [Thai Films and Nation Building: Blood of the Thai Military, the King of the White Elephant, Our Home and Fields]," 109-11.

Bangkok, or, increasingly from the 1960s onward, as unskilled migrant labour to the metropolis. In Charnvit and Wannee's periodisation, the two decades or so dominated by the 16mm movies began in 1947 with the slow post-war recovery, and ended in 1970 when the norm of feature filmmaking shifted back to 35mm, as the popularity of Thai feature films shot in Cinemascope grew.[19]

Two things can be noted about discourse of the *thai sakon* standard/ideal emanating from this period. Firstly, *sakon* now meant keeping up with the technical industrial norm identified with Hollywood or European cinemas, primarily of shooting in 35mm sound-on-film, minus the previous sense of excitement in identifying Thai filmmaking endeavour with that of the path of progress. It became a melancholic battle cry of the minority of elite filmmakers who persisted in upholding the *sakon/*Westernised standard, under severe tax constraints,[20] in pursuit of their dream of industrialising Thai cinema in order to eventually break into international distribution. In 1962 Rattana Pestonji, the most important *thai sakon* filmmaker of this period, wrote a short article expressing the view that Thai filmmaking could not yet be called an industry, so long as the majority of its filmmakers continued to make 16mm dubbed films rather than adopting the 35mm sound-on-film standard, "*an pen sakon niyom* [which is the universal norm]". Concerning the widespread practice then of shooting in 16mm silent, then engaging dubbing artists to voice the dialogues and sound effects live, Rattana invoked the eyes of the world to highlight the threat of being seen to be lagging behind. He warned that foreign correspondents were filing reports expressing surprise and amusement upon encountering the "*laa samai* [behind the times]" local practice of dubbing the dialogues and sound effects live to the auditorium.[21] Related to this point is Charnvit and Wannee's apt designation of the post-war period as the era of *nang nam nao thaithai*: the Thai-style melodramatically

[19] Ibid.: 94, fn. 11.

[20] See Boonrak Boonyaketmala, "The Political Economy of Cultural Dominance/Dependence/Disengagement: The Transnationalized Film Industry in Thailand, 1897-1983" PhD Thesis, University of Hawai'i, 1984, esp. chap. VI.

[21] Rattana Pestonji, "*Utsahakam phapphayon thai* [the Thai Film Industry]," Thai Film Foundation (taken from *Khwam ru kue pratheep* magazine, 1962).

trashy films.[22] The phrase deliberately foregrounds the hostility the cultural and educational elites felt against 16mm dubbed films, now perceived to have fallen far behind the *sakon*/Western standard of stylistic 'realism', production value and technical finesse.[23] One of the most unfortunate legacies of this period of popular cinema was precisely the top-down antagonism toward Thai films, which endured long after the 16mm movies themselves had been forgotten. The 'tradition' it inadvertently left behind, of intellectual and bourgeois animosity against Thai movies perceived to be well below certain projected Western standards, provides a crucial context for understanding the claim to legitimacy of contemporary heritage films.

Thai films *go inter*

Between the 1950s to the mid-1990s, the international dimension of Thai cinema consisted in the occasional presentation of Thai films at international festivals or as part of one-off film seasons, and in a handful of co-production efforts with Hong Kong. The global exposure of Thai cinema as such occurred from 1997, within the setting of that notoriously indistinct category of world cinema. The 'discovery' was largely driven by institutions and agents primarily based in Europe and North America, who define world cinema partly by producing new entries into it. They are: commercially influential or critically well-regarded international film festivals, critics, academics, magazines, websites, distributors, exhibitors, and arts and cultural centres. Their investment in the category used to be largely on the basis of those who have an interest in sustaining alternatives to Hollywood, and in broadening the sites of alternative film cultures from the ones established under the category of European art cinema. But more recently, several antagonistic definitions of world cinema have

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[22] Charnvit and Wannee, "*Phapphayon thai kap karn sang chat: Leuad thaharn thai-Phra jao chang pheuak-Baan rai na rao* [Thai Films and Nation Building: Blood of the Thai Military, the King of the White Elephant, Our Home and Fields]," 94, fn. 11.

[23] For typical characterisations of this period as the era of escapist, unrealistic, and melodramatic films, see Boonrak, "The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand, 1897-1992," *East-West Film Journal* 6, no. 2 (1992): 182. Also Sujit Wongthes, "*Nang thai kap karn seuksa khong prachachon* [Thai Cinema's Role in the Education of the People]," *Sangkhomsat Parithat* 6 (1972): 114-20. In Dome's preface to his short history of Thai cinema, he refers to this antagonism in his 'confession' that as a teenager during the 1960s, when the *nam nao* pairing of the 16mm stars Mit Chaibancha and Petchara Chaowarat was at its height, he stopped watching Thai films altogether. See his *Prawat phapphayon thai* [Thai Film History] (Bangkok: Ong karn kha khong khurusapha, 1990), preface.

emerged: those inclined to preserve the category as one which resonates with the traditions of counter, critical or third cinema; those who associate the term primarily with the distributional and promotional category of the commercially viable auteur; and those keen to 'break out of the art cinema ghetto' by embracing genre films of a mass commercial nature from around the world. The discovery of New Thai Cinema occurs within such a complex web of discursive and institutional practices.

Its emergence within this setting came with two debuts, Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Fun Bar Karaoke* (1997), which was invited to Berlin 1997 in the International Forum of Young Cinema section, and premiered there before moving onto other festivals worldwide, resulting in a limited release in Bangkok. While Nonzee Nimibutr's *2499 anthaphan khrong meuang* (Dang Bireley and the Young Gangsters, 1997) was invited to Vancouver and other festivals after its record-breaking success in the domestic market. The basis of these festivals' interest was in their 'new look' accomplishments, combining certain themes or iconographies that looked 'Thai' with a highly familiar aesthetic sensibility. In Nonzee's case, it was the combination of fifties Americana and retro Bangkok images, Buddhist with Hong Kong gangster iconographies. In Pen-ek's case, it was his reworking of the amusingly allusive aesthetics of the American indie films, the Wong Kar Wai inspired, generically melancholic Bangkok cityscape, combined with the retrochic interior and the theme of superstition.

The momentum of discovery gathered in 1999, beginning with a Thai Crime Films programme at Rotterdam, which featured Nonzee's debut in its selection. Later in the year his follow-up, *Nang Nak* (1999), broke more box-office records at home, resulting in invitations to several international film festivals such as Pusan and London. In 2000, Apichatpong's Hubert Bals funded *Dokfah nai mue marn* (Mysterious Object at Noon, 1999) premiered at Rotterdam, which also awarded a prize to *Nang Nak*. At Toronto the same year, the Fripresci prize went to the Bangkok based, Hong Kong born Oxide Pang's *Petchakhart ngieb antarai* (Bangkok Dangerous, 2000), co-directed with his twin brother. In 2001 Wisit Sasanatieng's debut *Fahtalayjone*/Tears… was invited to Cannes' Un Certain Regard section, where it caught much press attention for its stylistic virtuosity, as well as for being

the first Thai film invited to the festival. At this point, festivals associated with a special interest in East Asian cinemas simultaneously drew attention to their Thai discovery by programming showcase sections of the 'spotlight on (new) Thai cinema' variety. Pusan for instance produced a special booklet in 2001 called *Bangkok Express: Close Encounter with New Thai Films*, to accompany its Focus On Thailand section. Developments such as these encouraged distributors in Europe and America, initially those with an established art film niche, along with a broader range of distributors in the Asia Pacific, to snap up Thai films with festival exposure. Using the UK market as an example, that year ICA Projects released *Satree lek*/The Iron Ladies at its London venue, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA),[24] while Pathé quickly followed with *Fahtalayjone*/Tears...

From 2002 onward, a division began to emerge more clearly between Thai films that circulate internationally via festival invitations addressed to auteurs, subsequently gaining distribution in art cinema venues, and those that circulate in what might be called the transnational multiplex circuit. The first category applies primarily to the films of Apichatpong and Pen-ek. The former won his first prize from Cannes in 2002 with *Sud saneha* (Blissfully Yours, 2002), followed by his major Cannes success, *Sat pralad*/Tropical Malady. On the strength of its Jury Prize, ICA Projects released *Sat pralad*/Tropical Malady at its venue in 2005 as part of a complete season of Apichatpong's films; some of which soon cropped up in the film programme at Tate Modern. Pen-ek's profile in the UK art cinema market was given a substantial boost in 2004 with the promotion and distribution of his *Reuang rak noi nid mahasarn* (Last Life in the Universe, 2003) – regarded as his breakthrough film as a 'world cinema auteur' – by an established art film distributor, Artificial Eye. His 2006 release, *Kham phiphaksa mahasamut* (Invisible Waves), premiered in Berlin; where it screened in competition for the Silver Bear. Apart from Apichatpong and Pen-ek, a subsidiary strand in this mode of international circulation must also be

[24] With the ICA's decision to buy this lowbrow *kathoey* comedy, it circulated in London within an exhibition context still partially structured by the residual values of artistic and cultural cinemas. For an analysis of *Satree Lek*/The Iron Ladies' anomaly in this respect see May Adadol Ingawanij and Richard Lowell MacDonald, "The Value of an Impoverished Aesthetics: *The Iron Ladies* and Its Audiences," *Spectator: The University of Southern California Journal of Film and Television Criticism* 24, no. 2 (2004).

mentioned. This is the recent exposure of non-industrial, video or digital documentaries, experimental and short films, at (mostly) specialised or less commercialised international festivals, and often after their premiere in the Thai Short Film and Video Festival in Bangkok. A leading example here is the profile of Thunska Pansittivorakul, which grew beyond the Bangkok independent scene after his documentary, *Happy Berry* (2004), won a prize from a documentary festival in Taiwan. Meanwhile, a more explicitly mass commercial strand of international distribution has also emerged, one less reliant for this reason on festival acclaim and critical classification of the auteurist sort than on generic appeal. This was the pattern of success of the Hong Kong martial arts inspired, *muay thai* action comedy, *Ong-Bak*. In the UK market, it was released in multiplexes nationwide by Contender Releasing, a distributor with a niche in Asian action movies.

The relevant points to emphasise here concern the dissonant nature of the traffic between the global discovery of a minority of Thai films within the discursive and institutional rubric of world cinema, whether these are of the art cinema or multiplex oriented variety; and the responses in Thailand itself, or more specifically, within the film industry and the bourgeois media, to the world's interest in Thai films. Understandably, given that the interval in question is one of a nascent encounter – characterised by a two-way inadequacy of knowledge about each other – all kinds of guessing games went on. The film world, especially around the millenium, was not quite sure what it would find in Thai cinema. Film studios and directors in Thailand were hedging their bet as to which kind of Thai films the *sakon/*global market would find attractive. The picture is rendered more hazy still by the fact that global discovery was not facilitated by mediators with specialised knowledge about Thailand and its film cultures. Unlike the successes of New Iranian Cinema or New Korean Cinema, no Thai institutions were in place to introduce a body of Thai films to international festivals, or to produce publications advocating certain films or filmmakers as being of substantial artistic interest, or to help promote internationally aspiring Thai filmmakers through such concrete strategies as funding the costs of

subtitles and subsidising travel.[25] Furthermore, as indicated earlier, there is little that could count as a tradition of visible global distribution and exhibition of Thai cinema. Whether this is of the kind created by filmmakers occupying a cosmopolitan place in the modernist or avant-garde nexus connecting them to Europe, America, or Asia, either through film educational pilgrimage or a history of colonisation, or mass commercial circulation facilitated by diasporic movement. The situation, then, is one in which international festivals, distribution agents with a special expertise or interest in East Asian films, such as Fortissimo Films, and a handful of East Asian cinema specialists situated in the West, such as Tony Rayns, undertook the function of discovering Thai cinema according to the often antagonistic criteria set out above. And especially prior to the discovery of *Ong-Bak*, they did so partly through adapting the pre-existing New Cinema signifier that had already been effective in championing a body of films made outside of the West as important new contributions to world cinema. The loose phrase New Thai Cinema came into circulation to 'unite' such perceived auteurs as Nonzee, Wisit, Pen-ek and Apichatpong – the latter somewhat awkwardly placed in this company given that he did not emerge from advertising as they did, and is aesthetically blazing a very different trail. It should not be taken, then, as a term which emerged to capture the specificity of a distinctive film movement; for instance to designate a small group of filmmakers of the same generation engaged in aesthetic revolt, symbolic cinematic patricide, or the radical filmic return to repressed aspects of the past. (As was the case with New Chinese Cinema or New Taiwanese Cinema, which heralded the turn toward discovering the cinemas of the Asia Pacific in recent decades.) But it is a category uttered from the outside, as either an initial rangefinder expressed in the hope of finding a shared project among well-made Thai film debuts at the onset of or immediately after the economic crisis, or a promotional shorthand to claim the appeal of newness of certain Thai films of this interval,

[25] It was only 2005 that the culture ministry has begun to suggest setting up a film promotion agency, styled after the South Korean model, to fund 'independent' films, encourage film education, and help promote Thai films internationally. But to date no systematic measures have been applied, while the overriding power of a ministry with an anachronistic view of Thai culture might present some obstacles to the effective functioning of an agency of this sort. See "*Thai Film Promotion Agency khwamwang mai khong wongkarn nang thai nai mue krasuang wattthanatham* [the Thai Film Promotion Agency: New Hope for Thai Cinema in the Hands of the Ministry of Culture]," *Bioscope*, October 2005.

without needing to specify in too great a detail what unite them and precisely what shared intervention the filmmakers could be said to make.

Relayed back to Thailand, such eruption of the film world's interest in Thai cinema produced a novel kind of Thai global visibility. It was an interest which emerged unsolicited; unlike the promotion of mass tourism, it was not the result of a systematic campaign to sell a reductively pleasurable Thailand to the world. Nor, unlike Pridi's film project, or the aspiration of elite 35mm filmmakers of the military authoritarian period, did such interest emerge in response to the hopeful attempts to introduce Thailand to the world through the film medium. Relayed around the globalised setting of international film festivals, the rapid and simultaneous manner in which 'the circuit' suddenly took an interest in Thai cinema endowed it with intense, unanticipated and on the whole complimentary visibility. To this extent, what has often been domestically called the *go inter* golden moment of Thai cinema contrasted with the self-referential investment elsewhere in the idea of Thailand's achievements on the world stage through its beauty queens, boxing heroes, or love of its current monarch. At the same time, curiosity about Thai films from a journalistic, specialist, cinephile, or casual vantage point, or the entrepreneurial optimism of festival programmers and distributors – the upbeat approach that accompanied the search for the next big artist or the next blockbuster – differed from other kinds of 'unsolicited' flow perceived to be an affront or a threat. The eagerness of agents of world cinema to discover and promote good Thai films provided a welcome contrast to those cross-border currents of a more ominous or 'tarnished' nature, such as the traffic of Thai women as sex workers and brides, the world-famous feminised beauty of its *kathoey*, transnational capital and finance movement, the intervention of international monetary bodies during the economic crisis, and unflattering reports about Thai politics. This then was the overriding context in which global interest in contemporary Thai films circulated back to Thailand, to merge with, or be distorted by, pre-existing imaginary of the desirable degree of proximity or distance between the *thai* and the *sakon*. What sort of patterns emerged?

Almost inevitably, the differentiated kinds of *sakon* – global cinephile or global market – interest in a range of Thai films tend to be collapsed by the

investment in the desirability of 'our Thai films', as expressive of 'our Thai culture'. In the projection of some, as the embrace of *Hoam rong* indicates, heritage films constitute the exemplary body of 'national films' that command interest on the world stage, or that merit such visibility on the basis of their display of Thai tradition. In comparison, a more critical line of response expresses disquiet at the reification of Thainess apparent in heritage films, whilst assuming nonetheless the necessity of doing so for profitable cultural commodification.[26] In this strand of response to Thai cinema's global visibility, the possibility that Thai films circulate on the basis of their 'non-national', generic appeal, or due to the director's individualistic image as a 'non-national' auteur, tend to be discounted for the notion that it is national-cultural distinctiveness that carries them globally, whether this is defined positively as representations of Thainess, or negatively as its reification. In the first case, the investment in the notion that the world is, or ought to be, drawn to Thai films as expressive of 'good Thai culture', explains the wry edge of the newspaper report highlighting the 'shock' that *Hoam rong* found few international distributors despite its domestic success. The peg of this article was to convey the 'truth' that what the international market desires from Thailand are, not 'our good films', but ghost, monster and action films that happen to be made in Thailand.[27]

Another side effect of *go inter* visibility, which has had an especially decisive impact on the domestic circulation of heritage films, is to encourage the generalised sense of satisfaction that certain kinds of Thai films must now embody the *sakon/*universal standard of aesthetic and technical finesse. As mentioned earlier, what such visibility opens up is the possibility of projecting the aura of international visibility upon films which are legitimised from within, regarded as exemplary displays of national culture, irrespective of their actual prospect of global critical acclaim or exportability. In this sense, one unanticipated upshot of the visibility of Thailand in the eyes of world cinema has been to facilitate the institutionalisation of

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[26] The columnist who goes by the penname of Jang Bai Teuy, for instance, cautioned filmmakers in 2001 against abandoning contemporary stories, but half-concedes that perhaps clichéd filmic images of *khwampenthai* "might be a selling point in the international market, drawn to local attractions." See "*Truad thaew kongthap nang thai me arai 'mai' nai karn khud khong 'kao'* [Inspecting the Thai Film Rank: What's 'New' in Digging up the 'Old'?]," *Krungthep Thurakij*, 4 June 2001.

[27] "*Khwam jing khong nang nai meuang cannes: rao ja pai thang nai kan de?* [Movie Truth from Cannes: Which Way Should We Be Heading?]".

bourgeois spectatorship within Thailand itself, enabling heritage films to play even more intensely on the appeal of attaining the *sakon/*universal standard of quality, in a dynamic that addresses upwardly mobile, 'globalisation anxious' multiplex consumers. A fuller overview of the films' distinguishing textual and extratextual features can now be explored.

The official and unofficial heritage film

To give a preliminary definition of heritage films, one can begin by noting that in textual terms they have substantially departed from what the film historian Dome Sukwong once brilliantly termed the Thai cinematic tradition of *tingtang* [excessively unreal attractions].[28] Heritage films no longer share the fundamental textual premise of the *tingtang* tradition – amply evident in the older mythological, epic-action, or epic-fantastic films[29] – which consigns to irrelevance those textual aspects to do with fetishising verisimilitude of visual details. And if at all emphasised, this tradition has more often than not tended to refer to Thainess verbally, during didactic moments of the dialogue, rather than configure Thainess aurally and visually as aesthetically pleasing heritage.

Heritage films form a largely prestigious core within the more general category of *nang yon yuk* [literally, films that go back in time], or what is more commonly called in Thai-lish *nang period* [period films]. The latter, which are mostly but not exclusively literary adaptations, do not necessarily present a pastiche of iconic events and personages in the national biography; nor do they give spectacular new visual life to collective memories, whether of the official or unofficial kind, in the manner inherently characteristic of heritage films. In other words, one might describe as a period film Nonzee's *Jan Dara* (The Story of Jan Dara, 2001), his adaptation of Utsana Phleungtham's controversial erotic novel Reuang Khong Jan Dara; or Jira

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[28] "Khaphajao eng", "*Phra jao chang pheuak: saman phapphayon pheua chat thai lae manusayachat* [The King of the White Elephant and I]," *Nang: Thai* [Thai Film Quarterly] 10 (2001): 13.

[29] Some examples of these films, which are available on VCD (video compact disks) are: *Phra lor* ('The Tale of Phra Lor', dir. Ta-ngai Suwannathat, 1968), *Chula tri khoon* ('The Legend of Chula Tri Khoon', dir. Dokdin Kanyaman, 1967), *Jong-ang phayong* ('The Fearless King Cobras', dir. Noi Kamolwathin, 1971), *Seuk Bangrajan* ('The Battles of Bangrajan', dir. Anumas Bunnag, 1966), *Khun seuk* (War Lord, dir. Sakka Jarujinda, 1976).

Maligool's *Maha'lai muang rae* (The Tin Mine, 2005), adapted from Ajin Panjapan's autobiographical novel Muang Rae; or the ghost film *Dek hor* (Dorm, dir. Songyos Sugmakanan, 2006), based on an original screenplay drawing on the director's childhood experience in a boys' boarding school. By comparison, the following films can be more incisively understood as heritage films of either the official or the unofficial kind. The first category, which provides the focus for the rest of this chapter, lays claim to international quality by referencing national biography in the *sakon*/Hollywoodised (or transnational) aesthetic, and are emblematic of the bourgeois narcissistic sensibility. Exemplary films in this category are: *Bang Rajan* (Bang Rajan: The Legend of the Village's Warriors, dir. Thanit Jitnukul, 2000), *Yuwachon thaharn perd term pai rob* (The Boys Will Be Boys, The Boys Will Be Men, dir. Euthana Mukdasanit, 2000), *Suriyothai*, *14 tula songkhram prachachon* (The Moonhunter, dir. Bhandit Rittikon, 2001), *Talumphuk maha wataphai lang phaen din* ('The Storm at Talumphuk', dir. Piti Jaturaphat, 2002), *Hoam rong*, and *Thawiphop* (The Siam Renaissance, dir. Surapong Pinijkhar, 2004). In some degree of differentiation, the unofficial heritage films evoke collective memories of the kind that lie outside the realm of national biography. Chapter 7 explores in detail their mostly playful investment in, and energetic creation of, the fashionably retrochic form of *thaithai* audio-visual aesthetics. Exemplary films discussed there are *Monrak transistor* and *Fahtalayjone*/Tears of the Black Tiger. But this rapidly growing category also includes *Fan chan* (My Girl, dirs. Komgrit Threewimol, Songyos Sugmakanan, Nithiwat Tharatorn, Vijja Kojew, Vithaya Thongyuyong, Adisor, 2003), *Hua jai thoranong* (The Adventure of the Iron Pussy, dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2003), *Buppha rahtree* (Rahtree: Flower of the Night, dir. Yuthlert Sippapak, 2003) and *Cherm* (Midnight My Love, dir. Khongdej Jaturanrassamee, 2005). These strands – what might be called respectively the *thaithai* heritage film and the *thai sakon* heritage film – occasionally overlap, as in the case of Nonzee's first two feature films, *2499...*/Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters and *Nang Nak*, which appropriately enough are key transitional films facilitating the production of the body of heritage films over the past decade.

It is worth noting that the total number of heritage films released remains relatively low, but the regularity with which they have been appearing since the late 1990s, along with their aesthetic turn toward historicist spectacle and pastiche, is unprecedented. The most prestigious of these films, primarily *Nang Nak* and *Suriyothai*, commanded intense multiplex presence on their release. That is to say, the domestic legitimacy and visibility of (mostly official) heritage films tend to be in direct proportion to their 'bigness', or the relative scale of their budget, expectation of earnings, saturation of promotion, extraordinarily intense media profile (whether during the production stage or at the point of release), production value and aesthetic distinction of the seemingly *sakon*/Hollywoodised (or transnational) sort. In this respect, it is useful to highlight certain contrasts with the English heritage films of the 1980s and early 1990s, despite the fact that my adoption of the term 'heritage film' itself comes via one of the defining genres of British cinema of the Thatcher period.[30] Andrew Higson, in particular, suggests that this cycle of English heritage films marked their differentiation from Hollywood by functioning through a cultural-artistic rather than industrial-entertainment production method. They operated with a "hand-to-mouth production base", and adopted a self-consciously 'literary' style emphasising literary adaptations, authorship and the splendour of the upper class interior and landscape. Moreover, in exhibition terms they straddled "the traditional art-house circuit and the mainstream commercial cinemas in Britain".[31]

The Thai heritage films (especially of the official variant) make amplified gestures of outdoing Hollywood in a different way, by playing the latter at its own game in the domestic urban multiplex setting. Insofar as they are exhibited in sites geared toward the Hollywood or transnational blockbuster, *thai sakon* heritage films mark themselves as 'big films', and simultaneously the product of serious research and 'authorial' interpretation of national history, tradition and culture. In other words,

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[30] The main reason for borrowing the term comes from the following parallels between the British and Thai case. The heritage film emerged within a broader context of the proliferation of the heritage leisure and culture industry; deepening economic neo-liberalism leading to drastic inequality within the nation-state; and intense new right political-ideological re-articulation of national identity. And in different ways, the films conform to the aesthetic field of pastiche.

[31] Andrew Higson, "Re-Presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film," in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. Lester Friedman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 110.

they circulate as mass commercial products but are nevertheless endowed with an upscale, uplifting veneer. To facilitate their exhibition amidst the Hollywood or transnational blockbusters, heritage films almost invariably graft themselves onto a range of highly familiar genres. *2499*.../Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters lean on the action iconography of the Hong Kong gangster movies of the 1980s and 1990s, combined with the rite-of-passage narrative structure of the local teen movies. *Yuwachon thaharn*... borrows the buddy bonding hallmark of the teen movie to convey a wartime story of youth soldiers. *Nang Nak* is an adaptation of a very well known, much remade ghost tale. *Bang Rajan* draws on the action blockbuster's formula of maximising spectacular set pieces. *Hoam rong* relies on the sporting contest narrative structure. *Talumphuk*... transplants the disaster movie narrative to southern Thailand of the early 1960s. *Suriyothai* replicates the scale of the Hollywood historical epic, and borrows its organising principle of the family romance. That is to say, the generic features of heritage films are largely indebted to the major film genres familiar to viewers in Thailand from elsewhere, primarily Hollywood or Hong Kong films (with the exception of *Nang Nak* and some of the unofficial heritage films). But at the same time this element of borrowing provides a frame for displaying enframed images that aestheticise Thainess or allude to familiar ideas about the national past.

Before examining their intertextual claims to Thai/Siamese heritage, it is worth pointing out that heritage films, especially those of the official variant, are almost exclusively deemed to be appropriate for display on 'world-class' occasions. The time travel tale into the late nineteenth century reign of two kings, *Thawiphop*, was selected for the opening gala of the 2004 Bangkok International Film Festival (BKK IFF). *Hoam rong* was Thailand's entry for the Oscars; as was *14 tula*..., the first industrial Thai film to present as its explicit subject matter the mass uprising in October 1973 and its fallout. In the latter's domestic promotion, the poster claims that the film re-enacts "the world's first youth struggle victory", richly encapsulating the narcissistic fantasy of global distinction that heritage films play on. The telling shift here is of course away from situating the Thai uprising within the global context of many youth revolts. That the real uprising drew inspiration from the anti-Vietnam

War demonstrations in other parts of the world, as its success subsequently became a reference point for some of the Greek student protestors a month or so later, now became a claim to Thai exceptionalism on the world stage. Moreover, when official heritage films die at the domestic box-office, not an uncommon occurrence, they tend to be honoured with regretful remarks blaming the crudifying pressures of the mass market, and raising the scapegoat figure of a national mass audience unaccustomed to their standard of artistry or seeming seriousness of theme, research, and interpretation. In the case of the financially unsuccessful run of *14 tula*..., a strand of commiseration blamed the marketing department of the studio that funded the film for an apparently misleading campaign.[32]

The 'authorial' mark of distinction of *thai sakon* heritage films turns on the claims to seriousness indicated above: extensive background research, attentiveness to accuracy of visual detail, which bolster in turn a rhetoric of the newness of the filmmakers' 'interpretation' of the period in question. Much emphasis is given to the credibility of the director, situated as one who speaks from the position of the established film artist or the respected industry player, elevated to that status through the distinction of longevity within the unstable Thai film industry, or through a certain air of international viability associated with them. Accordingly, the factor of attentiveness to background research is directly associated with the director's own credibility. Here, the emphasis lies on the ability of the director – as an established master of the ship – to engage historians in the role of advisors, or to work with screenwriters with a special expertise in history, or to secure and operate the relatively large budget devoted to creating pro-filmic environments displaying verisimilar period details. For instance, the promotion of *14 tula*... focused on the unique credibility of its director, Bhandit, who had been a journalist during the 1973 uprising before establishing himself as a filmmaker, along with the unique experience and knowledge of its screenwriter, Seksan Prasertkul, who was one of the student leaders of the period (and is now a nationally known political academic), and whose personal experience provides the film with its biopic narrative frame. While the

[32] "*14 tula karn talad pha jon* [*14 tula* - Ruined by Marketing]," *MGR Online*, 17 October 2001.

promotion of *Bang Rajan* and *Suriyothai*, set in the eighteenth and sixteenth centuries of the Ayutthaya[33] kingdom respectively, emphasised the receptiveness of the background research to revisionist historical accounts of the period, with their filmmakers keen to demonstrate awareness of recent challenges by some historians to official nationalism's construction of the Burmese other.[34] In *Suriyothai*'s case in particular, the aristocratic director's venerated reputation did much to seal the image of the film as a so-called progressive, 'popular' filmic recreation of this period of antiquity (see chap. 6). Meanwhile, the comment of *Bang Rajan*'s director reflects a new degree of industry-led emphasis on visual details. In a promotional interview, Thanit asserted that the weapons used by the actors and extras are real; the setting of the protagonists' village in a forest clearing rather than a lush green paddy field is a more accurate recreation of the dwelling of *chao baan* some three hundred years ago. And with some self-professed bemusement, he pointed to the costume department's insistence on ordering the army commanders' costumes from Cambodian tailors in the interest of verisimilitude.[35]

A striking shared pattern of official heritage films is their style of referencing traumatic moments in public memory, situating the story world in a period associated with national upheaval, especially of the sort accompanied by the presence of powerful and sudden threats from elsewhere. Wartime Ayutthaya sets the stage for *Bang Rajan* and *Suriyothai*; the encounter with European imperialism during the late nineteenth century for *Thawiphop*, and in a more indirect vein *Nang Nak*; the Second World War for *Yuwachon thaharn*...; the politically violent American Era for *2499*.../Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters and *14 tula*...; and implicitly for most

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[33] The kingdom of Ayutthaya was situated largely in what is now central Thailand, and spanned the 14th to 18th century. Ayutthaya is also a term of periodisation, signifying the 'middle age' in nationalist historical narrative. As Peleggi summarises, "[t]his narrative maintains that the foundation of the kingdom of Sukhothai, in the mid-thirteenth century, was the first manifestation of the Thai nation. After the overtaking of Sukhothai a century later by the rival kingdom of Ayutthaya, the latter purportedly became the capital of Siam for the next four hundred years, until its fall to the Burmese army in 1767. But, the story goes, the Thai nation was restored to its greatness in 1782, with the foundation of the Bangkok (Rattanakosin) kingdom". See his *The Politics of Ruins and the Business of Nostalgia*, 37.

[34] This point is drawn from Sirote Klampaiboon, "*Bang Rajan ak khong adeet pritsana khong padjuban* [*Bang Rajan:* Axis of the Past, Enigma of the Present]," *Nang: Thai* [Thai Film Quarterly] 11 (2001): 91-92.

[35] Rungfa Limhassanaikul, "*Eek hon bon jor khong Bang Rajan* [*Bang Rajan* the Latest Remake]," *Season* 2000, 38.

of the films, the 1997 economic crisis. (This crucial though oblique point of reference also anchors many of the unofficial heritage films, most strikingly *Monrak transistor*.) Such references are conveyed through texts indicating dates and events of course; but more interestingly still is the turn toward citing iconic images signifying moments of national trauma, largely through presenting historical personages from that period, more often than not without narrating the events themselves. The historical personages are played by actors dressed and made up to a fine degree of resemblance to iconic images of them. These figures sometimes function in the narrative as characters, but more often than not they appear as cameos. Accordingly, *Talumphuk*, set in the early 1960s in a southern district razed by a devastating storm opens with a visual reference to the dictator Sarit. The opening sequence shows close-ups of an actor styled to a likeness of iconic images of Sarit as the military strongman. In his only appearance in the narrative, the burly figure with high cheekbones and a slightly droopy mouth, dressed in military uniform, addresses the devastated district of the film's title. *Thawiphop* similarly cites iconic images of King Chulalongkorn in an Edwardian suit, portraying in its closing moments glimpses of an extravagantly moustachioed actor, whose profile bears a remarkable likeness to the king. The protagonist of *14 tula...* was chosen partly on the basis of his physical resemblance to the young Seksan, and accessorised with a flat cap alluding to iconic images of the real Seksan at that time as the public face of the student-led uprising (see figs. 3-5). The pattern, in other words, is one in which a substantial degree of creative energy has gone into creating visually attractive intertextual enframed images, citing figures who are emblematic of the period through immediately recognisable pastiche of their portraits.

This aesthetic tendency situates *thai sakon* heritage films within the field of the "nostalgia film" in Jameson's terminology – a characteristic they share with *thaithai* heritage films. He points out that nostalgia films are "nonrepresentational", or connotative. In their "overstimulating ensemble" of signifiers of pastness, they refer not to the referential level of historical reality but to other imageries, other texts

– in other words to preconceived or stereotypical ideas about the past.[36] The aesthetic field of the nostalgia film is pastiche, defined in this sense as the visually fascinating collapse of historical representation into citations of the period style of a given generation or decade. Included also in this definition are voracious allusions to distinct historical periods, or the recycling of an array of period styles within the same narrative space. Accordingly, the focus of attraction of nostalgia films tends to revolve around instantly recognisable markers of period style, such as costumes, fashion, music, iconographic landscape or interior. In Jameson's argument, they are "historicist" rather than historical: they present visually fascinating spectacles which allude to conventional ideas of the past primarily for visual consumption, over and above representing historical dynamism and change. In their "image fixation *cum* historicist cravings", nostalgia films symptomise both the strength of existing appetite for the past, and the loss of the ability to reach historical referents and experiences, or to relate to present experiences as historically shaped by producing new aesthetic representations of them.[37]

We can now usefully return to the point about the 'authorial' claim to attentive background research of official heritage films, and observe that the product of such unprecedented emphasis on 'verisimilitude' are enframed images and pro-filmic environments that allude to other images, texts, and conventional ideas drawn from the dominant discursive field of official nationalist biography, rather than to narrativise history in the critical realist sense of representing certain episodes of the nation's past in a new light. For this reason, it is not surprising to find across several of the official heritage films sensorially stimulating tableaux of palace grandeur and royal aura. One of their defining images is the long shot of the golden grand palace spires reminiscent of the iconography of Wat Phra Keo of the Grand Palace, built in the late eighteenth century to mark the ascendancy of the current Chakri dynasty, and which now provides the setting of royal state ceremonies as well as a central tourist site. Bathed in glowing light, such an image evoking royal magnificence in *Thawiphop* and *Suriyothai* is already a clichéd one from Thailand's representation of

[36] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991), 16-24.

[37] Ibid., 287.

itself both to itself and to the world (see figs. 6, 7). Fittingly in *Thawiphop*, the shot is repeated in the sequence where the heroine, a modern, French educated young woman who cannot be at home in the present, learns that over a decade prior to the 'colonisation' of Greenwich Mean Time, King Mongkut (r. 1851-1868) had introduced to Siam a time system of his own invention – "our private time" – Bangkok Mean Time. Conventionally venerated as a king steeped in the knowledge of Buddhism and modern science, the heroine will shortly travel back in time to the land of his reign where she finds her true home.

Remaining with the examples of *Thawiphop* and *Suriyothai*, one can detect in their visual repertoire a symptomatic emphasis on the monarch's wisdom and morality. The former endows Mongkut with aura through the technique of the disembodied voice, alluding in the process to the myth of the monarch as a skilled, peace-loving negotiator in the historical mission of safeguarding Siam's independence from the imperial powers. (In contrast the agent of brute force is presented as the French, connoted both as sheer military might and lasciviousness.) In a key sequence of Mongkut's encounter with Sir John Bowring, the British envoy sent to Siam to secure a trade treaty, the king's 'cameo' appearance is framed in such a way that the actor's body is concealed from view, while the exceptionally low voice, uttering in slow, commanding English in a distinctly Thai accent, fills the frame as equal or superior to the English upper class intonation of the envoy. Seated high above ground in the resplendent throne edifice, the extreme high angle camera positioned behind Mongkut presents a view of Bowring, in the full regalia of Queen Victoria's representative, as a visually dwarfed figure. It juxtaposes such framing with long shots taken from the other side, displaying rows of Siamese bodies prostrate at the foot of the throne. The sequence situates the Thai spectator-subject accordingly, alongside the crouching figures listening intently to the exchange with the sense of the nation's fate hanging in the balance. Similarly, in the king's earlier cameo appearance, where the heroine prostrates herself on the palace ground along with other Siamese bodies as his procession passes by, the long shot framing the procession in profile against the palace wall cites an old photograph taken of him in the exact same composition (see figs. 8, 9). Alternating with cuts to close ups of the

heroine's face as she sneaks a look at the distant figure at the heart of it all, the sequence inscribes the Thai spectator in the same place as her enchanted gaze at a divine figure come back to life.

The same visual trope establishing the compact between the monarch seated high on the throne, the tidy rows of prostrate bodies at his feet, and the spectator inscribed as the enchanted monarchical subject, also recurs in *Suriyothai*. Here, a key sequence is the enthronement of the most righteous 'king of kings' in the story world, the peace-loving, moral and monogamous Chakkraphat, husband of the eponymous heroine. During the coronation, as he utters his solemn curse upon those who cause bloodshed to the land and bring harm to his loyal lieutenants, the camera zooms with stately rhythm out from the throne altar to take in the full majestic spectacle of the lines of bodies crouched at the foot of the throne in the most hyperbolic gesture of humble worship (see fig. 2). The king's face and body grow smaller on the gilded throne, then becomes barely visible, furthest away from the eye in the deepest spatial plane. But his voice fills the frame, holding transfixed there the crouching bodies, and by implication situating the Thai spectator-subject among them. As a lingering variation on other throne hall scenes involving what the narrative presents as morally lesser Ayutthaya kings – during which, significantly in contrast, none of them speak – the sound of this king's voice enveloping the image of subservient bodies below him evokes the moral magnitude of the most righteous king of all when compared to others in the story world.

The figuration of Chakkraphat as the Buddhist moral king is emblematic of the fixation with Buddhist iconography in heritage films; and through it, the connotation of a spiritually rich, rather than militaristically valiant, national heritage. In a key sequence where he is pressed by his allies to accept the throne, Chakkraphat as the Buddhist monk who is about to become king deliberates his historical role inside a temple. The framing shows his saffron swathed body in front of an altar of large Buddha statues, such that this living body appears as if it were one among the sacred, inanimate icons in the visual plane behind, the sombre lighting helping to strike an aura of transcendental righteousness. The actor's solemn demeanor, his steady gaze into the middle distance, and his long, authoritative speech, uttering in

the tone of pious detachment his moral duty to rule and restore peace to the kingdom, aestheticises his accession to the throne in terms of a moral rather than political victory. In a parallel fashion, in *Nang Nak* it is the figure of the monk who is based on a historical figure – in real life an important monk in the institutionalised Buddhist hierarchy of Mongkut's reign – who successfully intervenes to restore calm to a village thrown into turmoil by a ghost wrathful in her love. The montage images of a monkhood ceremony in *2499*.../Dang Bireley and the Young Gangsters, rendered visually attractive through extreme close-ups, quick cuts and the play of lighting accentuating the texture and bright colours of the objects in the ceremony, aestheticise the idea of Buddhism as the light of morality and the possibility of the young gangster hero's salvation. In *Talumphuk*... the visual register exoticises the southern setting, the mosques, the female bodies in headscarves and the pastoral landscape of the fishing village; but the narrative conflict establishes a conventional hierarchy of ethnicity and religion between the peace-loving (but misunderstood) Thai Buddhist boy, his loyal Sino-Thai friend, and their nemesis the psychotic Malay Muslim son of the district chief.

In their configuration of the Thai people, an implicit investment in 'de-militarisation' can be detected even among films that cite the very trope of the warrior-like nationalist people invented by hypernationalism. *Yuwachon thaharn*... narrativises the valiant battle of a group of adolescent soldiers, members of a movement styled after Hitler's Youth, against the Japanese invasion of southern Thailand in the hours just prior to Phibun's declaration of alliance in 1941. Euthana's return to this aspect of the past both relies on and reworks the hypernationalist precedent. The opening image cites the definitive icon of the soldier's sublime love for his nation in a series of low angle shots of a statue of a soldier against the special effects background of the fast moving sky; and the closing credits play to a famous nationalistic propaganda song composed during Phibun's leadership. The narrative draws on the rite-of-passage structure to portray the bond between boys of different classes and ethnicities, Thai and Chinese, established through military training under their father figure, the handsome captain who teaches them about comradeship and the manly style of love for the nation. In this case, rather than celebrating the people's

militaristic nationalist bond with the off-screen father figure, *Yuwachon thaharn*... heightens the pathos of the boys' defeat (and the captain's death in combat) because of the leader's sudden alliance with Japan. In doing so, it celebrates the boys' patriotism against the 'unpatriotic' act of the leader off-screen, even as the key motif remains the fascist-style low angle shots of the heroic soldier's body against the sky; and the narrative ends with the clichéd rhetoric, a familiar one from hypernationalist propaganda dramas, whereby the enemy surveys the ruins of Thai defeat but admiringly concedes the honour of the Thai warriors (see figs. 11). The displacement of the militaristic connotation of patriotism in *Yuwachon thaharn*... echoes the contrast in *Hoam rong* between the aesthetically discriminating royals and the fanatically modernising military. Here, the palace interior of the prince, the aesthetically progressive patron of the hero Sorn, is stylised as the desirable *thai sakon* style of architecture and interior decor, helped enormously by the warm lighting and colour tone. In contrast, the wartime sequences are conveyed through drab lighting and the grey colour tone, highlighting the unattractiveness of the army jeep, the army uniform, and the soulless decor of the office of the military commander.

In a similar vein, the Thanit version of *Bang Rajan* is adapted from a story that has its roots in the chronicles of Ayutthaya, concerning a group of villagers' spirited defence of their homes during the invasion of the Burmese. In the official nationalist narrative this story has been central to the assertion of the legacy of the Thai people's heroism in defending their homeland against the enemy.[38] Yet, as Sirote Klampaiboon points out, Thanit's version provides a differentiating gloss through emphasising the protagonists' attachment to their family-village home rather than the territorial homeland.[39] This dimension of the film might be approached as a bid to address a reading public that in the last two decades or so has come to partially recognise the anachronism of projecting the entity of the Thai nation-state back to time immemorial. A brief comparison with the 1966 film version, *Seuk Bangrajan*,

[38] See Sunait Chutintaranond, "The Image of the Burmese Enemy in Thai Perceptions and Historical Writings," *Journal of the Siam Society* 80, no. part 1 (1992): 97-98.

[39] Sirote, "*Bang Rajan ak khong adeet pritsana khong padjuban* [*Bang Rajan:* Axis of the Past, Enigma of the Present]," 94-95.

brings out *Bang Rajan*'s displacement of the hypernationalist concern to assert the bond between the mighty warrior leader and the valiant *chao baan*, as well as the celebration of the centrality of the latter in the successful territorial defence of Thailand.

In the 1966 version, the hero Thap,[40] a runaway soldier, first has to overcome disunity within to create a 'people's army', which in his conviction will put up a better defence against the Burmese than the weakened army of Ayutthaya. His success comes at the point where the muscular hero, played by the youthful star Sombat Methanee, is able to persuade two soldiers from his village, who had previously abducted his sister and her friend in the hope of luring Thap back into the army where he will be punished, to join his band of valiant men and women. The dialogues repeatedly emphasise the necessity of unity among the brothers and sisters of the Thai nation, and eulogise the men and women of the Bang Rajan village as exemplary warriors in this regard. In the key sequence where Thap travels to Ayutthaya to ask for a canon to protect Bang Rajan, the nobleman's denial of the request is framed in such a way as to deflect the possibility of narrating the elite's neglect of the people. Reasoning that the capital is more important than the village, and therefore has greater need for the canon, the nobleman nonetheless asks Thap to convey the capital's sympathy and appreciation for "our valiant warriors", and to let the villagers know that "Ayutthaya will be praying for them". The narrative ends with the defeat of Bang Rajan, but a defeat softened by the Burmese commander' acknowledgement that victory would have been the villagers' had they been better armed. More importantly still, the survival of Thap and his sweetheart, and the sudden appearance of the warrior Taksin during the very last battle scene, adds a strident note of optimism. The battle of Bang Rajan might have ended in defeat, but the future leader, with the help of the plebeian nationalists, will gain ultimate victory. In the closing shot, Taksin, who in history succeeded in establishing a new kingdom after the fall of Ayutthaya, conducts an impromptu marriage ceremony for the hero and heroine amidst the ruins of Bang Rajan's defeat, and assuages the couple that under him Thailand will be restored to its former glory (see fig. 12).

[40] The name Thap is a play on the Thai word for army.

In comparison, as Sirote emphasises, explicit verbal reference to the Thai nation is absent from *Bang Rajan*. The people's defence of the village, called Rajan in Thanit's version in a gesture of historical attentiveness, can be read in several ways: as the men's fight to protect their women and children; as the men and women's fight to protect their immediate community, or – as the Burmese commander admiringly puts it at the end – to "valiantly protect the land of their birth"; or as the sheer desperation of a traumatised people with their backs against the wall. Conflict caused by disunity within does not take up any part of the narrative; instead, as he waits outside the palace compound for Ayutthaya's decision on the canon, one of the heroes, Meuang, recounts in a flashback how Rajan's fortification was made possible by the influx of men and women drawn to this particular stronghold out of their common hatred for the Burmese. Unlike *Seuk Bangrajan*, the heroes' reaction to Ayutthaya's refusal is one of resentment. As In, who is about to become a father, reports on his return from the capital: "They refused to give us a canon, those Ayutthaya people. They might have offered to help us in some other way, but instead, nothing!" Resentment becomes resignation, as fellow villagers assure In that he had at least tried, and that without the capital's support Rajan will have to rely on itself. At the same time, the characterisation of Jan, the austere leader with the 'arcane-style' waxed moustache, as the hero who is quietly aware that despite his best efforts the village cannot hold out for long, adds to the mounting sense of impotence as the narrative advances toward the final battle. This spectacularly violent climactic sequence – rapidly edited with a dizzying array of camera speed, shot angles, and close-ups of gorily severed limbs – simultaneously situates *Bang Rajan* in the idiom of the transnational action blockbuster as it heightens the pathos of defeat of a valiant though doomed people. The sequence ends on a hysterical note of defeat. In and his pregnant wife, both fatally injured, stretch out their arms in the desperate gesture to touch each other at the moment of death (see fig. 13). The last man standing, Jan, falls to his death in magnificent slow-motion as he marches up to the enemy line for the last time; his brutalised body, shot through with arrows, is heroically enlarged by the low-angle shot but he cannot deliver the intended blow to the Burmese commander.

If 'Ayutthaya' in *Seuk Bangrajan* signifies a temporarily weakened elite that wholeheartedly entrusts the (plebeian) Thai warrior people to temporarily assume what under normal circumstances would have been its role of safeguarding the nation, what does 'Ayutthaya' stand for in the Thanit remake? The palace-capital of the story world is fascinating for its embodiment of contradictory significatory possibilities. Given the intense urban middle bourgeois dissatisfaction with parliamentary leadership at the time of *Bang Rajan*'s production and it domestic release, the weight of signification of the neglectful off-screen 'Ayutthaya' elites falls – not on the palace but on the weakness of national-parliamentary leadership in economic globalisation. This dominant level of signification addresses 'the Thai spectator' by acknowledging the urban bourgeois sense of frustration in the face of an inept, neglectful, or even 'unpatriotic' leadership that condemned to spectacular defeat a people assumed to be already united, valiant, but overwhelmed and rendered impotent by the new intensity and degree of penetration of hostile forces. In this respect, a parallel strand of contrast can be highlighted between the two film versions of the Bang Rajan legend. The Burmese soldiers in the 1966 version embody the 'attraction of the unreal' in speaking Thai and dressing in the comically stereotypical image of the bumbling Burmese in turban and sarong, an effect heightened by the invariably comical dubbing. But the 2000 version transforms them into Burmese speaking, splendidly uniformed, intensely violent fighters and amoral killers of Buddhist monks. This figuration of the Burmese warriors, signifying the magnified scale of external threats, simultaneously plays on the attraction of 'archival detail', the residual emotional hostility in the longstanding projection of the neighbour's otherness, and the newfound bourgeois anxiety about economic globalisation (see figs. 10, 14-16).[41] Yet, in spite of *Bang Rajan*'s overall address to the urban middle bourgeois – 'the Thai spectator' – through narrating the 'unpatriotic' neglect of the palace-capital

[41] In the interview mentioned earlier, Thanit explicitly suggests that the Burmese enemy figures might be read as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). He goes on to mention Bhumibol's famous speech after the economic crisis, calling on Thais to return to their core values and heritage of self-sufficiency. See Rungfa, "*Eek hon bon jor khong Bang Rajan* [*Bang Rajan* the Latest Remake]," 37. The Rajan villagers' stance of self-reliance can be regarded as a reference to the king's intervention.

'Ayutthaya', the possibility remains that the object of such criticism might be taken by viewers at face value.

A similar sense of impotence is conveyed by *14 tula*... In this case, the narrativisation alternates between the biopic element and the pastiche of the demonstrations of October 1973. The first aspect narrates the hero Seksan's flight from Bangkok after the uprising of 1973 to join the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), his eventual disillusion with the party's failing strategy, and finally his homecoming. The character voice-over, which situates the sequences of Seksan's own story in the past tense, highlights the character's mounting disillusionment in a way that does not challenge the consensus that this dimension of modern Thai radical history is a dead past. As does the primacy given to his character's point of view of the undemocratic instincts of the ethnically Chinese senior echelon of the party, performed as a stereotype of irritating Chinese aunties threatened by the handsome misunderstood hero, a figuration signifying here the authoritarian tendency of those in positions of power rather than any memory of left radicalism. On its release, a series of arguments blew up among the 'old left' in several of the Thai-language newspapers: the film was criticised for its singular focus on the Seksan character's point of view, and its reductive treatment of the real conflicts between the older generation of senior party members, most of whom were ethnically Chinese and loyal to its Communist Party, and the (then) 'new left' students who joined the CPT after 1976. Seksan and the film's director Bhandit hit back by accusing the critics of being 'dinosaur' lefties, undemocratic in their wish to preserve a party line of CPT memory.[42] This public dimension of the film's reception tended to veer into arguments about what really went on between the 'October generation' and the CPT, accompanied in some cases by short articles explaining what the film was 'trying to

[42] See for instance "*'Nam jim' an klai pen 'wiwatha' 14 tula songkhram prachachon ruem jak Thanet Aphornsuwan 'Yam Rawee' - Jai Ungphakorn* [the Dip That Grew Fiery: Arguments over *14 tula songkhram prachachon*]," *Matichon Sudsapda*, 22 October 2001. Bhandit Rittikon, "*Wiwatha wa duey khor thed jing nai nang 'Khon la jan'* [Arguments over Truth in '*the Moonhunter*']," *Matichon Sudsapda*, 22 October 2001. Seksan interview in Choowat Reerksirisuk, "*Mua 'Khon la jan' pen '14 Tula'* [When *The Moonhunter* Became *14 Tula*]," *Nation Sudsapda*, 22 October 2001. And references to the domestic reception of the film in Kamjohn Louiyapong, "*14 tula: ngao adeet khong karn meuang bon phaen film* [*14 tula:* The Shadow of Past Politics on Film], " in his *Nang utsakhanei: karn seuksa phapphayon naew watthanatham seuksa* [Southeast Asian Cinemas: Cultural Studies Approaches] (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2004).

represent' from the vantage point of those who had been through the history first hand. What is interesting to note is how the 'old left' critics of *14 tula*..., rather than the director, screenwriter and supporters of the film, were the ones prepared to discuss to the visual and narrative choices made to present Seksan's story of his personal disillusionment with 1970s radicalism. One of them pointed to the characterisation of his partner, which de-emphasises her public role during this period in favour of her private one as his lover and the mother of his child. Another raised the problem of presenting what still remains a nation's story of mass uprising, not through multiple points of view, but through so individualised a narrative technique. The following might be added to this grain of criticism: the representational limitations of *14 tula*... relate directly to the fact that it is above all an industrial product, more so than a Bhandit 'auteur' film or a Seksan testimony, whose legitimising aesthetic mode is the 'well-researched and verisimilar Thai film that all Thais must see', and whose legitimising ideological boundary is the idea of the middle class as the peace-loving agent of democratisation, who struggle heroically, and not always successfully, to protect democracy from authoritarian abuses of power and mass ignorance.

After the brief black and white recreation of the demonstrations in the opening sequence, the narrative begins with the hero Seksan intervening to prevent a dispute between a worker and an ethnic Chinese boss from breaking into violence. The hero chides the capitalist, and asserts that he himself is "trying the settle the matter peacefully". This becomes a motif throughout: Seksan's futile attempts to organise peacefully, and to democratise peacefully, against the odds presented in the narrative by petty figures within the student movement, the 'unpatriotic', Communist China-loving CPT cadres, the uncooperative female peasants, and the abstracted, unnamed established order off-screen. (Striking to note that the targets of the hero's frustration with the CPT and some of the peasants tend to be female figures, presented as those who clash personally with him and are individualised through the close-ups, while the peasant comrades loyal and trusting of him are all male.) In the jungle, the only episode when Seksan fires his rifle reduces him to a figure of fun, affectionately laughed at by the peasant comrades for mistaking the shadow cast by the moon for an

encroaching enemy. The figuration of the hero as the reluctant revolutionary and the obstructed 'peace negotiator' for democracy reverberates with the part of the film that recreates the demonstrations leading up to the toppling of the military dictators on October 14. As the days and nights of protest wear on, the narration tells of Seksan's increasing ostracisation from the rest of the student leadership, caused by their unfounded suspicion of his treachery. The violence occurs the minute the exhausted hero, stung by the accusation of his student comrades, steps down from the top of the bus from which he had been rallying and keeping the crowd composed. Seksan's peace-advocating style of leadership proves ultimately impotent as the agitated crowd slips from his control amidst the confusion, and in their panic 'provoke' further rounds of fire from the riot police.

If the level of filmic narration delivers what might be called a 'post-Marxist' figuration of the student leader Seksan – as the non-violent, nationalist hero of democratisation who is thwarted at every turn by authoritarian figures of power and an uncooperative mass – the visual register produces a commemorative pastiche of the chronology of the 1973 uprising. Here, creative energy has been exclusively channelled into creating pro-filmic settings and enframed images that refer to the most conventional manner of presenting the events during those few days and nights of 'count down' toward bloodshed – creating sequences that allude to iconic photographic images and news footage of the demonstrations. Real footage of the people flowing irresistibly en mass down the Ratchdamnoen Avenue toward the Democracy Monument now comes back to life, integrated into the story world with special effects touches such as a close-up of a piece of paper fluttering out of an office window into the historical crowd below, which flew from the table of the "uncle" who exists only in the story world. The students' real agitation on a stage in the courtyard of Thammasat University is recreated on the same site, with actors connoting the real student leaders of that period through physical resemblance and 1970s fashion, such as the 'peasant' clothes or oversized plastic glasses. The faded colour footage of a man wielding a baton in self-defence returns in black and white, touched up and cut with a close up of the fictional shots of smoking rifles, while the soundtrack adds a fictional voice of the man shouting at soldiers to stay away (see

figs. 17, 18). The Seksan character's voice-over washes above the scratched footage of the large crowds gathered to listen to the real Seksan or others speak. The singular trumpet soundtrack, a portentous pastiche of L'Internazionale fatally cleansed of its mass vocal energy, plays indiscriminately over the visual pastiche and real footage. The students' dialogues play as flattened citations of now anachronistic socialist or communist words, *sahai* [comrade], *jad tang* [organising cadre]. Real footage is made to occupy the same spatial plane as touched up footage and their black and white or colour re-enactments, edited without quotation marks, so to speak, as fragments seamlessly integrated into the pastiche of the demonstration in its countdown toward the bloody morning of 14 October. The ontological boundary between moving image captured during the real demonstrations and the allusions to them disappears.[43] The sum effect is to present, in the tone of blank commemoration, the visual fascination of a nation's abstracted advancement toward democracy.

[43] Compare for instance the look of *14 tula* with its nearest precedent, *Khoo gam 2* (dir. Banchong Kosalwat, 1996), released to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the uprising. In the last part of this film the narrative integrates real footage (much of which is the same as *14 tula*), but lets it run as distinct sequences rather than as fragments. The film occupies a different aesthetic field, insofar as it does not display anything like the voracious intertextuality of *14 tula*. The over lit, soap-style lighting, combined with the emphasis on the romance narrative between fictional characters rather than historical cameos, are indications of the distance between *Khoo gam* 2 and the energy channelled into fashioning the nostalgia film look of *14 tula*...

Fig 1. King Chakkra holds court in *Phra jao chang pheuak*

Fig 2. King Chakkraphat's voice fills the frame in *Suriyothai*

Fig 3. King Chulalongkorn in *Thawiphop*

Fig 4. Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in *Talumphuk*

Fig 5. Seksan Prasertkul in *14 tula songkhram prachachon*

Fig 6. Palace splendour in *Suriyothai*

Fig 7. Palace river view in *Thawiphop*

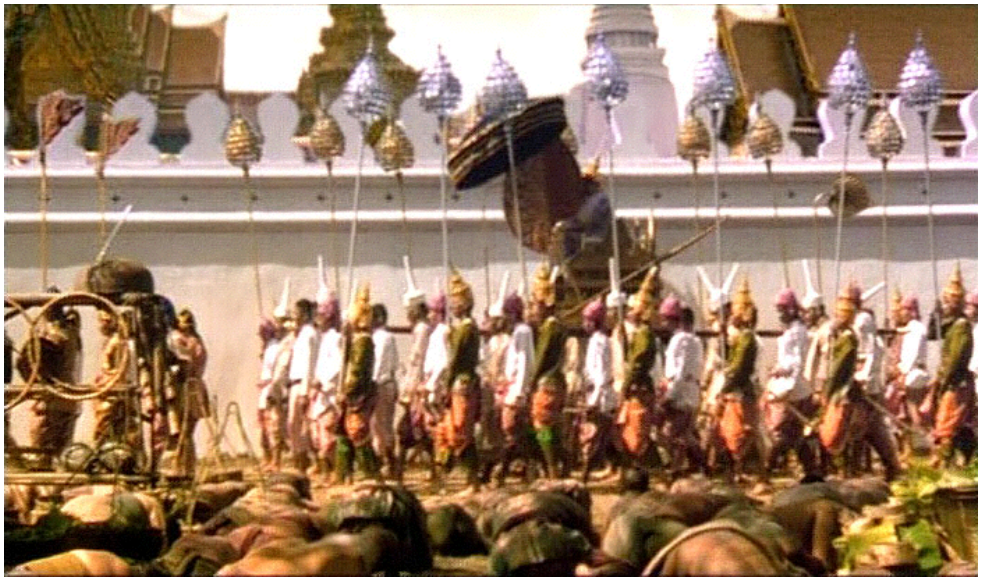

Fig 8. Procession of King Mongkut in *Thawiphop*

Fig 9. Photograph of King Mongkut

From David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2003), 173.

"They willingly sacrifice their lives for the land of their birth."

Fig 10. The enemy salutes the villagers in *Bang Rajan*

Fig 11. The enemy salutes the youth soldiers in *Yuwachon thaharn perd term pai rob*

Fig 12. The defeated hero assured of future victory at the end of *Seuk Bang Rajan*

Fig 13. The villagers' tragic defeat at the end of *Bang Rajan*

Fig 14. The Hongsa enemy in *Phra jao chang pheuak*

Fig 15. The unrealistic Burmese enemy in *Seuk Bang Rajan*

Fig 16. The verisimilar Hongsa king in *Suriyothai*

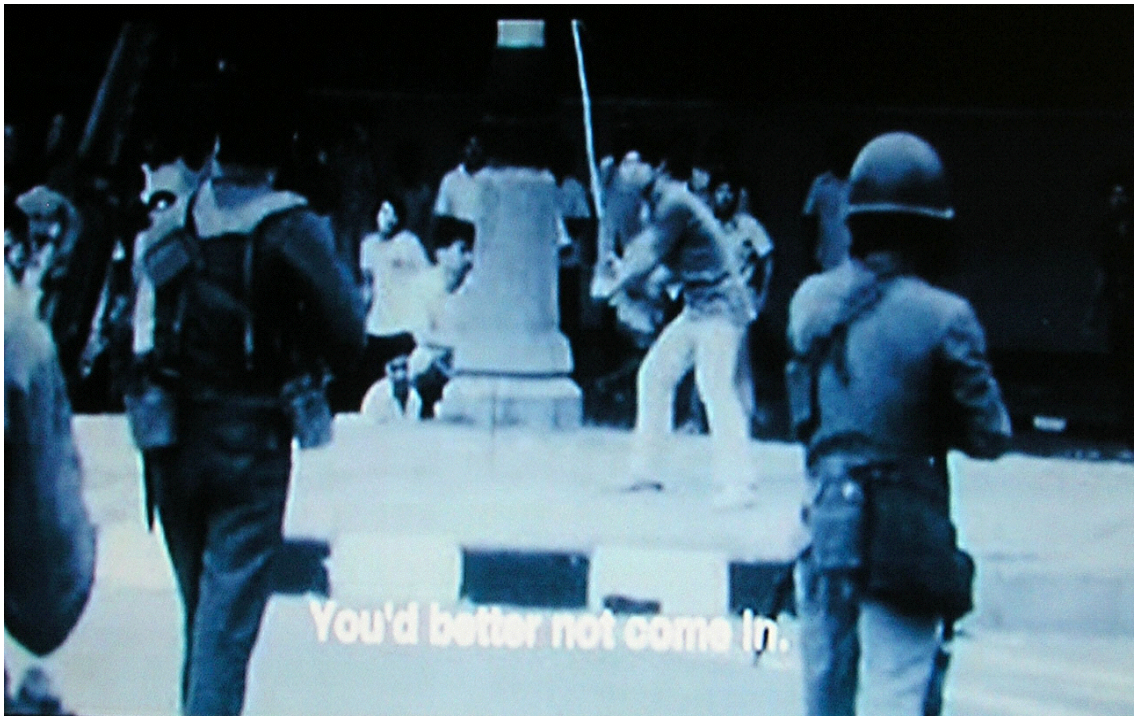

Fig 17. A man wields a baton in *14 tula songkhram prachachon*

Fig 18. A man wields a baton in the real footage of the demonstration

CHAPTER 3. Gentrifying exhibition: mini-theatre, multiplex, festival

This chapter extends the idea of the cinema as a public space of some sort, made by a specific mode of interaction with certain social groups over others, to the new milieu of the multiplex cinemas in contemporary Thailand.[1] Based in shopping malls or other densely populated, commercially active areas, these screens provide the physical condition of possibility for the resurgence of urban cinemagoing over the past decade or so. In 1997, the year of the economic downturn and three years after the opening of the first multiplex on the outskirts of Bangkok, the annual admission total to urban cinemas rose around four-fold compared to 1990: from 7 million to over 30 million, with gross box office take rising by nearly the same proportion to over 2 billion baht in the same year.[2] In 2003, with the exhibition market expanding at around 15-20% per year, that figure went up two-fold from 1997 to over 4 billion.[3] With the majority of multiplex screens concentrated predominantly in suburban and downtown areas of Bangkok, and only recently expanding to a small selection of large regional cities such as Chiang Mai in the north, Udon Thani in the northeast, or tourist towns such as Pattaya or Phuket, the multiplex boom has not only revived film distribution and exhibition; it has been especially key to transforming the image of cinemagoing into a prestigious part of Bangkokian culture. If in the period of

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[1] The chapter is partly influenced by Jeanne Allen's work on film exhibition in America. As she puts it, "the bond between film viewing and consumerism" during the early part of Fordist America was established through a newly gentrified and standardised exhibition environment. Allen emphasises how such factors as locating cinemas in shopping districts, the proliferation of national theatrical chains, and the introduction of female-friendly picture palaces, created conditions which fostered "increasing, and more explicit, proximity" between film viewing and consumer behaviour. In a parallel fashion, one concrete manifestation of the effort to institutionalise a 'bond' between film viewing and consumption within the parameter of an increasingly consumerist economy in contemporary Thailand is the physical proximity of film theatrical exhibition to those sites that symbolise the ascendancy of consumerism in the first place: the multiplex in or around shopping malls. See her article "The Film Viewer as Consumer," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 5, no. 4 (1980): 482, 486.

[2] Katharine Couling and Karsten-Peter Grummitt, *Cinemagoing Asia* (Leicester: Dodona Research, 1998), 87, 91. The figures cited from this source are drawn from data collected in the conventional fashion, which cover only the major markets of Bangkok, the surrounding suburbs, and major provinces. (Effectively this means that the box-office gross figure for a given film overwhelmingly reflects its multiplex performance.) The nationwide market as a whole is divided into eight distribution regions, which apart from the Bangkok and the surrounding provinces are served by distribution agents (commonly known as *sai nang*) who provide film packages to exhibitors.

[3] See "Global Cinema Exhibition," *Screen Digest*, September 2004, 271, 276.

Barmé's historical narrative, the new cinemas of the late absolutist period were inclusively priced; in this contemporary scenario, what stands out are the attempts of leading multiplex chains, primarily EGV, Major Cineplex and SF Cinema City, to anticipate the new film consumer through a pricing structure that tends to be on the exclusivist side, as well as through 'world-class' promotional rhetoric. In Nidhi's article, popular post-Second World War Thai films emerged in relation to their *chao baan* public, whereas the manufacturing of urban spectatorship in the contemporary interval quickly led to the emergence of an industrial Thai film aesthetic and marketing practices addressed to the culturally Bangkokian consumers.

Dens of youth delinquency

To get a better picture of the specific manner in which urban multiplex operators have been trying to transform cinemagoing into an ostensible part of bourgeois culture, a few words are needed about their prototype, the mini-theatres situated in shopping malls, and especially how they came to be regarded as sub-standard.

During the second half of the 1980s, small, multi-screened cinema theatres sprang up in more or less *ad hoc* fashion to compensate for the fast crumbling stand-alone picture palaces that were built during the interwar and post-war years. In Bangkok especially, exhibitors blamed the demise of these cinemas on the combination of the traffic problem, video, and the double-digit economic growth that placed a premium on land value. Watching video or cable and satellite television at one's own leisure in one's chosen space, whether inside the home or outside in bars and cafes, became preferable to braving the traffic and arriving at downtown cinemas without sufficient parking space,[4] and perhaps all the more so as video piracy was making speedily available the newest foreign film releases. In the city centre especially, the land value of the old picture palaces rocketed far above their day-to-day takes. As a result, one by one these buildings, mostly relics of post-Second World War modernisation with their dramatically rectangular facades and clean modernist lines, were abandoned to make room for more lucrative ventures such as shopping

[4] Monrudee Tadaamnuaychai, *Phattanakarn lae thidthang khong rong phapphayon rabob multiplex nai prathet thai* [A Development Study of Multiplex Theatres in Thailand] (MA Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1996), 45.

centres, apartment blocks or car parks.[5] Of the older cinemas that still remain standing today, only the ones with connections to the Crown Property Bureau can boast an afterlife to echo their past, such as the recently restored Chalerm Krung: the country's first modern, air-conditioned cinema built at the last absolutist king's behest in the early 1930s.

In order to plug the gap that caught most exhibitors and distributors unawares, mini-theatres were built into existing shopping malls, or cropped up as hastily converted additional screens to the remaining stand-alone cinemas. They could boast neither of the resplendent architectural and technological touches of the picture palaces, nor of the myriad 'world-class' promises of their successor the multiplex. Since the screens were fitted to venues that had not been designed for that purpose, tucked away in the back of shopping malls for instance, mini-theatres soon acquired a somewhat tarnished reputation. Monrudee Thadaamnuaychai's highly informative dissertation on the emergence of the multiplex in Bangkok, which includes interviews with the leading exhibitors of the mid-1990s, says that most of the complaints against the mini-theatres were to do with their sub-standard appearance, and their air of disorderliness, ranging from the small screen size to poor auditorium seating layout or sound insulation, to the commonly cited concern of fire hazard.[6] Echoing the ire of middle class Bangkok cinemagoers earlier in the century,[7] respectable society

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[5] Dome and Sawasdi, *A Century of Thai Cinema* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 19-23. In Dome's estimation, the incorporation of television and video into people's daily lives during this decade, coupled with the impact of the land boom, together wiped out more than seven hundred cinemas across the country and made obsolete an even higher number of open-air screens. During the 1970s open-air cinema entrepreneurs had already exhausted each other's capacity competing to provide the biggest screens. Now they switched to investing in gigantic sound systems to attempt to underscore the superiority of the entertainment they were offering from the new competitor, the audio-visually modest television screen. See Ibid., 14, 25.

Once video expanded out of the metropolis, compounding television's saturation nationwide from the 1980s, the older pattern of film distribution and exhibition in provincial or rural areas became severely disrupted. A small survey of the film business in Thailand, conducted for the first half of the 1980s with the support of the Thai Motion Pictures Producers Association, brings this fact into sharp relief. Its author the Thai film academic Jamroenlak reported that the distribution agents who responded to her survey pointed to video immediately as their biggest threat, with some calling for the government to crackdown specifically on the piracy of Thai films. Jamroenlak Tanawangnoi, *Turakij phapphayon thai* [The Thai Film Business] (Faculty of Mass Communication Thammasat University, 1986), 42, 27.

[6] Monrudee, *Phattanakarn lae thidthang khong rong phapphayon rabob multiplex nai prathet thai* [A Development Study of Multiplex Theatres in Thailand], 46-47, 52-55.

[7] Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand*, 70-73.

frowned upon them as unregulated, unsafe venues. More interestingly, mini-theatres acquired notoriety as darkly illuminated spaces populated by imagined delinquents, resulting in the ubiquitous phrase describing them as *laeng mua sum khong yaowachon* [dens of youth delinquency]. To this was often added other elements of horror, especially the projected presence of hoodlums on the lookout for lone women who went there.

Despite the general air of disapproval they generated, where mall-based mini-theatres were highly successful was in identifying new film consumers in youth.[8] This soon resulted in the resurgence of the teen cycle from 1985 (see chap. 4). According to one exhibitor's account, the proliferation of mini-theatres from the late-1980s also encouraged Hollywood distributors to increase their supply of films to the urban Thai market.[9] And they cropped up just in time to provide a platform for the Hong Kong action blockbusters of John Woo and Jackie Chan. The growth of mini-theatres explains why the total figure for urban cinemagoing was starting to climb steadily as the 1990s set in, and increased exponentially a few years later as the first multiplex screens opened for business in 1994.[10] Not surprisingly, the monetary if not 'cultural' success of partnering mini-theatres with shopping malls encouraged exhibitors to find ways of refining the formula. What became increasingly clear was that despite the seeming menace of traffic, video or cable television, metropolitan cinemagoing was a market waiting to be expanded, if exhibitors could cultivate a new, more 'legitimate' image for it. The charges flung at mini-theatres for being sub-standard, and seedy, suggested the potential for appropriately designed settings to attract regular mallgoers, turning especially those of a higher level of disposable income and cultural voice into cinemagoers.

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[8] Monrudee reports the comment of exhibitor Thanakorn Pulivekin that shopping malls were initially sceptical about mini-theatre screens. But they quickly came round to regarding them as one of the major attractions of any market-leading venture. See Monrudee, *Phattanakarn lae thidthang khong rong phapphayon rabob multiplex nai prathet thai* [A Development Study of Multiplex Theatres in Thailand], 46.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Couling and Grummitt, *Cinemagoing Asia*, 87.

Screens of world-class splendour: the Bangkok multiplex

Bangkok's suburban radius has been steadily expanding since the 1970s to accommodate the mostly new middle class families who either could not afford to set up home in traditional residential areas, or who wanted to move out of inner city parental homes into their own properties.[11] Over a decade later the suburbs grew larger through extensive highway construction, a continuing feature of the capital's landscape even after the economic crisis. During this wave of expansion, land developers built masses of private middle class residential estates in those suburbs connected to the city centre via the new highways.[12] A second wave suburban flight thus ensued, marked by the exodus of young wage-earning professional and entrepreneur families to the new commuter belt encircling the city.

Not surprisingly, the first multiplex was built in just one of these new large suburbs. The Bangkhae branch of Entertainment Golden Village (EGV)[13] is a ten-screen complex in the fantastically named Future Park mall, situated in the western edge of the capital. Its owner Vichai Poolvoralaks explained that the company decided to start up in this suburb because of the untapped market potential of its middle class residents: "*fang thon* [the west bank of the Chao Phraya river in which EGV Bangkhae is situated] only had second-class cinemas before we came along, despite being a densely populated area consisting mostly of financially secure people [*khon thi long lak pak than laew*]".[14] The strategy was obliquely framed as post-Maoist in its conception: to surround the capital with branches of EGV situated in the shopping heart of its largest, far-flung suburbs – the new philosophy of *pa lom meuang* [surrounding the city with the jungle] as one of EGV's executives once

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[11] Marc Askew, *Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 64.

[12] Ibid., 76.

[13] Initially EGV was a co-investment deal between Golden Village (led by the Australian-based multiplex operator Village Roadshow, affiliated with the Hong Kong-based studio Golden Harvest), and the Thai exhibitor Entertain Theatre Network. The chain was operated by Vichai and Visute Poolvoralaks, sons of a major exhibitor and Chinese film distributor in Bangkok. Later on Golden Village pulled out and Vichai bought up its shares. This brought EGV in line with the multiplex chains, Major Cineplex and SF Cinema City, which were founded on domestic capital and by the early 2000s had overtaken EGV in terms of growth. In 2004, EGV merged with Major Cineplex. See Liz Shackleton, "Sites Unseen," *Screen International*, 14 November 2003.

[14] Quote from Thanathip Chataraphuti, *Tamnan rong nang* [Tales of Old Cinemas] (Bangkok: Vera Dee, 2004), 119.

summarised.[15] Accordingly, it opened its second branch in a mega-mall to the southeast of the city, in an area characterised by a geographer as a "sprawling middle-income housing belt".[16]

When the multiplex first appeared in America in the 1960s, its novelty was to exhibit a large number of films in settings that need be no more than undistinguished, soon facilitating the turn toward saturated releases of blockbuster films.[17] Indeed, the indifferent setting of the multiplex itself signalled a break from the picture palaces of the modern era, reversing the appeal to high cultural aura through grand architecture features and interior details.[18] The Bangkok (and urban) Thai multiplex cinemas can more appropriately be regarded as a combination of both the new and the old. Like America, or anywhere else, their provision of multiple screens facilitate the practice of saturated releases, working in favour of Hollywood, with its more recent orientation toward globally saturated blockbuster releases, monopolist Thai film studios and or 'one-off' propaganda projects prepared to fork out large marketing budgets for their big films. But unlike the de-aestheticised setting of the original American screens, leading multiplex exhibitors in Thailand have gone all out to maximise those aspects enhancing the multiplex cinemas' "surface splendor", and to create their own contemporary version of – to borrow Siegfried Kracauer – the multiplex space as "optical fairy lands".[19] In other words, to promote cinemagoing as an acculturated activity, the leading chain of multiplex exhibitors have endowed these theatres with hi-tech accoutrements, and images of world-class splendour, luxury, comfort, and safety.

A glance at magazine advertisements featuring the major multiplex chains quickly reveals the primacy of the rhetoric of world-class attainment. An EGV

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[15] Amornrat Homhuan quoted in Monrudee, *Phattanakarn lae thidthang khong rong phapphayon rabob multiplex nai prathet thai* [A Development Study of Multiplex Theatres in Thailand], 71.

[16] Askew, *Bangkok: Place, Practice and Representation*, 237.

[17] William Paul, "The K-Mart Audience at the Mall Movies," in *Exhibition, the Film Reader*, ed. Ina Rae Hark (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 81.

[18] See Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1995). And Douglas Gomery, "The Movies Become Big Business: Publix Theatres and the Chain Store Strategy," *Cinema Journal* xviii, no. 2 (1979).

[19] Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction," 323.

advertisement campaign from the late 1990s signalled a break with the sub-standard mini-theatres of the recent past with a seven-point list, detailing the superiority of its new screens. In a caption written in English, the advertisement announced that EGV offered "the best cinemas in the entire world". The list covered a whole host of distinctions: superior screen and sound technology; air-conditioned and sound insulated auditorium designed to give the ultimate film viewing comfort; auditorium decoration using the best material; and, fascinatingly, a message of reassurance for prospective patrons that its screens conformed in every respect to health and safety legal requirements (see fig. 19).[20] Trading on the already proven international aura of its brand name, the United Artists Theatres chain (which used to operated screens in the upmarket The Emporium mall in Bangkok before it sold up to a new chain, SF Cinema City), put out advertisements boasting of *rong phapphayon matratharn radab lok* [world-class cinemas]. An early 2000s advertisement by the new chain, SF Cinema City, has gone one better with campaigns that screamed in typically overblown Thai ad-speak of *sudyod rong phapphayon radab lok* [the ultimate world-class cinemas] (see fig. 20).

The rhetoric of world-class splendour in these advertisements is meant to draw attention to those novel aspects which distinguish multiplex screens from the mini-theatres: the state-of-the-art audio-visual technology; the superior auditorium space; the theme-designed foyer and the clean toilets. World-class multiplexes have to be able to boast of large, hi-tech screens, the latest sound technology, and more recently computerised ticketing. Design features which have become compulsory are: spacious high-ceiling auditorium with clearly demarcated gangways; reclining seats with good leg room, excellent sight line and a drink holder; hypothermia inducing air-conditioning; wall-to-wall carpeting; well lit corridors all the way from the foyer to the screens; smartly uniformed staff; fantastically gleaming dreamworld kitsch interior. As they enter into the large toilets of the newer branches of Major Cineplex,

[20] Visute and Vichai regularly used to give interviews emphasising EGV's advancement over the family's old mini-theatres by pointing to the superior screen technology, auditorium layout, and fire safety measures that were up to standard. See "*Samphas khun Visute Poolvoralaks phu amnuay karn sang borisat Tai Entertainment* [Interview with Visute Poolvoralaks Tai Entertainment's Producer]," *Chiwit Ngan, Bangkok Post*, 20 September 2000. And Wandee Suntivutimetee, "*Lok Maya* [the World of Illusion]," *Sarakhadi*, August 1997, 159-60.

female clienteles are transported to a literal fairy baroque-land, consisting of rows of cubicles painted in rose pink and black, each with their own ornate gold mirrors, whose cleanliness and surface sparkle are a million miles from the neon-lit squatting cubicles still in place in the shabby second-class cinemas. Monrudee's research intriguingly cites an EGV executive who revealed that the chain had put much initial emphasis on training its staff to exhibit propriety of appearance and behaviour: "no shirt-tail hanging out, shoes have to be just so, during break time they can't be seen to be sitting around".[21] Precisely the relaxed ambient one still finds in the double-bill, 40-baht-all-day cinema tucked away on a residential road the *fang thon* side of the river, where aged ushers in faded white shirts take a drag of their cigarettes as they tear the ticket stubs and beckon the trickle of patrons upstairs. In the new *radab lok* setting, there is an expectation that patrons adopt world-class standards of behaviour. On top of the royal anthem, leading multiplex screens now play a short film requesting viewers to switch off their mobile phones. Patrons are expected to remain silent, or at best murmur quietly, while watching the films. This standard of expectation is not always maintained of course, but those who breach the unwritten rule are often frowned upon. There is not the same set of expectations in the faded palaces from another time, none of which take advanced booking.

While the emphases on the hi-tech and the world-class setting are probably intended to appeal to both the young and salaried adults, at the same time the leading multiplex chains' promotion campaigns seem to be specifically focused on wooing the upwardly mobile, wage earning clientele through notions of family friendliness, orderly gloss, as well as the emphasis on superior safety standards. A good example is the strategy adopted by the current market leader, Major Cineplex, a chain set up in 1994 by Vicha Poolvoralaks, a cousin of the original EGV owners, in a case of clan rivalry. From the start, Major Cineplex has been promoting the brand concept of "world best cinema and entertainment complex",[22] accompanied by a carefully

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[21] Amornrat Homhuan in Monrudee, "*Phattanakarn lae thidthang khong rong phapphayon rabob multiplex nai prathet thai* [A Development Study of Multiplex Theatres in Thailand]", 76.

[22] "*"*Major Cineplex" the Show Must Go On," *Krungthep Thurakij*, 14 October 2002. Since 2004, after the EGV merger, Major Cineplex's boss Vicha has become the most powerful monopolist in film exhibition, with around three quarters of the multiplex screens under his control. See "*"Major-EGV" khayao wongkarn prakad khuabruam kitjakan 'Poolvoralaks' phuk khad rong nang bedsed*

cultivated sanitised image, for which it has been rewarded with a "family friendly" reputation. Reportedly this is the chain most responsible for consigning to oblivion the image of cinema theatres as 'dens of youth delinquency'.[23] At the beginning, Major Cineplex differentiated itself from mall-based competitors by housing screens in what the management liked to flag up as 'entertainment complexes': free standing buildings consisting of screens and other entertainment sites such as bowling alleys, the ever ubiquitous karaoke, CD and DVD shops, book shops, gift shops, and restaurants or cafes offering a range of affordability. This is presented as a superior way to ensure the safety of its customers. According to one director: "late shows in mall based multiplexes aren't necessarily safe for women because once everything else is shut the buildings are not well lit…whereas we have our own car parks, which are sufficiently staffed".[24]

To accompany the aggressive second phase of its expansion from the early 2000s, Vicha updated his chain with decadent-sounding "themed" cinemas in "five star hotel" settings, situated both in suburbs and in downtown areas of the capital, as well as extending out to other large cities.[25] The motivation was apparently to create a less youth-oriented niche, in other words to target salaried adults in addition to the already secure majority of young urban multiplex customers. In a 2002 interview, Vicha estimated that as many as seventy percent of his clients are teenagers and young adults (a typical image is of the university educated student still living at home and receiving an allowance from parents). While for him *kloom khrop khrua* [the family group] remains the most significant pool of potential consumers as yet untapped.[26]

[Major-EGV Shock Merger Makes the Poolvoralaks Kings of the Cinemas]," *Matichon Sudsapda*, 18 June 2004.

[23] "*Khid hai taektang - Think Big khamphi thurakij "Big Boss Major" Vicha Poolvoralaks* [Think Different - Think Big: Major's Big Boss Vicha Poolvoralaks's Bible]," *Matichon Sudsapda*, 30 July 2004, 34.

[24] Thanakorn Pulivekin quoted in Monrudee, "*Phattanakarn lae thidthang khong rong phapphayon rabob multiplex nai prathet thai* [A Development Study of Multiplex Theatres in Thailand]", 60.

[25] "″Major Cineplex" the Show Must Go On." No doubt this is in keeping with its main competitor SF Cinema City, which has been extending fantastically themed variations defining the image of each branch: The Movie Pavilion (in SFX – the 'extra' first class chain), The Movie Ocean, Theatre On the Beach (in Pattaya), The Six Stars Lobby (another SFX).

[26] Ibid.

Perhaps the most extreme example of such efforts to attract the above average income cinemagoers is the appearance of elite 'living room' cinemas and VIP seats in a number of screens across all the leading multiplexes. As a simulation of a wealthy person's 'home theatre', these exclusive 'gold class' cinemas house a large screen, but a small number of roomy, reclining seats, done up in the luxurious style of first-class airplane seats. Each ticket-holder receives a blanket and sometimes a thick pair of socks to ward off the air-conditioning. Snacks and drinks can be ordered prior to entering the auditorium; and once the film starts they are served by usherettes/waitresses who crouch respectfully on their knees while arranging the glasses and dishes on little tables attached to the reclining seats, in order not to tower over the consumer. Gold-class screens stage a fantasy of film viewing in the baroque privacy of one's own technologically advanced millionaire mansion, where neatly uniformed maids bustle around maintaining ease and plenty. In their sanitised, hi-tech, five-star image, they can both play to the ideal of the elite family, or they can provide the setting for the world-class identified high-income adults. A splendidly kitsch advert for one of Major Cineplex's more recent branches in suburban Bangkok bears out this point. Announcing ten "Parisian Theme" screens with a fantasy image of the ultimate ostentatious movie date: a young dressy couple in evening wear recline romantically on corpulent red love seats, nursing between them a glass of red wine and a bucket of popcorn. The advertisement text offers a choice of deluxe seats between: the Emperor Chair, the most exclusive; the Opera Chair, apparently only a few of its kind in the world, designed exclusively in France to impart an "opera hall" ambience; and the marginally more modest Honeymoon Seat, every single one of which, the advertisement claims, has been "ordered directly from America" (see fig. 21).

With acculturated multiplex screens sweeping across Bangkok in this fashion, ticket prices leapt up almost immediately. In the mid-1980s, the most expensive seats in the capital cost 50 baht, while the premium rate outside the metropolis was 30 baht, with cheap seats going at less than 10 baht.[27] When the first multiplex screens appeared, the price of admission went up to around 70 baht. Then, as the screens

[27] Jamroenlak, *Thurakij phapphayon thai* [the Thai Film Business], 51.

multiplied with impressive concentration in the downtown shopping districts, that price quickly hopped up to 100 baht, and to the current average of 120 baht.[28] According to a 1998 film magazine report, the price hike was led by the upscale screens in The Emporium, the most ex-pat friendly mall of the 1990s. Should one be drawn to the kitschy hauteur of the gold-class cinemas the price will be at least twice as high.[29] Outside Bangkok, in a small selection of urbanised provinces and tourist towns now possessing a major multiplex chain, the arrival of these five-star screens has come at the cost of standardised ticket pricing comparable to that of the capital. Not surprisingly in this context, both Major Cineplex and its new competitor, SF Cinema City, are keen to roll out the multiplex model nationwide, a goal which reportedly has the backing of the monopolist film studios.[30] Their battle to dominate the exhibition market outside Bangkok will for the first time create a national market for saturated releases, which looks set to have an intriguing impact not only on the industrialisation of Thai film production but on future film styles. Around the time of the economic crisis, however, it was the shift away from the teen film cycle and the emergence of the heritage film that proved decisive in wooing urban bourgeois consumers to Thai films.

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[28] Compare this to the prices of the older Bangkok cinemas still operating: the second-run *Thonburi Rama* charges 40 baht for all day viewing; the first-run but second-class *Pata* charges 80 baht. Two hours drive from Bangkok, the Ayutthaya branch of *Thana*, a solely provinces-based multiplex chain with no public profile as such, also charges 80 baht.

[29] "*Saroop saphawa thurakij bantherng thai 2541* [Thailand's Entertainment Industry 1999 Round-up]," *Cinemag*, December 1998, 103. The ceiling is still rising. Major Cineplex has opened 16 screens in the brand new Siam Paragon mall situated at the heart of the shopping district. This multiplex now hosts the BKK IFF, and has overtaken The Emporium as the *hi-so* [high-society] place to catch a film. Here, ticket price for its regular screens range from 120 to 140 baht; but the leather love seats in its gold-class cinemas, every one of the seats a different candy colour, costs a whopping 1, 200 baht.

[30] According to a newspaper report in early 2003, major film producers believe that "the low quality of provincial cinemas is...a major obstacle to attracting moviegoers and increasing revenue in the provinces". See "Filmmakers Eye Provinces," *The Nation*, 3 January 2003.

The career trajectory of the owners of SF Cinema City runs parallel to that of the Poolvoralaks cousins. All of them belong to families of ethnic Chinese origins, whose fathers started out as exhibitors and distributors in the post-war years. The fathers of Vicha, Vichai and Visute made their names in the capital; the late father of Suwat Thongrompho, big boss of SF Cinema City, was in control of the eastern distribution region. In 1999, the family broke the Bangkok market with SF Cinema City's first and very successful multiplex, situated in the Mah Boon Krong mall in the main shopping district. Meanwhile one of Suwat's brothers remains in charge of the business back in the eastern region. A co-investor of this fast expanding chain is the production and distribution tycoon Somsak Techaratanaprasert of Sahamongkol Film International.

Whose public space?

The multiplex exhibitors' newfound energy for converting upper income adults into cinemagoers has had to be balanced against maintaining the already existing majority of teenagers and young adult clients. Most of the efforts to woo a 'better generation' of customers went into cultivating that narcissistically 'world-class' promotional rhetoric. On the ground, in the physical spaces of the multiplex foyer themselves, however, such efforts are undercut by their appeal to youth – in other words, by the provision of commodified spaces for youth distraction. To take the long walk through the foyer to the ticket hall, then to the designated screen, is to enter a state of sensorial pandemonium. The spaces are packed with cheap fun: photo sticker booths with their insane jingles, simulated explosions from the rows of game machines, CD and VCD or DVD stalls blasting the latest techno-pop, books and magazines stalls, a mini fun-fair in some cases, a mini-stage for the latest music or movie promotional events, and the ever ubiquitous snack and fast food corners.

Two irate comments found in a film magazine and a newspaper respectively give an idea of the clash of sensibilities between adults inclined to identify with the reinvention of cinemagoing as a cultured activity to which they are entitled, and the actual existing air of permanent mayhem defined by youthful pop culture. At the end of 1998, around three or four years after the second EGV chain had opened in the gigantic Seacon Square mall southeast of Bangkok, the Thai-language *Cinemag* film magazine (now defunct), with its aspiration to serious film journalism and criticism, warned against what its journalist regarded as the degeneration of this shiny cleaned up multiplex into a squalid marketplace. Complaining of noise pollution and the unsightly spectacle of stalls clogging up the multiplex's foyer, the writer contrasted its descent into chaos with the start of its life, when this branch of EGV could boast of "a wide, uncluttered lobby space, so much more pleasing to the eye and ear".[31] Seven years later, a Neil Semple wrote a letter to the English-language paper, *The Nation*, complaining about the newly expanded film festival, BKK IFF 2005 – "Why I have almost given up going". One of his rather 'bourgeois Bangkok' bits of advice

[31] "*Saroop saphawa thurakij banterng thai 2541* [Thailand's Entertainment Industry 1999 Round-up]," 103.

was: “Avoid venues that are cheek-and-jowl with some ferociously noisy malls...It would seem to me that the fuddy-duddies (like me) that attend film festivals are well past the age at which noisy malls were viewed as a good thing”.[32]

Festival fairy land

The expansion of the multiplex as a newly upscale site of Bangkok film consumption rapidly gave rise to a new kind of film event in Thailand: the *sakon/*world-class aspiring film festival. The five-star multiplex screens in the shopping heartland of the capital now provide a setting for a state-backed, economically questionable and tourism-dominated bid to make the capital a visible part of the international film festival circuit. The tourism agency’s recent attempt to yoke the BKK IFF to its cause of creating spectacular images of globally attractive Thailand is of course an attempt to keep up with the proliferation of large, city-based film festivals over the past two decades or so. But the appearance of this world-class aspiring festival also needs to be situated as a particularly degraded aspect within a fragmenting space of film exhibition, characterised by the emergence of implicitly culturally antagonistic and economically unequal kinds of Bangkok-based festivals since the mid-1990s, each reflecting different possibilities in the cultural formation of cinema as a whole. In other words, this dimension of festival exhibition should direct our attention to the volatile co-existence between the dominant, state-backed official festival, and nascent experiments in providing spaces for exhibiting non-industrial films, in the uncertain anticipation of a more inclusive, dedicatedly cinephile and perhaps cosmopolitan rather than narcissistically world-class aspiring local film culture.

In Colin Crisp’s useful clarification, the first generation of film festivals can be differentiated according to the emphasis given to four distinct sets of interests. These were “the cultural interests...oriented toward film as an art form”; the financial interests “which saw festivals as a showcase for products”; the interests of local businessmen who saw festivals as an opportunity to attract wealthy tourists; and government interests, which primarily “saw festivals in terms of a prestigious

[32] "Some Advice for Future International Film Festivals," *The Nation*, 4 February 2005.

political event on the international calendar".[33] From its beginning after the Second World War, Cannes for instance has on the whole been emphasising the financial interest, through "glamour and sensationalism", while Venice, having been discredited in the late 1930s for its association with fascism, foreground the commitment to film art in its post-war revival.[34] Adapting Crisp's clarification to the contemporary Bangkok context, we can turn our attention to three uneven, overlapping realms within the field of festival display. The state's interest in promoting tourism and the symbolism of a world-class addition to the festival calendar is shaping the BKK IFF into an audience-unfriendly festival with low cultural value. This was not exactly how the biggest festival in Bangkok started out, under the more modest name of the Bangkok Film Festival (BFF) in 1998. The name change in 2003 can here be identified as the point in which the progressive impulse of the original event became overshadowed: the creation of a festival in response to the curiosity for a broader range of films among a visible group of the city's inhabitants. (This cultural interest was nonetheless precariously balanced with the other interest of using the festival to project an image of Bangkok as a global city.) Emerging slightly earlier than the BFF in 1997 is the Thai Short Film and Video Festival, the flagship festival of a nascent alternative cinema culture in the process of being made by the 'post-October'[35] generation. Here, the alternative-identified cultural aspiration

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[33] C. G. Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema, 1930-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 223.

[34] Ibid., 224.

[35] This term can be taken to refer to the generation after those who came of age through political activism during the 1970s. They are most often dismissively described as the consumerist, politically disengaged, post-nationalist generation – children of the boom and radical political defeat. This picture is both true and false. Nascent efforts to stake out experimental or alternative spaces of film exhibition, in the hope that that would encourage revolt in filmmaking, are one significant terrain where members of the post-October generation are currently engaged. This dimension awaits full analysis. And it would be illuminating to think through the extent to which such efforts signal a departure from the political nationalist activism of the previous era to cultural activism: the shifting of radicalised energies to cinematic and audio-visual culture. A good axis of comparison can be found in Soyoung Kim's article on 'cine-mania' and film festivals in contemporary South Korea. She tracks the explosion of "quasi-religious energy...in film spectatorship" during the 1990s, accompanied by the proliferation of activist festivals which provide alternative spaces for exploring the "identity question". Signalling this as a departure from the rebellious energies grounded in nationalist, class-based labour politics of the 1980s, she asks whether these are "attempts to redirect the energy of mania into something that is grounded on a political agenda via the cinema". See Soyoung Kim, "'Cine-Mania' or Cinephilia: Film Festivals and the Identity Question," in *New Korean Cinema*, ed. Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer (Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 2005).

predominates, at least on the organisers' part. It is therefore worth making a brief incursion into this 'space for experimentation', to set it in comparison with the dominant level of festival image making.

Founded by the Thai Film Foundation, the short film festival's aim seems to be to create a more democratic space open to non-industrial, cultural and intellectual forms of filmmaking; to encourage film education and activism; as well as, increasingly over time, to establish contact beyond the metropolis and the national border with fellow cinephiles, film festivals, and film educationists.[36] The foundation, which works closely with the National Film Archive of Thailand, is largely self-funded and led by the film historian and festival programmer Chalida Uabumrungjit. It also undertakes various projects funded on a case-by-case basis by state and private organisations, such as a children's film season funded by the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority, or filmmaking workshops on the Tsunami funded by the Office of Contemporary Arts and Culture. This combination of private finance periodically topped up by funds from more established sources turns what is essentially a group of cultural activists in some respects into a small-scale entrepreneur, with all the financial risks and limited exposure that this scale of cultural entrepreneurship entails. (In this sense it is also comparable to those other key mediators of an alternative culture of cinema: film magazines that nurture cinephilia and promote serious film writing, namely the Thai-language *Bioscope* or *Film Virus*.)

In a significant contrast to Bangkok's 'showcase' festival – due of course to financial constraints but also a contrast rich in symbolism – the short film festival is held in sites with cultural and intellectual reputation, rather than in the leading mall-based multiplex screens. Currently its main exhibition sites are the October Memorial Institute, set up to commemorate the 1973 uprising and to continue educational, cultural or intellectual work in that spirit, as well as a commercially run art cinema, the first of its kind in Thailand which opened in 2004. The multiplicity of prizes awarded each year, enough for the recipients to fill a large stage, is a good indicator that so far its main achievement (and possibly the primary aim) has been to provide a

[36] This sketchy overview is made in the spirit of laying down markers for the necessary task of extensive research and analysis in the near future. Any misunderstandings and errors of judgment are obviously mine.

screening space, and a space of encounter among fellow cinephiles or aspiring filmmakers, and to recognise the energies of the often self-funded students of short films. This is the space where several young Thai filmmakers who have recently acquired national and international profile first gained exposure, ranging from those who have subsequently remained outside or on the margins of the domestic industry, such as Apichatpong,[37] to those who have gone onto make successful genre films with the major studios, such as Pakpoom and Banjong (directors of *Shutter kod tid winyan*). Additionally, as the festival's profile has grown, its organisers, rather than the consultant figureheads of the BKK IFF, have become the main contact zone between local filmmakers at the margins of the industry and foreign film festivals with similar sympathies. The short film festival is part of an emerging network consisting of independent film festivals, filmmakers, cultural institutions, archives, and film educationalists in Southeast Asia, extending its connection outward to festivals in South Korea or France and other sites in Europe and America. In this zone, curators co-operate on film seasons or film conferences; exchange information about interesting unknown works; and travel widely to each other's events to watch, deliver, and introduce films or talks. The inclusion of the Thai Film Foundation and its short film festival in an 'alternative circuit' of global festivals has a specifically potent charge in the Thai case, insofar as this implies that the cultural activists associated with them are engaged in a 'world-class' network of culture-making, which is sufficiently removed from the state-bourgeois imperative of creating hyperbolic displays of 'world-class' Thainess for the dream of global visibility. The nascent, outward looking cosmopolitanism that partly shapes this NGO's work finds parallel in its commitment to organising travelling screenings, and filmmaking workshops, around the country.

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[37] Prior to gaining international festival profile with his Hubert Bals funded *Dokfahr…*/Mysterious Object at Noon, the short film festival regularly screened Apichatpong's short films. It was the first festival to mount a retrospective of his work. Apichatpong himself is one of the co-founders of the Bangkok Experimental Film Festival (BEFF), also associated with the Thai Film Foundation, which is held on a more sporadic basis. The theme of the latest BEFF, held in late 2005, was the highly topical one of Democrazy. One strand of activities asked people who had never made films before to imagine their utopia of Bangkok, with contribution ranging from that of a senator to that of a maid and a monk. Fittingly the screenings were held away from the malls, the majority of which in Lumphini Park. See Kong Rithdee, "Heady Visual Spree," (www.thaifilm.com, 2006).

Given the non-judgmental inclusiveness of the short film festival in the first decade of its existence, there is now perhaps some uncertainty about its overall impact. The issue here is whether its role has been in effect to provide a forum for aspiring filmmakers from elite universities to leave their calling cards for the industry, and to stray into becoming an annual get-together event for amateur filmmakers of the hobbyist kind, rather than to provide a site that broadens film cultural horizons and nurtures challenges against conformity, censorship, propaganda and monopolisation.[38] This is not to imply that it has not shown a minority of short films that do take it upon themselves to challenge and negate. Whether thematically or perhaps to a lesser extent through formal experimentation, some of the films that have passed through the short film festival clearly pose questions about the myth of the conflict-free, 'classless' Thai society, the society of ethnic harmony and heterosexual propriety, and other facets of social reality the bourgeois-state projection of the demonstratively national public sphere usually renders invisible or unimaginable.[39] But, to borrow Soyoung Kim's phrase in her topography of film

[38] For a critique of the timidity of independent Thai filmmaking, and a questioning of the appropriateness of the designation, see Robert Williamson, "Assessing the Visibility of Alternative Cinema in Thailand," (www.bangkokfilm.org, 2006).

[39] Some examples include: *Ya luem chan* (Don't Forget Me, dir. Manutsak Dokmai, 2003): late heir to the political avant-garde tradition of perceiving reality anew through dissonant sound and image. Manutsak cuts the notorious footage of the massacre on October 6, 1976, to the banally authoritative voice-over from an old ethnographic documentary about the 'yellow banana ghost', and ironically uses the fey pop song of the film's title as the massacre's anthem of remembrance. Punctuated by unseasonably polemical texts, the film asks what, and who, lies behind society's desire to forget this horror. His more recent short film is the enticingly titled *So Bored With Middle Class* (2005), screened at the latest BEFF. *Be-hide the Wall* (dir. Aphiwat Seangpatthasima, 2003): an account of the long struggle against eviction by the inhabitants of Mahakarn Fort, an area in the historical quarters of Bangkok populated by communities who are technically squatters. The Bangkok Metropolitan Authority has plans to wring life and history out of the area and turn it into a heritage site. The film highlights the supercilious manner by which the authority attempted to throw out the inhabitants, and their sustained campaign of resistance. *Tang khanarn* (Parallel, dir. Panu Aree, 2002): Panu puts the office maid of a film production house in front of the camera, where she talks about her life, and cuts that with scenes of her 'invisible' work around the office of the men and women who by profession are meant to be good at 'seeing everything'. *Jom hoad manus si-iew* (The Cruelty and the Soy-Sauce Man, dir. Paisit Panpruegsachat, 2001): Paisit as the participating-observing filmmaker and lone cameraman shoots footage of a Sino-Thai construction entrepreneur in his small town milieu of pickup trucks with blackout windows and liquor-fuelled tough deals. His brusque editing and often ugly, off-centred images evoke the constant threat of violence of Sia Yai's world, drawing attention to the taut power play between the filmmaker and his subject. Unpredictable in his response to the filmmaker's presence, Sia Yai is the 'big man' who combines macho swagger with precise, melancholic, drunken philosophising about the state of being observed by the college boy who is meant to know more than him. See also the 'autobiographical', faux-porn films of Thunska Pansittivorakul, such as *Voodoo Girls* (2002), *Unseen Bangkok* (2005), *Happy Berry* (2004).

festivals in South Korea, as a Thai example of a film festival that, at least on the level of intention, tries to keep its distance from state and corporate interests in order to stake out a site for democratic expressions and artistic experimentation, the Thai Short Film and Video Festival now seems to be coming face to face with the hard question of whether it will in effect continue to provide a sub-cultural space for lifestyle filmmaking or portfolio compilation, or whether the moment has arrived for it to be turned into "an experimental space that might produce an alternative public sphere if not an oppositional one".[40] Of course the condition of possibility for that transformation cannot be simply limited to the activism of its organisers. Whether there are filmmakers, film writers, and above all anonymous film viewers who can supply that condition of possibility is a question that extends from the provision of physical space to that festival's place as a barometer of the energy to stake out a radical cultural element in Thai cinema as a whole.

As for Bangkok's biggest festival, its swift decline within the space of a few years from a festival that (at least in part) aspired to meet the voracious curiosity for cinema of a sizeable group of its inhabitants, to one that pays large sums to an America-based international festival consultancy, and pays for journalists across the globe to attend in the hope of taking them round new tourist sites, while raising the price of tickets halfway through the 2006 event,[41] raises many more questions about the kind of culture of which it is a typical product. Initially the city's showcase festival started out as the smaller BFF. Its founding director was a long-term American resident in the capital, Brian Bennett, who worked with a team of staff from *The Nation*, a major English-language Thai newspaper, and one of the sponsors of the event. The primary sponsor was the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT). In Julian Stringer's article on the relationship between "global cities" and the "film festival economy", he points out that the global proliferation of film festivals since the 1980s has a "modular quality". The newer festivals use "the existing big festivals as models so as to bring the world to the city in question, while simultaneously

[40] Kim, "'Cine-Mania' or Cinephilia: Film Festivals and the Identity Question," 89.

[41] For enlightening writing on the BKK IFF, see the articles of the film journalist Kong Rithdee in the newspaper *Bangkok Post* e.g. Kong Rithdee, "A Not-So Festive Festival," *Bangkok Post*, 3 March 2006. Rithdee Kong, "Soul Searching," *Bangkok Post*, 7 January 2005.

spreading the reputation of the city in question around the world".[42] Adapting his scheme, it can be shown that from the start the BFF was precariously balanced between the desire to bring the world to the city's cinephile, and the desire to show the city to the world as a modern part of the global modern city network. At the level of programming, as well as his public statements, the director tried hard to model the festival as an audience-oriented event, one whose main aim was to bring a broader selection of the world's films to the capital. The timing of the first festival can be related to the enthusiasm that greeted film seasons held a few years prior to it, such as the first EU Film Festival in 1996, which gave an inkling that there was a sufficiently large audience base to sustain a larger annual festival.[43] At the same time, the buzz of events other than the nitty-gritty of screenings, which can endow any showcase festival with the air of being one of the global calendar events, attracted the tourism authority with its specific interest in promoting Thailand to the world, as well as, according to some, a proportion of audiences less drawn to the BFF by cinephilia than by the urge to participate in an event of a world-class aura.

According to the anthropologist Panarai Ostapirat, in her astutely rendered account of the first BFF, the festival director Bennett adamantly defended the idea of a showcase festival for Bangkok audiences, and justified his film selection in terms of a difficult balancing act between broadening people's film horizons and ensuring maximum inclusiveness.[44] This is reflected in the programme, which combined a selection of art and independent films, with the odd Hollywood previews, a section on documentary films, and a sympathetic nod to Asian releases, including a slot dedicated to a selection of old Thai films that had been absent from the screen for many years.[45] Meanwhile, those representing the state in the organising committee, a

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[42] Julian Stringer, "Global Cities and the International Film Festival Economy," in *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, ed. Mark Shiel and Tom Fitzmaurice (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 138-9.

[43] Panarai Ostapirat, "*Khon bangkok meuang bangkok kap Bangkok Film Festival* [Bangkokians, Bangkok and the Bangkok Film Festival]," *Nang: Thai* [Thai Film Quarterly] 3 (1998): 9.

[44] Ibid.: 11, 13.

[45] The following year, the BFF affirmed its sympathetic commitment to the newly internationalised generation of Thai filmmaking with its choice of film for the opening gala: the world premiere of Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Reuang Talok* 69 (6ixtynin9, 1999). The film played to a packed auditorium, the majority of which were probably members of the ticket-buying public rather than

(then) government spokesman, and a senior figure of the tourism authority TAT, directly linked the first BFF to the Amazing Thailand tourism promotion campaign, which kicked off that same year.[46] As Panarai argues, their rhetoric thereby revealed the state's primary intention in exploiting the international ambient of the festival to promote an elevated, *sakon*/world-class image for the promotion of upmarket tourism.[47] In this respect, the film festival was meant as an accompaniment of sorts to the promotion of upmarket tourism from the mid-1990s.[48] Come the following year, the TAT extended its festival invitation to the domestic population, at least to the ones that read English fluently. In her welcome remark in the 1999 BFF's programme book, its representative flagged the organisation's aim to "encourage the entire Thai population to explore their own country and participate in the myriad activities that draw international tourists to our country", envisaging a festival "which will be an attraction not only for foreign visitors to Thailand but for Thai film lovers from all over the Kingdom".[49]

Held primarily in the multiplex of The Emporium mall, with talks and seminars spilling over into its 'Fashion Hall' foyer area and adjoining five-star hotel, the combination of world-class exclusivity, the aim to promote tourism, and the inclusive programming, presented the BFF with a fascinatingly incongruent range of responses. In terms of reception, the core organisers and sympathetic critics and academics judged it an overwhelming success.[50] The audience figure of the first year

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society's glitterati who graced the reception on invitation. In any case, the wildly rapturous response among those in the auditorium as Pen-ek's black comedy rolled – the lone man next to me repeatedly doubling over, clicking his fingers in extravagant delight as the jokes came thick and fast – vindicated in a nicely spontaneous fashion the audience-oriented tone that the festival's core organisers tried hard to strike.

[46] Juthamas Siriwan (then a deputy governor of TAT) wrote in her welcome note in the festival programme book (in Thai): "Since this is the Amazing Thailand year, the TAT aims to increase the variety of activities for tourists. I'm confident that the Bangkok Film Festival will attract both professional and amateur filmmakers, and will become one of Thailand's main annual events. The TAT will include the festival in its calendar of tourist events to be promoted around the world." See The First Annual Bangkok Film Festival, (Bangkok: 1998), 5. Currently the governor of TAT, Juthamas is unofficially described as the 'iron lady' of the expanded BKK IFF.

[47] Panarai, "*Khon bangkok meuang bangkok kap Bangkok Film Festival* [Bangkokians, Bangkok and the Bangkok Film Festival]," 10-11, 15.

[48] Peleggi, *The Politics of Ruins and the Business of Nostalgia*, 65.

[49] Bangkok Film Festival '99: 17-26 September 1999, (Bangkok: 1999), 6.

[50] See interview by Panarai, "*Khon bangkok meuang bangkok Kap Bangkok Film Festival* [Bangkokians, Bangkok and the Bangkok Film Festival]," 17-23.

of around 20,000 was presented by Bennett as a very promising start indeed, and talk began to circulate of a novel figure appearing among the urban crowd, the enthralled cinephile who took time off work during the festival period to watch unusual films back-to-back on the big screen for a change.[51] The festival founder himself was keen to downplay the symbolism of its the upscale setting, instead emphasising the extent to which the audience embrace of the BFF highlighted the real hunger, shared in his view among all classes of Bangkokians,[52] for a cultural mode of cinema. While at the same time he acknowledged that certain exclusionary aspects of the festival needed to be addressed, especially the failure (apparently for cost reasons at this stage) to provide Thai-language subtitles for most of the films in the programme, or the fact that talks were conducted primarily in English.[53]

Despite Bennett's insistence, though, other observers detected a strand of identification with the BFF that seemed to have less to do with the inclusiveness of cinephilia. The visibility of what appeared to be a new kind of festival-based film culture was such that the political commentator Pitch Pongsawat wrote a short newspaper article, published a mere day before the start of BFF 2000, wondering out loud how it is that film festival mania has come to be symptomatic of, in his words, "the middle class quest for 'taste' and self-definition [*pen akarn khong chon chan klang sung tong karn sawaengha "rossaniyom" lae khwam pen tua khong tua eng*]". And in a richly suggestive comment, he relates such symptoms to the desire to "connect with the world" in terms symbolically less passive, expressed especially prevalently through the aesthetic investment among some members of this class in the

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[51] Panu Aree and Panarai Ostapirom, "*An neuang duey thessakarn phapphayon krung thep khrung ti 1* [Looking Back on the First Bangkok Film Festival]," *Nang: Thai* [Thai Film Quarterly] 4 (1999): 49-50.

[52] During a phone interview I conducted for a radio piece commissioned by the BBC World Service Thai Section, Bennett mentioned a *khon khai kuaytiew* [a noodle stall vendor] – generally not a type one often finds wandering distracted at The Emporium – who told him he came to the festival out of his love for Zhang Yimou's films. Interview on 13 September 2000.

[53] Panu and Panarai, "*An neuang duey thessakarn phapphayon krung thep khrung ti 1* [Looking Back on the First Bangkok Film Festival]," 50, 57. Interestingly, in this interview, Bennett gave the impression that the cosmopolitan image struck by the first BFF helped to ease the prejudice of some international distributors against sending their films to Bangkok, wedded as they were to the fear that prints sent to unknown Asian festivals would risk disappearing into the netherworld of piracy. See Ibid., 52.

tradition of European counter-cinema over Hollywood.[54] The niggling scepticism that the buzz around the BFF was anything other than the momentary swarming of fashionable Bangkokians elicited from some of the festival's committed supporters a generously diplomatic response. "People need time to work out what film festivals are really for", said a film critic and a jury of the first BFF, Manotham Theamtheabrat when asked to comment about this new 'bourgeois fashion'.[55] Eavesdropping on the crowd of festival attendants in 1998, Panarai captured the symptomatic murmurings of pride that through this film festival, Bangkok was now acquiring the same culturally cosmopolitan aura as the major cities of the world.[56] Moreover, she argued that bourgeois desire to see Thailand in the image of a liberal democratic, culturally developed world, fuelled the intense outcry against censorship, which erupted after the police was asked to intervene and uphold the anachronistic film censorship law against four allegedly 'pornographic' films in the programme, including the Thai satire of religious cults, *My Teacher Eats Biscuits* (dir. Ing K, 1997).[57]

The irony is that the spontaneous success of the BFF in its first two years, a success which immediately turned the festival into one of the most nationally prestigious 'global' events held in the country, subsequently licensed the unbridled eruption of the official national interest in projecting Thailand's global image through it. This came at the expense of what had appeared to be the just about sufficiently defended emphasis of broadening the film viewing horizons of local viewers. The friendly advice prior to the second BFF offered by Philip Cheah, the pioneering director of the Singapore Film Festival (the first serious international film festival in

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[54] Pitch Pongsawat, "*Du nang du lakhon laew khen khrok khuen phu khao* [Watching Us Watching Films, a Sisyphean Struggle]," *Krungthep Thurakij*, 20 September 2000. Where Pitch is sharply critical, however, is his implication that the middle class cinephile's desire to connect with the world through dedicated film viewing, and webchat comments, remains an aesthetic investment of an inherently individualistic kind.

[55] Nantakwang Sirasoonthorn, "*'Thessakarn nang' yang mi kham tham?'* [Questions for Film Festivals]," *Krungthep Thurakij*, 4 January 2000.

[56] Panarai, "*Khon bangkok meuang bangkok kap Bangkok Film Festival* [Bangkokians, Bangkok and the Bangkok Film Festival]," 15.

[57] As Bennett and Ing K later clarified, the police with some reluctance intervened to ban the satire and ordered cuts to be made to the three other films after receiving an anonymous fax. Both alleged that the fax was a campaign of malice carried out by (unspecified) people in the film industry who were irritated by the prospect of a successful film festival organised by an American upstart. See Bennett interview in Panarai and Panu 1999, 53-55; Ing K interview in Sanvaros Chaichawalit, "*Ing K phu khian prawattisat chabab phae* [Ing K Who Writes the History of the Defeated]," *Nang: Thai* [Thai Film Quarterly] 13 (2004): 106.

Southeast Asia), that the priority of the Bangkok festival must always be to provide "a window to world cinema" for Thai people soon proved a prescient warning.[58] That cultural interest underscoring the programming team's attempt to model the BFF as an audience showcase festival was quickly passed over for the TAT-led dream of spreading to the world its own idea of Thailand as an upmarket tourist trap, and Thailand as a cheap location for film shooting, accompanied by the more understandable aim of the film industry to use the nation's showcase festival as a platform to promote Thai films. In his welcome remarks to the BFF 2000 programme book, Bennett's last year as the director of this festival in its original form, he still insisted on differentiating the festival from the big, commercially oriented models elsewhere, with what in hindsight seems like the last words of someone who knew the cultural emphasis would not be long sustained, "we are not like Cannes, Toronto or Sundance".[59] In 2005, a new official top note was freely sung in the comment of a TAT deputy governor that "the BKK IFF may not be what we may call a festival for film 'purists'".[60]

When the TAT took over the organisation of the festival in 2003, it was given a rebranding exercise with the new name: Bangkok International Film Festival.[61] Consequently, the tourism authority employed a film festival consultant from LA to promote and largely programme the BKK IFF, with a reported budget of "at least Bt60 million" in 2003.[62] Since then, according to the film journalist Kong, the budget has been inflated to an astoundingly extravagant sum of around 200 million baht for

[58] Wesley Hsu, "Screen Saver," *Metro (Bangkok)*, September 1999, 19.

[59] Bangkok Film Festival 3rd Annual, (Bangkok: 2000), 4.

[60] Kong, "Soul Searching." The riposte: a suggestion by the filmmaker Apichatpong, reported in Kong's article, that the newly expanded festival changes its name to "The Bangkok Film Festival for the Benefit of Tourism".

[61] The logic of state-funded cultural commodification – that which subscribes to royalism as it claims the status of 'world-class' – found full expression during BKK IFF 2006. Attendants had to pass through a gigantic replica gate simulating the set of the 16th century war epic *Naresuan* (The Legend of King Naresuan, dir. Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol, 2007), the three-part sequel to *Suriyothai*, in order to reach their designated screens in the brand new Siam Paragon mall. In contrast, a gorgeous print of a 1963 Thai Western, *Tawan lang leuad* (The Blood Sun, dir. Marut, or Tawee Na Bangchang), was buried in the smallest cinema available in that multiplex, irrespective of the fact that the opportunity to see any old Thai film in theatrical viewing conditions has become rarer than hen's teeth.

[62] Nick Pavlesky, "BKKIFF a View from the Stalls," *The Nation*, 26 January 2003.

the 2005 event.[63] In the press release prior to the launch of the "Revitalized Festival", the international festival consultant flown in for the job signalled the BKK IFF's newfound global ambition with a new style of award statuettes, scrapping the little BFF elephant for a big mythical being: "we believe that the Golden Kinnaree will soon become the most highly regarded Asian prize for international filmmaking, the equivalent of the Palme d'Or at Cannes".[64] With ostentatiously bought festival nationalism came stars – glittering or otherwise; marketing buzzwords such as the description of Thailand as 'the crossroads of Asia' and the BKK IFF as 'the Cannes of the East'; the TAT governor's boast of the festival's success in attracting foreign film crews to Thailand;[65] and delirious figures yoking the 'success' of the BKK IFF to the billions generated each year from tourism. What has not been forthcoming, though budget is no longer the obstacle, I leave to the excellent words of Kong – unmistakeably a case of cultural activism grounded in the cinema – published in the *Bangkok Post*:

> [In 2005] Last year, at one screening of a film at the Bangkok International Film Festival, a Canadian producer got up to introduce the movie that was about to be shown. The moderator in the theatre was an American woman, so, naturally, they spoke to each other in English – with no Thai translation. After the brief introduction, the film started. The movie's dialogue, naturally, was in English – without Thai subtitles. There would be another brief discussion after the screening, but I didn't stay, because I knew there wouldn't be a Thai translator present, and I was increasingly taken aback that a Bangkok film festival could be so oblivious to its context.[66]
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> [In 2006] Last year, I wrote a list (other Thai papers did too) of the changes we'd love to see at the BKK IFF. Here I could print the whole

[63] Kong Rithdee, "Commentary," *Bangkok Post*, 7 January 2005.
[64] Press release, "Bangkok International Film Festival to Showcase Global Filmmaking from 'Masters to Present'," *Bangkok International Film Festival*, 18 October 2002.
[65] Lekha J Shankar, "Can Film Festivals Promote Tourism?" *The Nation*, 29 December 2004.
[66] Kong, "Commentary."

> thing verbatim without risking being outdated: the absence of Thai subtitles, the lack of a Thai festival head, the inefficiency of the Film Market [the industrial event to publicise Thai films and promote their export], the need to spend money on what really matters, the importance of making the fest less Western and more Asian, etc...The fest must exist with the cultural benefits of Thai audiences as its priority; the excuse that most Thai festival-goers are educated bourgeoisie who understand English ignores the fact that good movies should be appreciated by people of all ages and classes...The American team have done a fair job of whipping up publicity by bringing in stars, but their role should be limited to that, and not to programme the festival without fully understanding the sentiment of local audience. It is true that the recent BKK IFF saw many full-house screenings, but it's a distortion to claim that it was a success (and please, please stop saying that this is the "seventh biggest festival in the world" or "the most important" in the region). The festival spent a lot of money flying in journalists and guests, but what will happen when we do not have the money to invite them any more? Are we a rich nation?[67]

Taking the programming into account, an awkward point of comparison begins to emerge between the newly internationalised festival and the BFF. The 2006 selection of the BKK IFF is larger than the original festival ever was, as befits the budget. Variety is maintained, both geographically and in terms of the range of film styles and thematic concerns. *Pride and Prejudice* mixes with the latest films from directors who operate outside or at the margins of the mainstream such as Zhang Yuan, Laurent Cantet, Rakshan Bani-Etemand, a selection of Thai films of the industrial kind, DV documentaries and shorts, and a smattering of old Thai films. The programme clusters have grown, including interestingly adventurous sections such as the competition designated for ASEAN films, the section on International Documentaries, or the non-competition New Voices and Reel World sections that

[67] Kong, "A Not-So Festive Festival."

focus on the less known filmmakers. That said, it is undoubtedly the case that the most interesting aspects of the improved programme could have been achieved with a lower budget, and under the directorship of the more than qualified local staff and volunteers currently made to answer to the consultants while they do most of the day to day running of the festival and part of the programming untainted by crass glitziness in any case, suffering the indignity of officialdom's presumption that they are unready for the *sakon/*world-class exposure that comes with the job of programmers. Without the same degree of attention to non-bourgeois local audiences who need subtitles, or the commitment to establishing a senior echelon of local programmers who define the festival's cultural remit, and to training a younger generation of activists and curators for future directorship of the festival; the increasing visibility of international attendants with press passes, and the wildly magnified rhetoric of the BKK IFF as a globally first-class festival, simply raise that much more acutely the question of who this improved programme is meant for.

In his 2006 article, Kong refers to a series of satirical cartoons published in a Thai language film magazine suggesting that the BKK IFF had, for reasons detailed in his piece, become a "colonised territory", and an intimidating space for the average Thai cinephile – 'average' for not necessarily possessing fluent English. But this in itself raises an interesting question. Although Kong refers here to such similar criticisms as his made in other Thai-language newspapers, one feels this is a strategic move to call upon a critical mass and pre-empt the easy response of dismissing his voice as the heated passion of a cinephile who happens to have a public corner to write. The fact is that Kong's challenge to the organisers of the BKK IFF to restructure the event to serve its local audiences, in the interest of building a thriving film culture in Thailand, remains a voice without much reverberation outside of certain elements of the film press. (Compare, in the introduction and chapter 5, the extravagant capacity for eruption in the public sphere of the general press over a precious selection of *thai sakon* heritage films projected as poised on the cusp of global recognition.) Moreover, if the outcry over the censorship fiasco during the first BFF revealed bourgeois society's readiness to spin into action when certain actions within the domain of cinema are at odds with its imaginary of a culturally modern and

sufficiently liberal Thailand; what is being said in its pregnant silence over the newly 'world-class' BKK IFF, now far and away one of Asia's most expensive festivals, held in the most nationally expensive cinema screens, in what is apparently Asia's largest shopping mall?[68]

[68] The September 2006 coup is also making its impact felt on the volatile BKK IFF. Shortly before it announced the last minute postponement of the 2007 festival, the TAT cancelled its contract with the Los Angeles-based festival consultant as well as appointed a Thai festival director and signalled that the next festival's budget will be considerably lower. See Kong, "TAT Cancels Contract with US Organiser," *Bangkok Post*, 30 November 2006; and "Film Festival Postponed Until July," *Bangkok Post*, 22 December 2006. The decision to reduce the budget to a reported 130 million baht most likely relates directly to the coup, insofar as the political crisis has been delaying the allocation of budgets to all government departments. But recently the short film festival director (and now the main BKK IFF programmer) Chalida also pointed out that Kong's activism through writing could plausibly have contributed to that decision. In her speculation, TAT senior figures do take heed of the fact that such strongly worded criticisms appeared on the pages of the elite *Bangkok Post* newspaper. Comment made at the Annual New Southeast Asian Cinema conference, HELP University, Kuala Lumpur, December 2006.

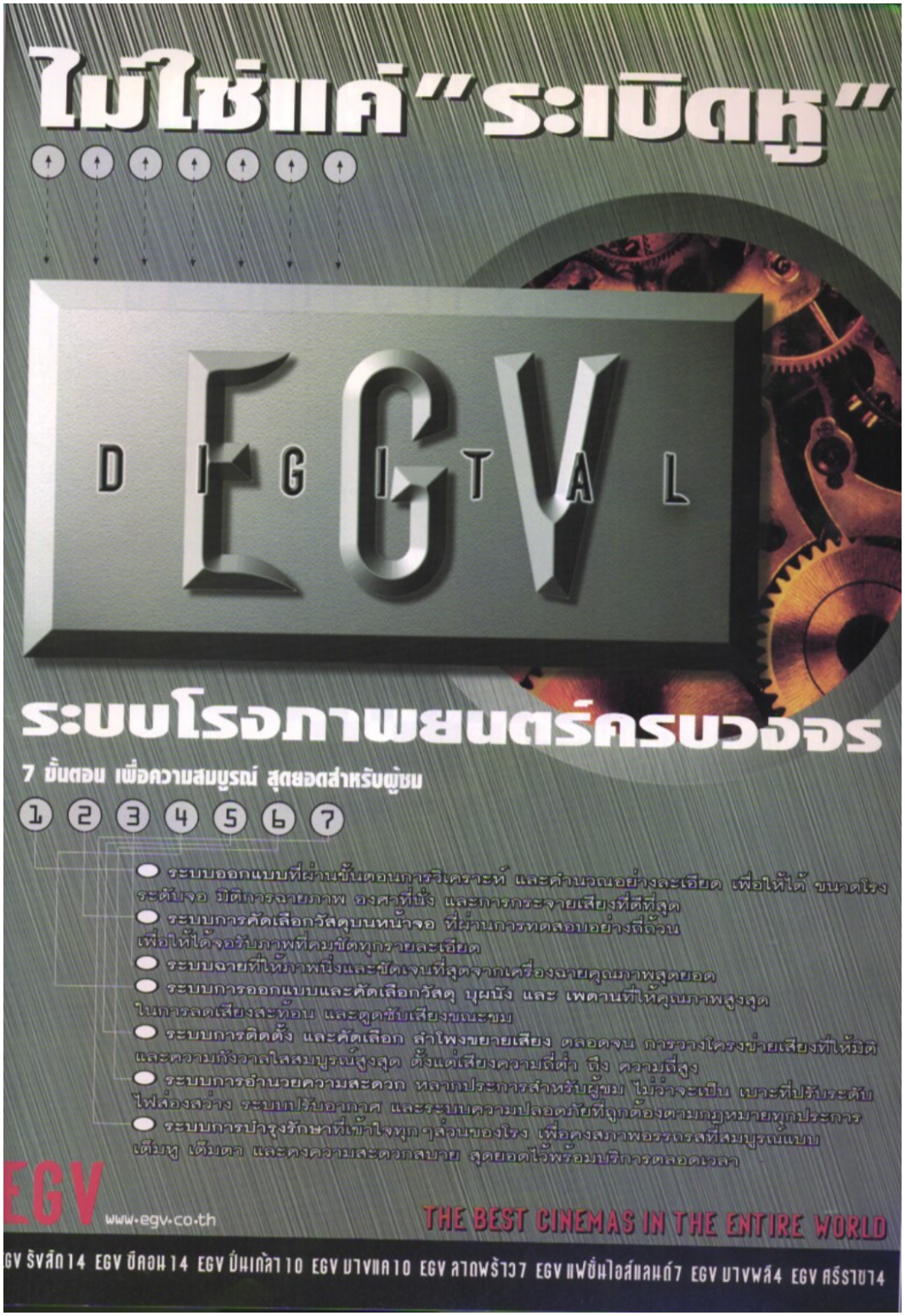

Fig 19. An early advertisement for EGV
seven points of distinction for "The Best Cinemas in the Entire World"
From *Ngan prakad phon rangwan phapphayon haeng chat khrung thi jed* [The 7th Annual National Film Award] 1998.

Fig 20. Advertisement for SF Cinema City: “the ultimate world-class cinemas”

From *Cinemag* September 2001

Fig 21. Advertisement for Major Cineplex "the heart of world-class entertainment"From *Thessakarn phapphayon san khrung thi 6* [The 6th Thai Short Film and Video Festival] 2002

CHAPTER 4. Un-Thai *sakon*: the scandal of teen cinema

Three sequences set in shopping malls, from three films released within a few years of each other around the mid-1990s:

The first is a nonsensically titled, eminently perishable comedy of the much-maligned 'school skirts and shorts [*kraprong baan khasan*]' genre. *Baeb wa lok ni...nam tao hoo lae khru rabiab* ('It's Like...Soya Milk and Miss Manners', dirs. Pongkaew Sa-nguanthai and Chatchawan Klongchang, 1994) is 99 knockabout minutes of low-tech, lowbrow comedy featuring a gang of uniformed schoolgirls, the spinsterish 'Miss Manners', and a volleyball team captain of the pretty boy variety. The girls are browsing in the lingerie floor of a mall on a school day. A lewd looking man seems to be following them around, so they hatch a plan to teach "the perv" a lesson. Luring him into the toilet, they corner him with brooms and drain un-blockers, cue absurdly whirling keyboard soundtrack, silly contorted facial expressions and dumb nasally squeaks of protest from the victim of their slapstick assault. Lying face up, eyes bulging in an exaggerated expression of shock, the man pulls out an ID card identifying himself as the school warden; cue the girls' exaggeratedly arched eyebrows and dropped jaws. In the idiom of the lowbrow comedy, the sequence externalises society's anxiety about young girls roaming loose in the city, and resolves it in appealingly silly fashion through a string of comical sketches featuring the girls' resourcefulness in putting grown men in their place; a pattern which recurs throughout the film.

The second is a slickly produced musical financed by a pop conglomerate, a love on campus genre reinvented through enframed images of fantastical attraction. *Jakrayan see daeng* (The Red Bike Story, dirs. Euthana Mukdasanit and Niphon Piwnaen, 1997) is a star vehicle for the conglomerate's then best-selling Eurasian teen star, Tata Young. Here she dons thick-rimmed glasses to play an academically precocious, nerdy freshman, nursing a crush for label mate Mos,[1] aka Pathipan Patthaweekan. In the sequence in question, the two go to buy academic books in a

[1] Teen stars are more commonly known by their nicknames. With the explosion of pop culture during the 1980s came the convention of publicly referring to media personalities by the informal rather than official first name.

mall. Sure enough a song and dance routine breaks out, narratively framed as the daydream of one of the characters. But really this is an excuse to feature Tata and Mos in an energetically choreographed duet, accompanied by skate boys and Japonesque girls who move in sync with the image-music vernacular of global youth culture. With its quick zooms and jerky hand-held shots, this music video montage renders 'Thailand' as a fantastically global space for puppy romance.

Its tone could not be further from the alarmist underpinning of the prestigious *Sia dai* (Daughter, 1994), scripted, edited, and directed by Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol as a call to national awakening to the 'epidemic' of drug addiction among youngsters. Graced with the approval of both the education and health ministries, on its release this strange hybrid of overwrought melodrama and pseudo-documentary stylisation became one of the most financially successful Thai films of the 1990s. The sequence in question narrates the self-destructive beginning of a friendship between two schoolgirl junkies after a nasty episode involving near rape in a mall. Wandering around the fun-fair floor on a school day, the duo attracts unwarranted attention from a group of delinquents. The boys, armed with Stanley knives, force the girls to go up with them to a deserted top floor, made to appear sinister with chiaroscuro lighting casting shadows on the gigantic ventilation pipes, accompanied by a violently masculine electric guitar solo – the soundtrack of another generation. Here, the mall is no longer a dream space of global-style fun, fashion and romance, but calls to mind society's anxiety about its youth, coalescing in the hysterical trope of the vulnerability of young girls to the dangers that lurk in the darkened corners of their pleasure dome.

This chapter traces the moment of consolidation of the conglomerate 'music video' teen films to the moment of their de-legitimisation at the onset of the economic crisis, leading to the production of heritage films in their place. Industrially speaking, this recent cycle of teen films has played a significant role in helping to organise the film industry into the monopolistic form largely operative today, whose main characteristics are the unprecedented dependency of production on metropolitan conglomerate financing, and increasing rationalisation of film production labour in the model of moving toward a 'professionalised' industry. It was the success of the

teen films that strengthened the vertical integration of production with exhibition and distribution, and delivered for the first time the horizontal integration of production with domestic conglomerate pop and television entertainment outfits. More importantly still, a new textual aesthetic emerged to help secure this unprecedented scale of transition to a monopolistic, and largely domestic finance-based mode of industrial organisation. The defining aesthetic feature of the teen films can be seen in the mall sequences juxtaposed above, which distinguish films addressed to teen audiences to films addressed to 'Thais in general'. While the visually undistinguished, merrily nonsensical *Nam tao hoo…* speaks to youth culture from within; the visually stimulating pop star vehicle *Jakrayan see daeng* signals a shift toward the pop conglomerates' appropriation of that culture from without, in a dynamic that plays on youthful self-projection and fantasy. In other words, the latter inscribes youth as a category of spectatorship, anticipating the film (and pop) consumption of teenagers and young adults. By contrast, *Sia dai* speaks of the malaise of 'youth culture' to the 'concerned' Thai parent-citizen. Adopting what might be called an ethnographic speaking position, it claims to represent – 'from the outside' – a domain of social or cultural life implied to be hitherto invisible and under threat. In this respect *Sia dai* prefigured the narrativising address of the official heritage films that shortly followed from it.

Pleasures of nonsense: representing youth to itself

The specific cycle of teen films explored here began in 1985, with the success of the comedy *Seum noi noie kalon mak noie* (Happy-Go-Lucky, dirs. Uncle aka Adirek Wataleela and Pued aka Thanit Jitnukul),[2] and ended with the blockbuster success of *Nang Nak*. This intentionally absurdly named comedy was financed by Tai Entertainment, a small production house set up by Visute Poolvoralaks (one of the previous owners of the EGV multiplex chain). It was while working for the distribution branch of his family's enterprise that he befriended two film poster

[2] Like the stars, the directors of teen films were commonly called by their nicknames. What is interesting to observe is that as the era gave way to heritage films and the internationalisation of 'new Thai cinema', filmmakers' official names began to be adopted again as symbol of newfound seriousness. For this reason the most well known directors of the teen era will be referred to by their nickname and official name.

painters, Adirek/Uncle and Thanit/Pued (now highly-respected producers and directors) who in their spare time had written a screenplay about a group of young men sharing a rented house in a Bangkok *soi* (a residential side street) – what Adirek/Uncle himself once described as a simple story close to his own experience.[3] Visute recalls that he was drawn to the script's novelty: it eschewed the romantic pairing formulae that underscored the star system for a story that celebrated group friendship; and equally it turned its back on the 'plight of the first wife' family melodrama that had become prevalent during the mid-1980s.[4] He persuaded an uncle who had been casting around for a film project to put down half of the 2 million baht production budget, and begged his reluctant father, a successful distributor and exhibitor, for the other half.[5] According to Adirek/Uncle, a script that had started out as drama drawn from real life was changed to a comedy. With that, Tai Entertainment came into being; and nonsensical comedy became its signature.

*Seum noi noie...*proved Visute's father wrong. Earning around 4 million baht, the film netted a respectable enough profit. But its biggest impact was to highlight the possibility of breaking into the first-run market by targeting youth. In contrast to the prevailing wisdom that Thai films needed to cater to the nationwide market, primarily through the star vehicles, the success of a comedy consisting of a large cast of young newcomers suggested otherwise. Tai Entertainment broke the mould in addressing the metropolitan first-run market by producing movies targeting a specific generation within it. The national second-run or third-run markets would not exactly be ignored, but since the established practice of selling film packages to regional distributing agents meant that each film could only earn so much, the first-run market, though often proven to be inhospitable and unpredictable for local products, promised the greatest profit. The secret was to come up with a style of films in anticipation of

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[3] Anonymous, *Khao sang nang thai khunnaphap kan yang rai* [How Do Quality Thai Filmmakers Work?] (Bangkok: Editor 1999, 1999), 71-72.

[4] Pinyo Trisuriyatamma, *Khatha sek ma hai pen thewada: beuang lang khwam khid ti khub khleuan nang thai su yuk thong* [From Dog to God: Thai Cinema's Golden Age and the Thinkers Behind It] (Bangkok: openbooks, 2003), 173.

[5] Ubagong, *Phiang sieaw neung thyung.nang thai* [Fragments of Thai Cinema] (Bangkok: Pry, 1990), 229. Pinyo, *Khatha sek ma hai pen thewada: beuang lang khwam khid thi khub khleuan nang thai su yuk thong* [From Dog to God: Thai Cinema's Golden Age and the Thinkers Behind It], 174.

audiences who are sufficiently large in numbers, and sufficiently stable in their film viewing habits. For this reason, Visute could claim in a 1989 interview, with several successful teen comedies to his name, that it made most financial sense for Tai Entertainment to make films for Bangkok cinemagoers, characterising the nationwide market as, for him at least, an unknown quality.[6] Echoing Adirek/Uncle's comment that he and his fellow director drew the inspiration for their debut from personal experience and a milieu most familiar to them, the marketing brain of this small production house talked of trying to make films to reach audiences most familiar to him. That he came from a family of exhibitors who led the way in building Bangkok mini-theatres was surely no coincidence. The instant success of its films can be seen an opportune response to the trend whereby youngsters were being seen around this new entertainment space.[7]

In terms of form, what is interesting to observe about Tai Entertainment's early successes is their combination of excess intervals of a jokily pastiche sort, with a plot that harks back to the rite-of-passage convention of the *khluen luk mai* [new wave] films. Justin Wyatt clarifies that excess is "those moments within the film which seem to work against the developing story, encouraging an appreciation for the film's formal composition". It can be understood as techniques that "do not form specific patterns across the film", which "freeze the narrative" drawing the attention of viewers to pleasures other than the one of following narrative progression.[8] To be

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[6] Anonymous, *Khao sang nang thai khunnaphap kan yang rai* [How Do Quality Thai Filmmakers Work?], 59.

[7] Also interesting to note is that in the late 1980s, Tai Entertainment was one of the first production houses to shift to shooting in widescreen, in a departure from the still routine practice of shooting and projecting in cinemascope. On this issue, filmmakers with the ambition to break into the first-run market sided with reputable veterans such as Chatrichalerm, who saw that making the long overdue switch to widescreen was necessary for Thai filmmakers to break into the international market. As the film critic Sananjit Bangsapan documents in an informative collection of interviews with all the major film directors of the 1980s, this issue divided producers and filmmakers into those who championed global technological parity, some of whom nursed the dream of international breakthrough, from distributors of Chinese films and Thai B-grade filmmakers, whose main source of profit came from the second-run and third-run markets nationwide. For the latter, the demand to collectively shift to widescreen did not make economic sense, since, they claimed, exhibitors upcountry were not prepared to fund the cost of changing the projection technology. See Sananjit Bangsapan, *Sonthana 12 phu kamkap nang thai ruam samai* [Conversations with 12 Contemporary Thai Film Directors] (Bangkok: Nang Video, 1992), 65-67, 138-44, 219-21.

[8] The 'music video' interval is one such example of excess. See Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, 1st ed., *Texas Film Studies Series.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 27-28.

more specific, while the excess intervals in Tai Entertainment's early films tend to allude to an array of global filmic and pop cultural references, the narrative that sometimes struggles hard to 'logically' frame them seems to refer to the 1970s social realist trope of graduates, (mostly) young men, setting out to find their true vocations in the real world. The snappily titled buddy comedy, *Chalui* ('It's A Breeze', dir. Adirek/Uncle, 1988), often regarded as the film which bears the strongest stylistic signature among all of Tai Entertainment's early output, can be studied as a key example in this regard. *Chalui* stars the most popular cast members of *Seum noi noie...*, the lanky bespectacled half-Filipino Billy Ogan and the dark-skinned self-styled hard-rocker, M aka Surasak Wongthai. Billy and M are here cast again as housemates, playing losers and recent graduates Pong and Tong respectively. Being young men of their time, the duo is less driven by the compulsion to leave Bangkok behind and find work upcountry as doctors, teachers, and so on, than their shared dream of rock stardom. And appropriately for a film of a transitional nature, *Chalui* restlessly mixes nonsensical verbal puns, knowing visual allusions, music video moments of heartfelt sentimentality, within a narrative that half-parodies, yet half-endorses, the boom time celebration of get rich quick schemes and pointless media stardom.

It is worth describing in some detail the eight minutes or so of its opening sequence, in order to highlight those formal aspects that made *Chalui* seem, on its release, too '(post)modern' for words. With its crazily energetic cutting of noir pastiche, horror pastiche, fifties rock'n'roll, and a homage to Michael Jackson's moonwalk, the sequence reveals the kind of aesthetic shift that has, for better or for worse, earned the comedy its 'canonical' reputation as the film that set a whole new standard of self-conscious display of 'cinematic-ness' for other 'quality' Thai films to aspire to. *Chalui* opens with the sound of Billy singing a doo-wop song celebrating youthful dreams, as the credits roll against a background of shots of musical instruments signifying retro rock'n'roll: a piano, a fifties electric guitar, a double bass, a cool chrome mike. The sequence then cuts to a concert scene where a young man (Tong/M) wearing cool shades, a black dinner jacket and a red bow tie, is seen miming the very same song on the stage to adoring fans below. Toward the end of the

song, a doorway slowly opens at the opposite end of the stage, letting the stream of neo-noir blue filter light fill into the darkened concert hall. Out of that light steps a man (Pong/Billy) wearing shades, a trilby, and a mackintosh. Pointing to the stage he shouts: "that's my song!" The music abruptly shifts from doo-wop to pulsing eighties electro pop. The pair chase each other down a stairwell – every cut a long shot to show off chiaroscuro shadows as much as to convey what little narrative information there is. Then the allusion to horror: the noir detective lookalike falls flat on his back, the synth soundtrack becomes a low eerie hum. The song thief – thinking his pursuer is dead – saunters off with the latter's trilby, but a close-up of the detective's wiggling hand suggests otherwise. He rises growling in an unnaturally low, dragging voice: "that's my hat". The electro pop and chase starts up again, but this time the detective whose sneering face clearly indicates otherworldly menace begins to appear in every direction that the thief runs to. He hits the thief on the head with a pipe, then another abrupt cut – and we are transported elsewhere, a reception room in what appears to be a hotel. Billy/Pong, now wearing a dinner jacket and a bow tie, taps M/Tong lightly on the head with a drumstick, telling him to pack up the drum set. The stuttering M/Tong (a sly in-joke referring to Adirek/Uncle's one time co-director Thanit/Pued) is clearly the sidekick in this new scenario; and the blue light is gone. Billy/Pong turns his back to go out of the door, awaiting him a mob of screaming fans. He ducks to the men's room where he admires his reflection in the mirror, does a smug little Michael Jackson moonwalk to the urinal, and with his back turned to the camera appears to be undoing his fly. Cut to a close-up of a smile spreading across his face, followed by another abrupt cut showing water trickling down the top mattress of a bunk bed. We are now finally in the 'real world' of the story world: Pong on the top bunk has just wet his bed, and Tong his housemate below is very cross indeed. The opening sequence might have been a dream, or given sudden the juxtaposition of noir-horror-musical pastiche with the schoolboy homage to Michael Jackson, a dream within a dream – all this is of course left unexplained.

As chapter 2 notes, stylistic borrowing is not a new feature in Thai filmmaking. But what seems to be strikingly novel in *Chalui*'s case is the knowingness that distinguishes its citation of film styles from elsewhere. For it to be

effectively comical, that eight minutes of runaway pastiche has to assume – in a playful narrating wink – a viewing sensibility of a comparably knowing sort; and it has to assume such viewing sensibility to be sufficiently prevalent among this or that group to which the film addressed itself. In other words, through nonsense of this intertextual sort, *Chalui* privileges the knowing spectator whose aesthetic sensibility implies first and foremost delight in 'getting' an international array of generic pop cultural references. The 1980s boom in Thailand signalled also the insertion of the country into this aesthetic economy. And it was the urban young born from the 1960s who came to be at the vanguard of its global image flow, consuming transnational pop culture in a rapidly expanded market; and gradually shifting toward producing, as well as consuming, their localised idioms. *Chalui*'s opening sequence is a mode of address that 'speaks from the inside' in this sense.

The verbal register of the comedy can also be regarded as exemplary in this context. The dialogues make representational a form of 'private', informal, risqué speech among young friends. When the buddies Tong and Pong first meet, they half-heartedly respect the polite pronoun couplet *khun* (you)/*phom* (me). As soon as they become housemates, the duo shift down several gears to *myung* (you)/*ku* (me), and fling at each other such affectionate profanities as *aye hia* (bastard!) or *aye ham hiaew* (shrivelled bollocks!). Elsewhere the dialogue is full of street slang derived from the delightful youth trend of hybridised Thai-lish: weur! ('over' aka OTT), *mai seriad* (not 'serious' aka it's cool), or the amusingly camp *okay loei*.[9] Meanwhile middle-aged absurdity is engendered in a female media personality known for her witticisms, here playing an alarmingly bespectacled, exaggeratedly 'correct Thai speaking' spinster aunt. Similarly, the combination of toilet humour[10] and absurd bodily gags, address young viewers with a colluding wink as nonsensical in-jokes.

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[9] Appropriately enough, in *Chalui*'s case the main characters speak in the actors' own voice. In 1988 the convention of using voice artists to dub over the dialogues was dying out among Thai films with first-run ambition. In this case, had the protagonists' expletive-studded conversations been dubbed over by voice artists specialising in the 'correct' tone of enunciation, the feel of *Chalui* as a film that spoke to its own generation would have been lost.

[10] Such scatological attraction appeared to be one of the stylistic signatures of teen films. In her short survey of the patterns of plot, characterisation, prop and dialogue of teen films released in the early 1990s, film academic Jamroenlak mused over what seems to have been a new trend: unmotivated bathroom and toilet scenes. See "*Banteuk jak nang thai 2535* [Thai Film Diary 1992]," in *Rangwan phapphayon haeng chat khrung thi 3* [3rd National Film Awards] (1994).

For all the pleasure it offered of addressing youth from the inside, though, what is so fascinating about *Chalui* is the way it prefigured the full-blown shift toward institutionalising the youth spectator figure as consumer of domestically manufactured pop. In the last third of the film, three moments of flimsily motivated excess follow each other. The first is a montage to a rock song sung by M/Tong, shot again in blue filter lens. It shows Tong's decision to leave Bangkok, and Pong's last minute decision to find him and stop him. The song plays to images of the boys wandering desolately in the city's picturesque main railway station, by the end of which Tong changes his mind and goes back to the rented home, where the duo is reunited in rain soaked (romantic!) delight (see figs. 22, 23). Clearly, given its self-contained quality as music video excess, and as with both of the concert scenes that follow, these weakly motivated intervals provide a platform for Billy and M to advertise their real life transition to rock-pop stardom, even if this is ultimately denied to the characters they play in the film.

Conglomerate teen films: recognising and desubstantialising youth culture

Competition came for Tai Entertainment in the early 1990s, when a domestic pop label began to take an interest in producing teen films. What is significant to note here is the timing: RS Promotion turned its attention to film production after the success of Tai Entertainment's first schoolroom comedy, released in 1991, *Kling wai korn phor sorn wai* (The Time Not Beyond, dir. King aka Somching Srisupap).[11]

In the following year, the pop label tested the market with a musical starring one of its stars, Touch na Takuatung. *Rong ta laeb plaeb* ('The Magic Shoes', dir. Prachya Pinkaew, 1992) is a whimsical story of a boy, also called Touch, and his magical pair of dancing trainers, a perfect excuse to incorporate music video intervals featuring tinny pop songs and hip-hop influenced choreography. In a similarly playful tone to the opening sequence of *Chalui,* this film too flirts with spectatorial knowingness by citing films from elsewhere. One chase sequence has Touch jumping

[11] The observation about timing is the suggestion of film critic Suthakorn Santithawat. See "*Nang thai nai thodsawat lang (2530-2539)* [Thai Films of the Last Decade (1987-1996)]," *Sarakhadi*, August 1997, 132. Similarly, Anchalee suggests that by the end of the 1980s, the largest group of teen film fans were literally that – adolescents aged 17 or under. See "Endearing Afterglow," 455.

on a skateboard in an attempt to evade a ridiculously dressed bunch of baddies. The sequence of course alludes to the famous opening of *Back to the Future*, where the Michael J. Fox character Marty whizzes across town, hanging off the back of a truck, to get to school. And sure enough *Rong ta laeb plaeb* cheerfully pays homage to Marty's unconventional school ride by cross-cutting those precise images, shown as a film within a film on the TV screen, and the exact same moves executed by Touch, framed and shot as an imitation of the Hollywood original in a playful display of its own status as a copy. A couple of years later, RS Promotion officially launched its film subsidiary, RS Film, with the release of the groundbreaking blockbuster *Lok thang bai hai nai khon diaew* (Romantic Blues, dir. Rashane Limtrakul, 1995). The moment for horizontal integration had arrived. By this stage the Bangkok multiplex boom was under way; Adirek/Uncle had left Tai Entertainment to join RS Film, working as producer on Rashane's hyper-stylised debut. With it, a new film look announced itself under the conglomerate production model led by this pop label.[12] Its boss Surachai Chetchotisak liked to describe his production house as consisting of "*khon roon mai* [the new generation]",[13] justifying its teen orientation by citing a self-conducted market research showing that "85% of cinemagoers are teenagers".[14]

Lok thang bai... is a landmark film in several senses. According to Rashane, who started out after graduating from an elite university as a music video director and record promoter for RS Promotion, the production budget for his debut was around 7 million baht, with another 2.5 million or so in post-production.[15] In other words, a

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[12] Not long after, a major conglomerate Grammy Entertainment followed suit by setting up its own film subsidiary. Grammy's production house lagged behind RS Film and Tai Entertainment during this period, but has since the early 2000s re-emerged as one of the strongest producers of 'multiplex quality', and international aspiring, Thai films. The conglomerate was rechristened GMM Grammy in 2001 in a move reflective of its ambitious expansion to become the leading media conglomerate in the country, and no doubt the region.

[13] Wandee Suntivutimetee, "*Lok maya* [the World of Illusion]," *Sarakhadi*, August 1997, 156-9. Siwaporn Kongsuwan, "*Surachai Chetchotisak hia hor haeng RS* [Surachai Chetchotisak RS's 'Hia Hor']," *Cinemag*, September 1999, 99.

[14] Though in this 1997 interview, RS Film's boss was keeping his options open by emphasising equally that the ultimate aim would be for audience expansion of the most inclusive sort. But meanwhile, he noted, "reality dictates that we must secure the most established market first". Wandee, "*Lok maya* [the World of Illusion]," 158. RS Film has undergone a few bouts of restructuring in the 2000s. It is now an umbrella organisation housing several smaller, individually managed production houses, each aiming to tailor their films to different markets.

[15] Pinyo, *Khatha sek ma hai pen thewada: beuang lang khwam khid thi khub khleuan nang thai su yuk thong* [From Dog to God: Thai Cinema's Golden Age and the Thinkers Behind It], 149-50.

decade on from Tai Entertainment's surprise success, the budget for producing a film targeting the first-run/multiplex youth market in tandem with the nationwide market had increased five-fold. It is clear that much of this budget went on enhancing the look of the film. Whereas *Chalui* combined the artificialised look and fast cutting rhythm of its intervals of excess within an overall narrative scheme filled with mundane enframed images, Rachane's debut went one step further with delirious play of images to an ever-present soundtrack throughout. A 'music video' love triangle, all affected angular shots and emphatic slow motions, *Lok thang bai...* features two of the most successful stars signed up to RS Promotion. Its combination of visual gloss, teen stars, pop songs, and the hybridisation of teen romance with the shootout aesthetic of the Hong Kong gangster movie, was rewarded with immediate commercial success. The 55 million baht box-office performance, then an unprecedented level of financial success for a Thai film, accelerated what was to be disparagingly referred to as the trend for the *khai tape* [record label] movie.[16]

Lok thang bai... can be regarded as the moment in which the high concept mode of production began to be localised as the industrial norm of the 'quality' Thai multiplex film. In Wyatt's study of what he calls the most influential economic and aesthetic mode of film production in post-classical Hollywood, he defines the high concept film as a form of product differentiation distinguished by "an emphasis on style in production and...the integration of the film with its marketing".[17] Hence the term high concept, which refers to the kind of film whose 'concept', conveyed through a strong visual scheme, is instantly recognisable and easily transferable across different merchandising platforms. Wyatt points out that the high concept film is an industrial mode developed in response to the shift toward conglomerate ownership and the proliferation of new audio-visual technologies, leading to new channels of film distribution such as pay TV or video.[18] It emphasises "the look": the image of the film and especially the match between image and soundtrack, "the hook": the marketing hook to facilitate the merchandising of other goods or

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[16] Siwaporn, "*Surachai Chetchotisak hia hor haeng RS* [Surachai Chetchotisak RS's 'Hia Hor']," 102-3.

[17] Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, 20, 22.

[18] Ibid., chap. 3.

entertainment products related to the film, and "the book": the reliance on narrative discourses which conform to generic expectations combined with simplified characterisation.[19] It is a mode of industrial film production which aims to differentiate its product the better to reach specific market segments, and whose reliance on marketing hype facilitates the saturated release pattern of multiplex exhibition rather than the traditional pattern of staggered releases.[20]

The key textual features specified by Wyatt of the high concept film illustrate why *Lok thang bai...* looks the way it does; while the connection of the high concept film with the introduction of saturated releases goes a long way toward explaining why it attained the box-office figure that it did. As indicated earlier, the concept of the film can be summed up in one line: a love triangle involving two brothers and a girl, starring RS Promotion's upcoming popsters (who had by that stage released one or two albums under the conglomerate's record label). The simplified narrative and characterisation serve as a generic frame supporting the real attraction of the music video intervals, licensing the heightened display of visual virtuosity. The film opens in excessively spectacular fashion; the combination of extreme close-ups, slow motion, rapid cross-cutting and hysterical string soundtrack extract an otherworldly ambient from what turns out to be a rather mundane plot event: Mai (Tao aka Somchai Khemklad), a young mechanic, is picking the lock of a car belonging to the father of schoolgirl Pon (Nook aka Suthida Kasemsant na Ayudhaya). Pon mistakes Mai for a thief but it turns out that he is doing her father a favour, since the latter had left his keys inside the car. The film sustains its stylised look throughout, visualising a city dreamscape of light and shadow, a Bangkok of sometimes noirish distortion, sometimes retrochic gloss, a fashionably 'cinematic' city which fly by in a dizzying array of camera movement, speed and showy compositional angles. Images only exist here to draw attention to their quality as that: a panoramic river view at dusk against a condominium skyline; a thunderous rain soaked street shot in blue filter; natural sunbeam boring through the tarpaulin covering an indoor, retro-style market; the sinister shadows of a shipyard at night. In keeping with the generic connotation of the

[19] Ibid., 16-20.
[20] Ibid., 104-12.

cinematic city, the protagonists' clothes and a few key props indulge in the fantasy of a colder place and an older time. Inexplicably Pon appears in some of the scenes wrapped in cute Japonesque style winter sweaters and woolly hats. Her father drives a gleaming fifties car, whose fitful contribution to plot development is that it repeatedly breaks down so Mai and his younger brother, who is also in love with Pon (another RS Promotion in-house star), keep getting called back to her house. The music video intervals occur now in more or less unmotivated fashion, unhampered by the sense still present in *Chalui* that some kind of compositional motivation, however flimsy ('it was just a dream after all'), must account for the sudden shifts in the film's look. Here Pon riding into town in Mai's car is sufficient cue for a love song, played whole to a snappily edited montage featuring close-ups of the stars and spectacularised spaces (see figs. 24-27).

The aim of cross-platform marketability clearly dictates the aesthetics of *Lok thang bai...* Here, the teen stars constitute the pre-sold element Wyatt identifies as integral to high concept success.[21] (And sure enough with the release of the film came the soundtrack album.) What is interesting to note is how such pre-sold element was better equipped to translate across, on a generational basis, the multiplex market and the nationwide market (if not beyond that into some neighbouring countries where Thai pop and television entertainment was beginning to dominate during the 1990s). The visual scheme comprises a form of product differentiation for the multiplex market, signalling here its status as a Thai film that could stylistically hold its own in the new *sakon/*transnational exhibition space. Outside of the multiplex setting, the star presence increased RS Film's bargaining power with regional distribution agents. In one interview boss Surachai would neither confirm nor deny the murmurings that during the 1990s, it was RS Film's high concept teen vehicles that extracted the best price from the distribution agents.[22] By connecting film and pop in this manner, RS Promotion became better placed than their competitors to profit-maximise from both the multiplex market and the second-tier or non-theatrical market. The music video teen star vehicles enabled it to expand into metropolitan multiplex exhibition while

[21] Ibid., 80-81.

[22] Siwaporn, "*Surachai Chetchotisak hia hor haeng RS* [Surachai Chetchotisak RS's 'Hia Hor']," 101.

making its presence felt in the traditionally two-tier system of film distribution and exhibition.

More importantly, elements now missing from high concept teen films, when compared to Tai Entertainment's early hits, indicate a substantial shift that had taken place in terms of filmic address. Dialogues were now generally cleaned up, with a corresponding dwindling of toilet gags. Substituting earthy language and toilet humour with visual appeal, and the seduction of pop fandom, the 'music video movies' addressed their audiences less from the 'inside' – by enframing rude bodily jokes, verbal slang, or nonsensical gags drawn from the youth cultural milieu for the pleasure of recognition – than from the outside in their appeal as commodified distraction. This mode of address recognised and appropriated adolescent self-imagining in matters of love, or their desire for connectedness to the world at large through fashion and global mass culture, and externalised these subterranean currents as visual excess. Visual thrill and sensate stimulation were now harnessed to maximise the consumption of the multi-media pop-film product, whilst emptying the films of the barbed sense of nonsense that characterises youth's representation of itself at its best.

Un-Thai or *thaithai*?

Sure enough, with their staging of the generic cityscape and their indulgence of music video intervals, the record label teen films quickly came under stinging attacks from anxious observers outside of the youth milieu. What is interesting about the logic of these attacks is their tendency to slip between aesthetic judgment and a cultural nationalist one. In other words, the dislike of a derivative film style became all too easily expressed as alarm for the apparent cultural weakness of 'the nation's future'. The signal came early on. In *Chalui*'s case, as film critic Suthakorn Santithawat pointed out, its humorous pastiche provoked mutterings that much of the film was cribbed from elsewhere, especially in this instance Hong Kong.[23]

[23] Suthakorn, "*Nang thai nai thodsawat lang (2530-2539)* [Thai Films of the Last Decade (1987-1996)]," 131.

More interesting still is the complaint of Somching/King, one of Tai Entertainment's most successful teen film directors, against the dismissal of one of his films as a poor piece of imitation. His comedy about a quirky young female graduate's adventure of (romantic) self-discovery in San Francisco, *Prik khee noo kap moo ham* (Chilli and Ham, 1989), alludes to the famous axe attack scene in the Stanley Kubrick horror, *The Shining*, through much the same gestures, shot composition and editing. That recreation got the director into some trouble: "They said I copied that shot from *The Shining*. I intended the shot as a joke but many people didn't get that and so they accused me of copying. The truth is, the mood I wanted to create in that scene is comedy not horror".[24] The fascinating question here is why such light-hearted citation of a Hollywood film, which humorously marks the fact of its own second-hand status by copying in more or less exact fashion the compositional framing and editing of the Kubrick sequence, provoked the kind of criticisms that forced upon the director the indignity of having to explain his own joke. What might otherwise have been called playful homage was instead taken as shoddy proof of imitation, a sign of an impoverished ersatz imagination and a symptom of the weakness of Thai culture in the face of Hollywood's global dominance and Hong Kong cinema's influence then in Asia.[25]

As chapter 2 discusses, the playfulness with which early Thai filmmakers borrowed from the stylistic conventions of the Hollywood musical is one example of a nascent Bangkok bourgeoisie confident in its mission as mediating agent of *sakon*/modernity. In some contrast the anxieties raised by conglomerate teen films bear signs of much greater insecurity leading to the search for new culprits of reckless

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[24] See interview with Somching/King in Sananjit, *Sonthana 12 phu kamkap nang thai ruam samai* [Conversations with 12 Contemporary Thai Film Directors], 248.

[25] See also Pensiri Sawaitviharee's work on the stylistic postmodernisation of studio-funded Thai films released between 1995-97. She points out that such features that have come to be defined as characteristic of the 'postmodern film style', such as intertextuality and pastiche, are strongly present in the films of this period. Interestingly, in her article (based on an academic thesis) "*Nang thai: postmodern khae nai* [How Postmodern Are Thai Films?]" she identifies such stylistic features as the element in common among conglomerate teen films or in the debuts of directors who shortly came to be identified with the 'post-teen' New Thai Cinema. For instance, Pensiri points out that Oxide Pang's time travel exploration of karma, *Thaa fa likhid* (Who Is Running?, 1997) self-consciously cites *Back To the Future*. While Pen-ek's *Fun bar karaoke* alludes to *Clerk*, among an array of other (non-Thai) films. See her "*Nang Thai: Postmodern Khae Nai* [How Postmodern Are Thai Films?]," *Nang: Thai* [Thai Film Quarterly] 7 (1999/2000).

imitation of *sakon*/global and implicitly un-Thai ways. Craig Reynolds argues that during the 1990s, intensified capitalisation spawned a renewed fear of "the cult of imitation", articulated especially forcefully by Thai public intellectuals who tended toward a pessimistic assessment of the impact of globalisation on Thai society, and who signalled their pessimism in the language of fear that "universal culture will overwhelm and dominate local agency".[26] More generally, as the decade drew to a traumatic close, such anxiety concerning Thailand's susceptibility to transnational capital and cultural forces found common sense expression in scrutinising the apparent loss of Thainess of the folk-devil[27] figure of youth, an anxiety which coalesced in public hostility against the most visible, the most ostensibly postmodernised signs, images, icons of 'youth culture'. Predictably enough, as one such desubstantialised recognition of the living forces of youth culture, taste, fashion and experience, high concept teen films came under heavy fire.

In 1998, as the full impact of the economic downturn began to make itself felt in widespread redundancy and renewed political instability, there emerged in relation to the cinema an alarmist rhetoric that drew its emotional force from the crisis discourse circulating in the air more generally: *nang thai kamlang ja taai* [is Thai

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[26] Craig J. Reynolds, "Globalization and Cultural Nationalism in Modern Thailand," in *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand*, ed. Joel S. Kahn (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), 130-4. The term "the cult of imitation" first came into public circulation in 1915 in an article penned by the anglophile, England-educated King Vajiravudh. Reynolds contextualises the moment of its emergence in the following way: "An attempted coup in 1912 had resulted in the arrest of ninety-one persons, some of whom were imprisoned for a dozen years. Apart from personal dissatisfaction with the king and jealousy at his attempts to train a junior cadet corps of Wild Tigers, the more politically astute of the conspirators were critical of the monarchy as an "unprogressive and dying institution". The Young Turk movement, the democratic revolution in Portugal, and Japan's constitutional monarchy were "foreign models" that motivated at least some of the officers...The Bolshevik triumph a few years hence did not give him any comfort either. Not least of these foreign models, because of proximity and the large number of Chinese immigrants in Siam, was the Kuomintang victory and the establishment of a republic in China in 1911-12. Vajiravudh in "The Cult of Imitation" referred scathingly to Sun Yat-sen's wearing of a "frock coat", seeing in this mere item of clothing a sign of a deviant and dangerous European political ideology." See Ibid., 132-3.

[27] As John Clarke et al. explain with reference to post-war Britain, one of the ways in which society responds to disruptive social change is to scrutinise what youth is up to. When social anxieties stemming from deep crises fail to find organised political expression, they are displaced onto subordinate social groups. See John Clarke et al., "Subcultures, Cultures and Class: A Theoretical Overview," in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, eds. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchinson, 1976), 71-74.

cinema about to die?].[28] The surface symptom was the downward spiral in the total number of films released, from over a hundred in 1990 to less than twenty in 1997. In reality, as industry observers point out, the decade's steady downward trend had to do with the collapse of B-grade filmmaking.[29] While the leading production houses were shifting toward allocating higher budgets for fewer films, in conformity to the new industrial norm of high production value products accompanied by well-orchestrated promotion campaigns. Nevertheless, given the dramatically reduced total number of '(our) Thai films' at an especially tumultuous moment in national life, within a context in which consumerism and the slavish acquisition of global life-styles were blamed, rightly or wrongly, for its economic woes; a 'cultural' explanation came to powerfully overshadow the more mundane one of industrial re-orientation toward monopoly consolidation. The finger of blame for the seeming extinction of Thai cinema at this moment – Thai cinema implied now to be an institution of Thai culture rather than an industry – pointed of course to the music video teen movies. Why? In the words of one commentator, published in 1998, "the cult of imitation plaguing Thai filmmaking [*karn kerd latthi auw yang khong karn sang nang thai*] at the end of this decade must be seen as an unwitting case of digging one's own grave".[30] For this writer, the heritage of Thai cinema was fast being lost in the trend for producing pale imitations of Hong Kong comedies and action blockbusters, resulting in the culturally degraded formulae of "delinquents from broken homes taking it out on each other by fighting to a pop soundtrack". Similarly, in a case that rings somewhat of the pot

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[28] This forms part of the title of an article by the academic Sakul Punyadatta, "*Nang thai kamlang ja taai lae khad hai pai jak sangkhom thai.?* [Is Thai Cinema About to Disappear from Thai Society?]," in *Ngan prakad phon rangwan phapphayon haeng chat khrung thi jed* [The 7th Annual National Film Award] (1998).

[29] Suthakorn, "*Nang thai nai thodsawat lang (2530-2539)* [Thai Films of the Last Decade (1987-1996)]," 130-1. With the widespread availability of cheap VCD and DVD from the early 2000s, the Thai B-movies have begun to stage a come back. What is interesting to note here is that, unlike the previous era, there is a trend of media conglomerates setting up a specifically designated subsidiary producing B- or niche movies. For instance Mangpong, better known for its chain of CD and DVD stores, has recently begun to make films, not all of which make it to multiplex screens. A good example of this new kind of niche film is the very popular Mangpong-financed horror-pastiche-comedy *Buppha rahtree/*Rahtree: Flower of the Night, whose success spawned the sequel *Buppha rahtree phase 2* (Rahtree Returns, 2005). The first was a cult hit on its domestic multiplex release, and has since gained international profile through sites of cult film exhibition such as festivals specialising in horror. It also circulates very profitably in the domestic nationwide rentals market.

[30] Sakul, "*Nang thai kamlang ja taai lae khad hai pai jak sangkhom thai?* [Is Thai Cinema About to Disappear from Thai Society?]," 44.

calling the kettle black, in that same year *Matichon* newspaper reported that Euthana Mukdasanit, co-director of the Tata-Mos vehicle *Jakrayan see daeng*, lambasted teen film producers for saturating the market with products designed for youth stupefication. In an article that sensationally drew attention to the "abject" box-office gross of Thai films in 1998 compared to Hollywood releases, partly entitled *nang thai meud...mai dai sed Hollywood* [dark days for Thai films as Hollywood overwhelms the theatres], Euthana conjured up several spectator figures whom he suggested had been rudely bypassed during the teen movies' dumb reign. According to this veteran filmmaker, teen films alienated real Thai cinemagoers, those specified as "*mae kha* [matronly market vendors] *chao baan*, *phu yai* [adults]". And in any case, at this stage with the genre reaching saturation point, he claimed that teenagers who had once been so susceptible to 'their' cult of imitation were even beginning to turn away.[31]

What can be drawn out from this moment in which the Thai-culture-in-crisis discourse was revitalised in the domain of cinema? There is of course the underlying fear that 'bad' teen movies would either exert a bad influence on the nation's youngsters, or conversely, that the box-office success of high concept teen movies reflected badly on the moral, intellectual and cultural fibre of the future of the nation.[32] More interesting still, though, is the extent to which hostility against conglomerate teen films had everything to do with the seeming paucity of recognisably Thai-style images on the screen, and nothing to do with the aesthetic mode of the films as such. The 'correctively authentic' high concept heritage films are no less guilty of visual excessiveness, pastiche, well-worn, intertextually motivated plot, simplified characterisation, or over-stylisation; and in their most financially sensational examples, the marketing strategies adopted are if anything far more advanced than the conglomerate teen films' promotion of pop stars through music video intervals. Yet one kind of film look is delegitimised as imitative, while

[31] See "*Wongkarn 'nang thai' meud raidai pee '41 khae 150 lan mai dai sed 'Hollywood'* [Thai Film Industry in the Dark - 1998's 150 Million Gross a Far Cry from Hollywood]," *Matichon*, 19 October 1998.

[32] Hence the other complaint of the author who feared that Thai cinema was about to die: that the spectacular shootout sequences of some of the music video teen movies reflected their lack of regard for morality, ethics and truthfulness. See Sakul, "*Nang thai kamlang ja tie lae khad hai pai jak sangkhom thai.?* [Is Thai Cinema About to Disappear from Thai Society?]," 45.

another, product of the same aesthetic and economic mode, is celebrated as gloriously Thai in the appropriately *sakon* idiom. Much of the battle to be seen as a quality *thai sakon* film depends on the position from which a given film 'speaks': a generic teen film compares badly in the cultural nationalist stake to the heritage film of a respected 'auteur'; and from the spectating position constructed in accompaniment.

As an addendum before we leave behind the teen cycle. That its exemplary films might represent popular cultural heritage of the kind as yet invisible among heritage films of the officially endorsed quality cannot be so slavishly ruled out. Two examples from the 'school skirts and shorts comedies' directed by Somching/King still haunt. *Kling wai korn phor sorn wai* may be a comedy about jokers and losers who veer close to failing their university entrance exams, but it enframes this moment. Senior high dunce Karn comes home from school, where home is a neighbourhood shop house, the milieu of pettily exploitative ethnic Chinese capitalists in Thai films in the social realist and other kinds of canon. He walks through the store and up the stairs to his bedroom, outside of which hangs a black and white ancestral portrait of his deceased grandmother in a high-collar Chinese top. Passing his mother at her desk, busy working out the accounts, he calls out a greeting to *ma* rather than *mae* [the Thai word for mother]. The sequence tells us simply that the boy is a *lukjin*, perhaps one of the first filmic moments in which that ethnic identity is naturalised, rather than stereotypically marked, in the story world of a Thai film.[33] In *Pee neung pheuan kan lae wan assajan khong phom* (My Wonder Year, 1993), ostensibly a sentimental 'school shorts with music video intervals' narrative about a teenage boy who reconnects with the ghost of his elder brother, which cannot help displaying its visual virtuosity in a scene that recreates the special effects of *The Terminator*, the veiled reference to the dead of the 1970s political violence is cathartic. The dead brother, Tuey, committed a suicide some time in the 1970s, partly due to a difficult relationship with their authoritarian father. A flashback sequence toward the end tells us that his death was suicide rather than a road accident, which

[33] In a shift away from caricaturing Chinese figures as the capitalist *jek* [chink], what began to appear in a small number of teen films is striking. In *Kling wai korn...*, *Lok thang bai...*, *O-negative rak ok baeb mai dai* ('O-Negative There's No Design to Love', dir. Pinyo Rootham, 1998), Chineseness dictates the look of a home, situating some of the characters as a *lukjin*, rather than connotes through stereotype capitalist modernisation's exploitation of the (ethnic Thai) people.

happened the night father and son clashed over the young man's fascination with art, protest songs and corrupting books. Finding a paperback copy of *Fa bo kan* [The Sky is No Barrier] in Tuey's bedroom,[34] the furious father declared that he would never be allowed to go to art school in Bangkok: "the place is crawling with goddam militants!" A decade or so after this fateful night, when the family had moved to Bangkok and are prospering from the boom, the ghost of Tuey comes back to save his younger brother from the same fate as him. Ton too is close to throwing his life away, under pressure from the father's demand that as the only remaining son, he should carve out a career for himself in the family firm. In the end the father repents, apologising to the ghost for the error of his ways. This is a dream ending upon which can be read the fantasy of the father figure acknowledging sins committed in the recent past, finally laying to rest young wandering spirits. Its allegorical tone is quite unlike the commemorative *14 tula songkhram prachachon*, whose funereal re-enactment of the demonstrations of 1973, and its fidelity to the disillusioned point of view of a student leader of that period, tends to have the unfortunate effect of suggesting that there are no more stories, public or private, left to tell about this time.

Bourgeois Thai spectatorship: moral panic and the nostalgia film

An alternative to formulaic films addressing youth came early on during the reign of the music video movies, visibly in the guise of Chatrichalerm's *Sia dai*. With its ostensible stance of social concern and didactic self-positioning – as a precautionary tale to parents and their children from the country's most respected royal auteur – the anti-drugs mock documentary eschews youth spectator for its appeal to 'serious' patriots, galvanising a nation of potential cinemagoers with a highly emotive issue. This – what might be called the moral panic mode of address – can be regarded as a strategy of inscribing a 'universally Thai' spectating position. At both textual and extratextual levels, *Sia dai* positioned itself as morally compulsory film viewing for Thais who love the future generation of Thais, displacing the political interpellation

[34] Canonical in Thai socialist literature, Khamsing Sinok's collection of short stories was first published in the late 1950s, then disappeared from circulation for many years during the crackdown on radical publications by the Sarit dictatorship. *Fa bo kan* was subsequently rediscovered by radicalised students and intellectuals in the run up to the 1973 uprising.

of a patriotic subject position onto a cultural one conditional upon the attendance of a film.

The ethnographic narrating stance is evident in *Sia dai*'s mock documentary structure. A large cast consisting of the country's top actors, playing worn down parents, directly address the camera with woeful tales of how they are losing their adolescent daughters to drugs, cataloguing the whole gamut of social malaise: adultery, divorce, alcohol, AIDS, prostitution, poverty, gambling, and so on. Endless scenes of the daughters' drug-taking are accompanied by a self-consciously 'concerned' soundtrack sung by a voice immediately recognisable as the sound of the 1970s 'October generation', reaffirming the textual effect of serious social exposé. Such horrors raised are then partially resolved through a fantasy of family reconciliation and the restoration of male parental authority – an unearned resolution given the narration's litany of parental neglect, abuse, violence, or their fatal bitterness and resignation. Especially melodramatic in this context is the sudden softening of the characters of parents portrayed as the more financially established of the group: the restaurant owner played by Chatrichalerm's long-time actor Sorapong Chatri, and the abattoir owner who suddenly turns up to take his daughter back home, out of harm's way away from Bangkok, where her mother and rapist stepfather live.

Given the strength of sentiment against drugs in bourgeois society more generally, and the exalted status of its director, *Sia dai*'s box-office figure (comparable to RS Film's *Lok thang bai...*) probably needs to be contextualised taking in the impact of compulsory school trip screenings. Yet what might be worth speculating on is the extent to which that combination of the anti-drugs theme and the moral panic mode of address, by playing on bourgeois fears, successfully galvanised that class of adults more generally used to expressing wariness of Thai films into taking their children along to the cinemas. In contrast, the subject matter of Chatrichalerm's next social exposé, *Sia dai 2* (Daughter 2, 1996), about a young middle class girl who contracts HIV through blood transfusion, sank like a stone, causing the prince to wryly comment that when he struck gold with *Sia dai*, society heralded him as "god", but the following year when the sequel failed to perform he

suddenly became a "dog".[35] Perhaps, in contrast to the drugs scare, AIDS only faintly registered in the imagination of respectable society, easy to dismiss as far and away the epidemic of migrant labourers, sex workers, ethnic minorities, and so on, quite unlike the phantom of drugs which by contrast felt like a threat close to home.

Another strategy of universalising Thai film spectatorship, and one that has since proven to be more effective than moral panic in anticipating the 'better generation' of film viewers, is played out through the nostalgia film aesthetics. Its moment of capture can be identified as the release in 1997 of Nonzee's retro gangster biopic, *2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters, financed by Tai Entertainment. This collaboration between the pioneering teen production house and the advertising director Nonzee, along with his close-knit team, is a film with multiple entry points. Nimbly balancing the familiar hallmark of the teen rite-of-passage narrative with retrochic and references to real political events, its polysemic quality beautifully broadened the appeal to the teen market by simultaneously addressing, precisely through retrochic, the more 'respectable' swathe of potential film consumers brought into concentration by the Bangkok multiplexes.

*2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters is set in the 1950s. The story concerns the hoodlum hero, Daeng, whose gang of fellow school dropouts ran a notorious racketeering operation from the backstreets of Bangkok (an alleyway popularly known as *trok bireley*), until they were weeded out of their turf by governmental crackdown on the city's disorderly elements. At which point the boys ended up running a casino in a town that cropped up to service the newly established American military base. In aesthetic terms, Nonzee's gangster-teen-biopic provided no corrective to the stylised excesses of RS Film's hit *Lok thang bai...* Even more feverishly than the latter, his debut displays a dizzying appetite for fragmented images and showy camerawork, shifting and changing speed to a restless soundtrack, whose power of sensorial stimulation is intensified by the extravagant play with different film stocks, switching freely from colour to sepia to black and white with photo montage moments to boot. But while judging from the degree of visual excess, Nonzee's debut could easily be placed within the same aesthetic field as the teen

[35] Wandee, "*Lok Maya* [the World of Illusion]," 150.

music video movies, elsewhere a combination of textual and extra-textual features, some self-consciously placed there, others more accidentally attached to the film, endowed *2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters with a veneer of seriousness so fatally perceived to be absent from its conglomerate teen counterpart.

For a start, there was a certain air of challenge in basing the protagonist on a real life figure of the recent past: a gangster whose notorious young life and untimely death in a car crash gave him a mythical afterlife. The subject matter, and the late 1950s setting, signalled an appetite for controversy.[36] The year referred to in the Thai title 2499 Buddhist Era (i.e. 1956) veers scintillatingly close to two moments of political danger. The most obvious point of reference is the 'dark age', whose dawning is usually taken to be the year Sarit became prime minister in 1958. The second and probably less remembered referential possibility is the power struggle between Bhumibol and the flagging Phibun, played out over the issue of whose authority it was to 'lead' the celebrations marking the 2500th anniversary of Buddhism (i.e. the year 2500 B.E or 1957).[37] This was an age in which gangsterism had an ambivalent ring to it: the dictatorship bolstered its image as guardian of law-and-order by cracking down on *anthaphan* [hoodlums], or those who looked like them, yet those in power were executing their own form of gangsterism on a major scale, emboldened by US anti-communist money and the frontier capitalist expansion. Did the *anthaphan* bedevil social orderliness, or in a despotic order was he in fact its rebellious anti-hero? The care taken to portray Daeng Bireley's character as superior by far to the other young hoodlums – cleverer, kinder, a killer with some integrity and a good son who tried hard to become a monk for his mother – clearly plays on heroic identification with the outlaw, or at least with the more humanely superior of its type. The narrative discourse itself touches only lightly on the political referents: the voice-over speaks of a coup and an unnamed regime's crackdown on Bangkok gangsters; the date caption marks each passing year in the politically

[36] Screenwriter Wisit Sananatieng reveals that most of the material was based on a series of books called *Sen thang mafia* [Path of the Mafia], written by Suriyan Saktaisong, an ex-hoodlum who claims to have based the account on 'inside' experience. See interview in Sittirak Tulaphitak, "*Wisit Sasanatieng script writer* [Wisit Sasanatieng Scriptwriter]," in *Nang Nak*, Nonzee Nimibutr (Bangkok: Praew Entertain, 1999), 146.

[37] See Thak, *Karnmeuang rabob phor khun uppatham baeb phadetkarn* [Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism], 119-20.

turbulent second half of the 1950s; Daeng Bireley's decamp to an area near a US military base recalls Thailand's relationship with big brother during the Cold War. Nevertheless, to sympathetically portray a real life gangster as a morally sound, and an ultimately tragic, character could easily enough radiate the frisson of political intent. Given that all Thai cinemagoers cannot help but be aware that the Film Act has wide-reaching power of censorship, one of whose clauses is to forbid the depiction of notorious criminals, a biopic with this ostensible subject matter could easily emit 'political-ness'.[38]

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[38] The Film Act was first passed in 1930. Despite several amendments over the years, the bulk of it remains in effect. It is enforced by a police department, through a censorship board consists of a range of representatives from various sectors of society including the film industry and academia. The Act is in the process of being substantially overhauled in favour of a ratings system. The process of drafting the new legislation, however, has been rumbling painfully for some years, and as yet it is not clear when it will actually come into use, or what new rules of censorship it will sneak through. (One of the sticking points of the current draft is the requirement that short films will also need clearance permission.)

In recent years, what has been fascinating to observe is the resurgence of media discourse expressing strong criticisms of the current practice of film censorship. Certain sectors of the media that identify themselves with a modern, forward-looking Thailand are quick to rally to the cause of quality films that appear to be struggling with the censorship board. For instance, toward the end of 2001 censorship became a running issue in *The Nation*, just prior to the release of *Jan Dara*, whose sex scenes are relatively explicit, and *14 tula songkhram prachachon*. The version of *Jan Dara* shown in Thai cinemas was cut at the request of the censorship board. After an outcry over its trailer being shown in cinemas and on TV, the paper wrote in an editorial: "In this age, the question that needs to be raised is how to strike a balance between a film-maker's right to express artistic freedom, the individual's right to be entertained, and the need to protect members of the public from "indecent" contents...All these questions are raised every time a particularly provocative movie is screened before the censors so that they can make a decision. In the absence of a movie rating standard, the Film Censorship Board's decisions will continue to be criticised for inconsistency and unfairness". See "Editorial: Artistic Freedom Versus Indecency," *The Nation*, 23 September 2001. The controversy over *Jan Dara* compelled some of its readers to write in: one letter asked "[w]hy doesn't he [Nonzee] think of our Thai tradition, values and culture?" (Unchalee Chaiwichian, 4 October); another asserted "the all-important question is whether Thai audiences are adult enough to accept it. Remember DH Lawrence's "Lady Chatterley's Love", which got banned and is now considered a classic?" (Leka, 6 October).

On censorship, as with so many other aspects in the formation of cinema in Thailand, views concerning the appropriate degree, and the appropriate mode, of film regulation are often expressed as comparison with what goes on elsewhere. The title of a *Bangkok Post* report sums up Thai film producers' indignation at the perceived double standard in the practical application of the Film Act, "Filmmakers Slam Obsolete Censorship: Foreign Breasts in, Thai Breasts Out," *Bangkok Post*, 23 March 2004. Film historian Dome points out that during the late 1920s, when the press became a forum for debates concerning censorship, some who did not see the need to censor imported films justified their stance by claiming that it was only colonised countries who censored films from such 'free' places as Great Britain or America. Conversely, others who supported the need for such legislation pointed to the fact that film censorship has long been in practice among 'civilised nations'. See *Phrabat somdet phra pokklao kap phapphayon* [King Prajadhipok and Cinema] (Bangkok: Ton Or Grammy, 1996), 161-77.

To put it more specifically, one of the attractions of *2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters laid in the sense that it was prepared to go further than other contemporary Thai film releases to veer afoul of a law whose very arbitrariness frames how they are decoded and experienced. Widely accepted as an irritating anachronism by those strongly invested in the image of modern Thailand, the release of any Thai film that appeared to be probing its power of application could then be rewarded with an unusually high degree of publicity and media profile; its right to publicly circulate in cinemas framed as an issue of social significance especially among those who, in 1997, would not normally have been inclined to take an interest in Thai films otherwise. The fact that on its release the biopic was reported to have irritated some of the real-life hoodlums 'who were really there' for its alleged factual inaccuracies, resulting in a widely reported spat, only added further to the frisson of challenge, opening up public debates over how historically faithful *2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters could claim to be.[39] Perhaps Nonzee's debut was even helped a little by the seismic political drama that year: the campaign to pass the draft of the 1997 constitution through parliament. At that time, the protracted battle to pass this draft became a rallying call for those who wished to see wide-ranging reform of the state, a cause with special emotional currency among urban elites (of liberal or conservative persuasion) keen to put the military back in their barracks once and for all, liberalise the media, and restructure the parliamentary system in opposition to provincial money politics, and much else besides.[40] Around the Thai New Year holiday period (in April), when *2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters was released, any art work which could be ascribed the intention to chip away at illiberal, not especially 'world-class' standards of state control and governance may have generated just that little bit more sympathetic interest than it might have done otherwise. Just as the prospect of a new constitution was seized upon as the springboard to myriad forms of progress. It was in such a climate that a film critic by the name of Nam Pheung could make the claim, during a seminar organised by *Cinemag* magazine held in early September that year to discuss the

[39] Thida Plitpholkarnpim, "*2499 Anthaphan khrong meuang*," *Cinemag* 2001.

[40] See Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand's Crisis* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), 120-1.

highly topical matter of the impact of the currency devaluation on Thai cinema, that anyone wishing to see Thai films shed their 'stagnant' rut should throw their weight behind the draft. A connection was forced between Thai cinema and Thai politics; and given the climate of political and economic uncertainty, it spoke strongly to people. According to the magazine's journalist, Nam Pheung's claim was made to great applause.[41]

Such extratextual markers of seriousness reverberated with *2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gansters' claim to quality as a well-made Thai film, which displaced historical representation onto the nostalgia film aesthetic. Here, the textual enframing of Americana *phra nakhon* [the East Bank of Bangkok] – the world of black-haired Brylcream teddy boys, James Dean lockets, Elvis records (in a film released the year Thailand stopped producing LPs), coffee houses and creaky ceiling fans, the rolling guitar riffs of early rock – celebrates the first rush of mass cultural Americanisation (see fig. 28). According to the 'October generation' writer Wanit Jarungkit-anan, the film may have been guilty of taking liberties somewhat with historical facts, by shifting up the period in which the real Daeng Bireley terrorised the Bangkok alleyways. In the memory of this writer at least, Daeng Bireley did not rise to notoriety until "*2500 kwaa kwaa* [around B.E 2500 or from the turn of the 1960s]".[42] It is tempting to think that perhaps the decision to 'fictionalise' the period in which the mythical Daeng Bireley existed had something to do with the attractiveness of stylising the 1950s itself, over and above the flower-power hippy imaginary stereotypically associated with the 1960s. In a film full of unmotivated cutaways to 1950s retrochic – the convertible with the chrome bumper, cat-eyed sunglasses and full-bodied skirts, wooden bowling pins – its pastiche marks the arrival of the nostalgia *thai sakon* film along the line of Jameson's definition: a film aesthetic distinguished by historicism and high production value, whose presentation of the past connotes stereotypical ideas and images of decades and fashion, of

[41] Anonymous, "*Bantherng thai yuk ngern baht loi tua* [the Thai Entertainment Industry after the Baht's Devaluation]," *Cinemag*, October 1997, 90.

[42] Khwanjai Aimjai, "*Khor thokthieng jak nangsue (lae reuang jing) su nang: khwam penpaidai lae khwam rabphidchob* [Adapting Books (and Reality) to Film: What Possibilities for Thai Cinema and What Are the Responsibilities of Filmmakers?]," *Sarakhadi*, August 1997, 190.

"1950s-ness" in this case.[43] The intervals of excess here court the attraction for virtual mobility in a parallel logic to the projection of the generically cinematic Bangkok cityscape for the viewing pleasure of young spectators of global pop culture, though one that nonetheless could claim greater 'authenticity'. The bursts of black and white photo montage to rock'n'roll tunes celebrate what the spectator now sees through clichéd eyes as the innocent stirring of mass cultural modernity stereotypically associated with the 1950s, this register undercutting the film's otherwise thematic veneer of seriousness in referencing what was one of the most repressive periods in modern Thai history. Meanwhile, the overblown John Woo style violence probably did enough to open the film out to fans of the spectacular action genre – the 'let's accommodate everyone' factor.

The novelty of a film text with multiple entry points for teenagers and adults alike seems to have paid off beautifully. Making around 75 million baht from its multiplex release, *2499…*/Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters exceeded Rachane's record label debut by a clear 20 million. It held the record for the highest grossing Thai film in the domestic market for two years; got invited to London among others on the international film festival circuit; subsequently turning Nonzee into a celebrated national figure. In what might be taken as an indication of the film's success in returning an air of cultural seriousness to Thai cinema, we can point to a feature article in the respected *Sarakhadi* magazine. In a 1997 issue devoted to celebrating the centenary of Thai cinema, this magazine, which does not regularly feature the cinema so prominently, contained a lengthy report from a public seminar occasioned by Nonzee's debut. The participants, a panel consisting of the writer Wanit, the filmmaker Euthana, and two respected film critics, debated the value of Thai filmic adaptations of historical material. Not surprisingly, one of the key questions discussed was the extent to which Thai filmmakers could now make biopics of controversial historical figures without fear of censorship.[44] Moreover, since

[43] Jameson, *Postmodern, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 19.

[44] Khwanjai, "*Khor thokthieng jak nangsue (lae ruang jing) su nang: khwam penpaidai lae khwam rabphidchob* [Adapting Books (and Reality) to Film: What Possibilities for Thai Cinema and What Are the Responsibilities of Filmmakers?]," 190-92. The panel referred to an aborted film project about prisoners on death row, set during the dictatorship of Phibun. Earlier on in the 1990s Euthana had plans to shoot this project, titled *2482 nakthod praharn* [1939 Death Row]. It got as far as a

*2499…/*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters was both financially successful and critically welcomed, it signalled the moment in which the other kind of 'quality' Thai films primarily addressed to youth would struggle to sustain the level of market visibility they had previously held. This is the reason why in *Matichon*'s sensationalist 1998 report claiming that Thai cinema was in dire crisis, the boss of Tai Entertainment began to distance himself from his old identity as the *enfant terrible* financier/producer of the mini-theatre films for youth, to his new self the financier/producer of the multiplex films for – who? Filmmakers can no longer exclusively target teen audiences, he now declared; in the age of the multiplex boom "we must include everyone".[45] But on what basis must this universally Thai constituency of viewers be wooed?

Around the same time, an incisive short article written by the film critic Suthakorn related the fortune of *2499…/*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters to its spectacular aesthetic. In posing the question of whether spectacle [*khwam na teun ta teun jai*] was "the way forward" for an impending generation of Thai films, he argued that the key to the success of Nonzee's debut was to attract what he named the "extra" group of infrequent cinemagoers through spectacle.[46] Suthakorn guessed that this group consisted of viewers considerably advanced in age to the teen and young adult majority of cinemagoers; and who "tended to have no special interest in film as art". In his argument, this group of "extra" cinemagoers were pleasantly caught by surprise at the visual scheme of Nonzee's films, which showed them: "things they had never seen in Thai films, or had not seen for a long time, or were not expecting to see; and more importantly, they found in the film those things they desired to see in the first place".[47] As the conglomerate teen movies had demonstrated, visual excess of too fantastically global a nature threatened to alienate this extra group of '*khon thai*' multiplex cinemagoers. To address them, the film text must be made to connote

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completed script, but sensitivities over how Phibun would be referred to forced the director to shelf the project.

[45] "*Wongkarn 'nang thai' mued rai dai pee '41 khae 150 lan mai dai sed 'Hollywood'* [Thai Film Industry in the Dark - 1998's 150 Million Gross a Far Cry from Hollywood]."

[46] Suthakorn Santithawat, "*Karn sang khwam na teun ta teun jai thang ok mai khong khon tham nang thai?* [Spectacle: The Way Forward for Thai Filmmakers?]," *Nang: Thai* [Thai Film Quarterly] 1, no. 5 (1998): 44.

[47] Ibid.

old Thai things, positioning this group of potential viewers as the Thai spectator engaged in the pleasure of remembrance. Yet conversely we can also begin to see that remembrance of innocent days passed cannot be triggered unless a given Thai film was at the same time capable of displaying its status as a quality film of an international standard: through the self-conscious signalling of its attainment of the *sakon*/universal standard of virtuosity. In this aesthetic logic, there are no significations of Thainess, no discourse of the quality Thai film that does not at the same time 'mark' Thailand's impending arrival in the imputedly *sakon* aesthetic and cultural field.

Fig. 22 *Chalui* music video excess in blue filter

Fig. 23 *Chalui* the transitional moment leading toward the conglomerate music video film

Fig. 24 *Lok thang bai hai nai khon diaew* the conglomerate music video excess

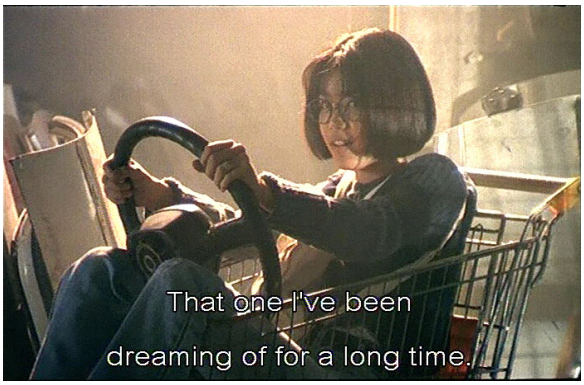

Fig. 25

Fig. 26

Fig. 27

Fig 28. 1950s retrochic in *2499 anthaparn khrong meuang*/Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters

Fig 29. Rural retrochic in *Monrak transistor*

CHAPTER 5. High concept heritage

The 'new look' heritage film

After *2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters, Nonzee and his team collaborated for the last time with Tai Entertainment[1] on a remake of a ghost legend. The story of Mae Nak, a beautiful but troubling young bride who died during childbirth but remained in the world of flesh, assuming human form to be with her husband, is a ghost tale so very well known that a writer once quipped that its heroine ought to be crowned Thailand's national ghost.[2] In recent decades it is mainly through the countless number of television soaps and filmic remakes that the legend of Mae Nak has been kept alive.[3] So much so that by the time Nonzee came to adapt the legend for his second film, the ghost that terrorised the inhabitants of Phra Khanong district[4] had already acquired the reputation of being possibly the country's most heavily filmed ghost.

Nang Nak has tended to be described as the product of a director's expressive – even heroic – vision.[5] This is in response to the film's striking visual scheme,

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[1] In 2004 Tai Entertainment merged with two other companies: its one-time rival, GMM Pictures, the film subsidiary of the conglomerate GMM Grammy; and Hub Ho Hin Films, the production house which made *Satree lek*/The Iron Ladies. The merger took place after the success of the 1980s nostalgia film *Fan Chan*/My Girl, on which the three companies co-operated. The newly merged GTH is currently the second biggest producer of films in Thailand.

[2] The writer is Atsiri Thammachoat. Mentioned in Songyote Waeohongsa, "*Nang Nak: rue ja pen tamnan khong phi tua sudthaai* [Nang Nak: Legend of the Last Ghost?]," *Sinlapawatthanatham*, November 1999, 64.

The popular historian Anake Nawigamune, who has done extensive research on the Mae Nak legend, recounts that the tale began over a century ago as a rumour: Phra Khanong was said to be in the grip of fear of a widow ghost whose death was so inauspicious that her spirit was condemned to restless fury. According to his book, *Perd tamnan Mae Nak Phra Khanong* [Mae Nak: Classical Ghost of Siam], by the early twentieth century the oral tale of the rumoured-to-have-been-real Mae Nak had acquired the fictional forms of theatre, poetry and prose. In 1936, the first filmic version of the tale, *Nang Nak Phra Khanong* (dir. M.R. Anusak Hussadin), was released. See Anake Nawigamune, *Perd tamnan Mae Nak Phra Khanong* [Mae Nak Classical Ghost of Siam] (Bangkok: Nora, 2000), 21-23.

[3] Anake, *Perd tamnan Mae Nak Phra Khanong* [Mae Nak Classical Ghost of Siam], 38.

[4] Phra Khanong district is situated in the suburbs of Bangkok. In the legend, however, the district signifies the rural. This is also evident in many of the filmic versions of the tale, including Nonzee's remake. The filmic Phra Khanong becomes the setting of the 'rural' site that welcomes visits by dignitaries from Phra Nakhon, the unofficial old name for Bangkok.

[5] A *Bangkok Post* report just prior to *Nang Nak*'s release introduces Nonzee in the following manner: "[He] made a thundering debt two years ago with *Daeng Bireley's and the Young Gangsters* [sic]. The film was adored by critics and turned out to be the highest grossing movie in Thai history. The beautifully crafted film went on to make a name for Mr Nonzee, who had previously directed only advertisements, at various international film festivals...The huge success of the movie placed Mr

signalling an unprecedented degree of attentiveness to images of high production value when compared to previous audio-visual versions of the legend. Secondly, *Nang Nak*'s headline-grabbing domestic box-office success transformed Nonzee into something of a national treasure. Earning around 150 million baht on its theatrical release, his remake instantly broke the existing record for the highest grossing Thai film in the domestic market.[6] Immediately after its successful domestic run, the director's national standing was bolstered further by the international profile of the film.[7] Without underestimating Nonzee's imaginative power in endowing a well-worn legend with a striking new filmic 'face'; what is significant to note is extent to which the articulation of *Nang Nak* as a high quality national film of an 'auteurist' vision was already in place in the promotional stage, underscoring the successful positioning of the film as 'national cinema' for cinemagoing adults. For this reason it is worth paying some attention to Tai Entertainment's motivation in financing the project, as well as its much-vaunted strategies of promoting and placing the film in leading multiplex venues.

The clue lies in the comment of the Tai Entertainment boss, made in 1998 – the year rife with the 'Thai cinema in crisis' discourse – that he believed a Thai film stood every chance of making box-office history, just so long as it was capable of "*doen* [hitting]" the right "*khoncep* [concept]".[8] By this stage Visute's studio was squeezed by the pop conglomerates, lacking its own supply of in-house pop stars and unable to compete with the latter's machinery of cross-platform promotion. In order to compete, the pioneer producer of nonsensical teen comedies was forced to shift the terms of its market presence, coming up with a strategy of differentiation rather than

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Nonzee firmly in the role of the white knight who would ride in to revitalise the local movie industry...The white knight role has fallen on Mr Nonzee once again, with the much-anticipated...release of his new film, *Nang Nak*". See Nilubol Pornpitagpan and Ukrit Kungsawanich, "Coming Attractions," *Bangkok Post*, 27 June 1999.

[6] Mentioned as significant in this respect is the fact that *Nang Nak* was only beaten at the box-office by one foreign blockbuster, *Titanic*. See interview with Visute in Pinyo, *Khatha sek ma hai pen thewada: beuang lang khwam khid thi khub khleuan nang thai su yuk thong* [From Dog to God: Thai Cinema's Golden Age and the Thinkers Behind It], 172.

[7] International interest in *Nang Nak* took three forms: press reports on the film's domestic box-office success; invitations to film festivals around the world; and commercial distribution, the most successful of which seems to have been in Asia.

[8] "*Khui khang jor: Visute Poolvoralaks haeng Tai Entertainment-Entertain Pictures* [Screen Sidebar: Visute Poolvoralaks of Tai Entertainment-Entertain Pictures," *Cinemag*, December 1998, 73.

struggling to reproduce pale imitations of an already proven formula. As Visute told Pinyo Trisuriyatamma, the author of a book of interviews with leading figures in Thai industrial cinema today, accepting the folly of trying to keep up with the trend of the record label movies was the reason why he decided to finance *2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters, then *Nang Nak*, at the point that he did.[9]

Visute often claimed that when Nonzee pitched to him the idea of a "modern version" of the Mae Nak tale, he was instantly attracted to its "strong concept".[10] The 'hook' – Nonzee's version of a tale just about every Thai person knows – combined an appealing mix of the new and the old. The widow ghost with the elongated hand comes back to life through the eyes of the man who, after having made just one film, had become Thailand's most eagerly anticipated director. (This was primarily due to *2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters' blockbuster success at the domestic level, and secondarily its international exposure at film festivals.) Highlighting *Nang Nak*'s concept of a nationally shared story remade by a national figure, the marketing team employed by Tai Entertainment came up with a promotion campaign based on a very strong, coherent visual scheme. In particular, the promotional posters and the trailer for the film generated a great deal of buzz in the run up to its release. Two things are striking to note about them: firstly, the visual emphasis on the 'authentic look' of the protagonists; secondly, the foregrounding of *Nang Nak* as a director's film, subtly suggesting 'authorial seriousness' in contrast to the established norm of promoting teen stars to sell 'insubstantial' films.

To take one of the film posters as an example (see fig. 38): in the foreground the face of the young actress Intira Charoenpura, who plays the ghost Mae Nak, is set against an eerie background of brooding clouds and shadowy treetops. Against the largely monochrome colour scheme, the blood red tear trickling from her downcast eyes emits a shuddering effect. The image shows off her dramatically cropped hair, the temple almost shaven clean, a visual detail which on *Nang Nak*'s release would be

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[9] Interview in Pinyo, *Khatha sek ma hai pen thewada: beuang lang khwam khid thi khub khleuan nang thai su yuk thong* [From Dog to God: Thai Cinema's Golden Age and the Thinkers Behind It], 184.

[10] "*Sampas khun Visute Poolvoralaks phu amnuay karn sang borisat Tai Entertainment* [Interview with Visute Poolvoralaks Tai Entertainment's Producer]," *Chiwit Ngan, Bangkok Post*, 20 September 2000, 3. And Suparp Rimtheparthip, "*Khon tham nang thi mai thaai nang*: *Visute Poolvoralaks* [a Filmmaker Who Doesn't Direct: Visute Poolvoralaks]," *Bioscope* no date, 13-14.

raised time and again as a marker of its departure from previous film and television versions of the tale: as a well-made heritage film attentive to such authenticating detail as the hair style of Siamese women in the pre-modern era. To the bottom of the poster sits the title in red fonts, styled for an arcane effect, with a different spelling of the ghost's name from the version with which she is more commonly known; again evoking both the shudder of novelty whilst underscoring the claim to greater attentiveness of authenticating detail. The teaser at the top of the poster reinforces the authenticating effect of the image with a phrase, printed in an old-fashioned typewriter style of fonts, a line in stylistic pastiche of classical poetry. (It can be translated as 'parted from her beloved husband/the maiden's tears flow like blood'.) Note, however, that above the film's title, in smaller fonts, sits Nonzee's name; the cast information is entirely absent.

More strikingly still, the trailer visualises the concept of 'Nonzee's new look remake' with a montage that neither resorts to the teaser (the voice-over), nor to snippets of dialogues. Pure image atmospheric pulse: the trailer cuts images of malevolent nature to eroticised shots of the attractive young leads, with their hair cropped in synchronised fashion; a female voice humming a tune in the style of a traditional lullaby adds a haunting aural layer. The trailer succinctly hints at a break in Nonzee's treatment of this ghost legend away from the previous filmic convention, which tended to deploy simple special effects largely for comic play. While its ending on the notorious image of an eye: the close-up of Nak's face, then its sudden reflection in a broken mirror, one eye asymmetrically enlarged, became a talking point even before the film was released.[11] This figuration of a ghostly though corporeal Nak strikes an allusive note, an element of stylised abstractness easy to associate with the artistic expressivity of an individual filmmaker, in the sense in which we might talk of an auteur. Like the promotional posters, the trailer emphasises *Nang Nak*'s visual novelty whilst connoting an otherworldly, rustic Siam. Both elements direct attention to the fascination of the film's 'new look', situating the remake as the product of a prestigious director's vision over and above the attraction

[11] See "*Khui khang jor: Visute Poolvoralaks Tai Entertainment-Entertain Pictures* [Screen Sidebar: Visute Poolvoralaks Tai Entertainment-Entertain Pictures]," *Cinemag*, January 2000, 81.

of stars. (This claim was reinforced by the fact that both the protagonists were newcomers.)

Intriguing to note that at the end of 1999, when asked by *Cinemag* magazine to reveal the secret of *Nang Nak*'s box-office success, Visute speculated that much might have boiled down to the fortuitous positioning of the trailer in the screens of leading multiplex chains. The trailer played as the 'coming attraction' before viewers got to see the blockbusters *The Matrix* and *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*.[12] This positioning at once highlighted difference: the appeal of a Thai film whose story everybody knows but whose new look no-one has ever seen; while maintaining the all-important suggestion of comparability: this Thai film is of one and the same multiplex standard as those Hollywood blockbusters.

More significantly still, a week after *Nang Nak*'s release in late July, a newspaper reported that the film had already garnered 70 million baht; what would turn out to be around half of its domestic gross box-office figure.[13] This pattern of instant box-office peak signalled the successful impact of an orchestrated promotion campaign geared toward generating a 'first week', if not 'first weekend', rush – part and parcel of the saturated release norm brought into being by the multiplex boom. In turn, the impressive scale of the figure itself generated national headlines suggesting the following: that in turning to a shared legend, and by visualising a past implied to be shared by all Thais, a heritage film of *sakon*/universal aesthetic finesse was at last returning the 'national audience' to the nation's cinemas.

Nang Nak as nostalgia film

As he was promoting *Nang Nak*, Nonzee often claimed that he was inspired to remake the legend to redress what he perceived to be lacking from previous film and television versions of the tale. His vision of the legend would recover what he described, to richly misleading effect, as a "realistic" treatment of the love between Mae Nak and her husband, Mak. And it would evoke in compellingly atmospheric detail the late nineteenth century period in which Nonzee and his screenwriter, Wisit

[12] Ibid., 83.
[13] "Classic Thai Ghost Movie Set to Be Box-Office Legend," *The Nation*, 30 July 1999.

Sasanatieng, decided to set the story.[14] Collective memories of more innocent days long passed would be invoked: of settling down to listen to the Mae Nak serial on the radio; or going to the cinema to watch this or that filmic version of the legend; or following this or that television serialisation. At the same time the promise of a fresh interpretation of the protagonists' love, and the heavily promoted claim of an unprecedented level of visual verisimilitude (in the sense of creating enframed images brimming with evocative period details), promised a stimulating encounter with a new kind of *thai sakon* filmic experience.

It is worth exploring in some detail *Nang Nak*'s textual pattern of display, in order to bring out the precise manner in which it is an exemplary film aesthetic of its kind: a film that connotes Siamese/Thai heritage through the 'new look' of the archival enframed images. With its attentiveness to the display of *boran* (pre-modern) signs – especially during narratively redundant intervals – *Nang Nak* bears the aesthetic logic of the nostalgia film.[15] The narrativisation constructs a series of pictorial tableaux of *boran* pastness in anticipation of the spectator, who is now inscribed as both 'Thai' and the 'virtual tourist' simultaneously.

In his article contrasting Nonzee's remake to the *tingtang* aesthetic governing previous filmic versions, Songyote Waeohongsa points out that no other remake of the Mae Nak tale based their appeal on the 'look' of the late nineteenth century period in the manner that *Nang Nak* does.[16] For instance, in the 1959 version of *Mae Nak*

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[14] Nonzee, *Nang Nak*, 1.

[15] See Anchalee Chaiworaporn, "*John Woo lae Nang Nak khwam teun ta nai yuk postmodern* [John Woo and Nang Nak: Spectacle in Postmodernism]," *Nang: Thai* [Thai Film Quarterly] 7 (1999/2000).

[16] Songyote, "*Nang Nak: rue ja pen tamnan khong phi tua sud thaai* [Nang Nak: Legend of the Last Ghost?]," 68-70. Some of the previous film versions set the story world in the nineteenth century. For instance, the opening shot of *Sanya jai Mae Nak Phra Khanong* ('The Engagement of Mae Nak's Heart', dir. Surin Chaoompanich) contains a caption specifying the year 1868 (see fig. 31). The montage that follows reveals that to be the year Mae Nak died giving birth. (The VCD of this version does not give the release date, but it appears to have been made around the late 1980s.) The difference between this version and Nonzee's remake is instructive. In the visual register, Surin's version dresses the characters in traditional loincloths and wraparound tops, and houses them in wooden homes on stilts; neither of which especially signify the late nineteenth century. The pro-filmic contains sceneries of canals and parched fields, but is devoid of archival details. Unlike *Nang Nak*, there are no close-ups of traditional clay pots and bowls, or of bamboo instruments for catching fish. The supernatural special effects bring to mind the 1980s Hong Kong ghost comedies. Mae Nak's eyes sometimes flashes red beams in anger; she is vanquished by a boy monk who emits green electro current from his palm; the boy monk flies through the air like a martial arts hero. In the aural register, the musical soundtrack is a wonderfully mad combination, switching from a native recorder tune, a

Phra Khanong (dir. Rangsee Tassanaphayak), the first of a series of popular Mae Nak films based on the composition of the producer Saneh Komarachoon, the enframed images convey the setting of a generically rural village, consisting of homes inhabited by members of an extended family network, whose centre of social life is a temple, and a stall for the village men to drink and fight in.[17] Lacking in the density of images signifying a given period or era, viewers are asked to imagine a story world within a 'traditional' setting, occurring in a time of 'once upon a time'. In a significant degree of contrast, Nonzee's remake signals a shift away from such aesthetic attraction of the unreal into a terrain substantially describable as pastiche. The inventiveness of *Nang Nak* consists in the virtuosity with which it signifies the foreignness of the pre-modern world, alternating that aspect with its citation of national historical events. The narration arrests the story world in a highly symbolic moment in the official biography of the nation, signalled by the opening shot of an eclipse that occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century. The text caption specifies its precise date, 18 August 1868, and indicates that we are at the very end of King Mongkut's reign (see fig. 30). The historical event to which the opening image refers is the

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synthesiser tune, the theme tune of *The Exorcist*, and – in moments of slapstick or during fight sequences – thunderous classical orchestral music.

[17] Saneh provided the plot framework for this 1959 version, as well as its sequel *Winyan rak Mae Nak* (The Loving Spirit of Mae Nak, 1962). Songyote points out that each of these versions became plot templates for subsequent remakes. He also argues that the Saneh composition combines the oral myth of Mae Nak – the local myth belonging to the inhabitants of Phra Khanong – with stories drawn from the epic poem *Khun Chang Khun Phaen.* See Songyote, "*Nang Nak: rue ja pen tamnan khong phi tua sud thaai* [Nang Nak: Legend of the Last Ghost?]," 68.

Mae Nak Phra Khanong begins with Mak's courtship of Nak, beating his competition, the village headman's son, Phlerng for her hand in marriage. Mak is then conscripted to Bangkok, while the pregnant Nak remains in Phra Khanong. Phlerng takes the opportunity of his absence to make lecherous advances, lying to her about Mak's infidelity in Bangkok. She dies in childbirth. After her body is buried, an errant holy man digs up her grave in the hope of extracting magic potion from the corpse. But the ploy goes wrong and instead he unleashes the spirit of Nak. She kills the holy man, then heads back to her house in the village, taking revenge on Phlerng by frightening him – transforming before his very eyes from the corporeal form resembling her pretty human self into a ghost with the face of an erupted volcano. Mak comes back home one night, drunk, but immediately realises that Nak is actually a ghost, and so flees the house. The next day he and the other villagers call for the famous holy man, Ajarn Tae, to drive her away from Phra Khanong. Ajarn Tae sucessfully traps the spirit of Nak in a clay urn, which is then thrown into a canal.

The plot of the sequel involves the return of Nak after the urn is accidentally fished out of the canal, then broken. Nak's mission this time is to prevent Mak from remarrying the rich girl from the next village. In the sequel, she proves too powerful for the holy men, and it is a boy monk who turns up out of the blue to defeat the spirit through a combination of force and persuasion. He weakens her supernatural power then warns her of the sin of murder, vengeance and jealousy, finally compelling Nak to agree to leave Phra Khanong and begin the long task of atoning for her sins.

fateful eclipse correctly forecasted by the aged king, who died shortly afterward.[18] Such allusion to an event of national importance is combined with intertextual play, creating a story world in which the historical personage of a famous Buddhist monk in Mongkut's reign mingles with the figure of the Brahmin exorcist, drawn from previous filmic versions of the Mae Nak legend; where the reference to a war coexists with iconic tropes drawn from previous audio-visual versions of the tale, such as Mae Nak's elongated hand. And lastly it incorporates into this story world the symbolic narrative of Thainess: the restoration of narrative equilibrium as the successful connecting of the village, and the local temple, to the royal-Buddhist heartland in Bangkok. *Nang Nak* cannot be described as representational as such, but consists in the de-differentiated combination of an array of 'texts' signifying either the *boran*, or the national *geist*, or both.

To flesh out its play with significations of national history: In public memory, the eclipse is a source of national pride and pathos – the accuracy of Mongkut's prediction symbolises the parity of knowledge between Siam and the colonial powers. Yet his death shortly afterward symbolises the traumatic loss of a righteous king. The public memory of the eclipse circulates for the reproduction of royal-nationalism: Mongkut's achievement at the tragic cost of his life symbolising the exemplary struggle of the kings of Siam/Thailand to maintain her independence through selective modernisation.[19] In other words, the vision of the eclipse calls forth from (Thai) viewers the official collective memory of the nation's past. The power of the opening image to evoke a mood of foreboding derives from its connotative meaning. It is an image addressed to the Thai-spectator-subject in this respect.

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[18] According to Thongchai Winichakul, this episode was the outcome of a struggle led by the king to incorporate Western geographical thinking to Siamese cosmology, symbolised here in the calculation of the time of the eclipse with a method partly drawn from astronomy. Thongchai emphasises that the episode represents the victory of the king's epistemological battle with traditional court astrologers, a battle waged under the pressure of the European imperialist presence, rather than a battle characterised by an indigenous manoeuvre to beat the imperialists in their own field of knowledge. See *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1994), 39-47, 56-61.

[19] In one interview where Nonzee explained his decision to set the story world in this specified interval in the past, he described the film's opening image as a recalling of the national memory of trauma, intended to signal to (Thai) viewers the atmosphere of foreboding he tries to sustain throughout the rest of the film. See Siwaporn Kongsuwan, "*Nang Nak khong Nonzee* [Nonzee's Nang Nak]," *Cinemag*, July 1999, 92.

Yet if the image of the eclipse speaks of the nation's biography in the conceptual frame of monarchical aura and the profound emotional bond sustained with the monarch's loyal subjects, such allusion co-exists with other imageries that visualise the past in the style of the rustically *boran*. The opening sequence of *Nang Nak* brings the past back to life in a montage display of exotically pre-modern, 'Old Siam-ness'. Its first two minutes or so is a virtuosic play of fragmented images, orchestrated to stimulating layers of rustic sound displaying the appeal of 'Nonzee's new look Mae Nak'. The montage cuts fluently between the image of the eclipse and shots of mayhem among the inhabitants of what appears to be a traditional village. The establishing shot gives way to images of a canal in chaos as boat dwellers react in fright to the sun's sudden disappearance, then reverses back to the eclipse before cutting to a monk beating a gong. The editing then moves to tight close-ups of the visage of a Buddha statue, a pan shot of monks chanting in the temple, then cuts back again to the eclipse, followed by a shot of a monk ringing a bell, an old man repeatedly shooting a rifle into the air, concluding with a shot of birds taking collective flight against a blue filter sky. These condensed images of arcane rituals conjure up a world of exotic strangeness, in metonymic contrast to the one inhabited by the Thai spectator-subject in the present moment of viewing. Such visual fascination with the *boran* continues in the opening credits that shortly follows, where the editing swiftly cuts between pan shots of an old mural, consisting of faded images of men and women, wooden huts and a herd of buffaloes, etched in the two-dimensional style of classical Siamese art; and spying shots that encircle a wooden hut, bringing magically to three dimensional life a hut of verisimilar appearance to the ones seen in the mural.[20]

Excess intervals displaying the exotic appeal of the pre-modern occur periodically in the 100 minutes or so of *Nang Nak*'s running time. The narrative begins with Mak bidding farewell to a tearful, pregnant Nak, having been called to war. He is prevented from returning for some time due to an injury, and therefore

[20] This is a rhetorical trope of collapsing the long distant past 'to life', by cutting between inanimate images signifying the past, such as a mural or a black and white photo, and their recreation as moving image. It is common in much of the contemporary Thai heritage films. See the beginning of *Suriyothai* and *Talumphuk maha wataphai lang phaen din*.

remains ignorant of the fact that his wife died shortly after he left home. The montage conveys the length of time Mak spends apart from his beloved wife, while at the same time freezing narrative momentum to display an otherworldly pictorial feast of natural delights. Time-lapse photography brings a lush paddy field up out of the barren earth, dissolving to a quick succession of images of a snake, a catfish, a crab; a world teeming with life underneath the green blades, whose lushness is emphasised by close-ups of fat raindrops on lotus leaves. Time made cyclical and space replenished by nature's awakening, this tableau of the bygone natural world connotes the plenitude of Old Siam, courting the spectator's look in fascination at the difference of 'back then'. Elsewhere, what turns out to be a premonitory dream to warn Mak after he returns home that all is not as it appears, is at the same time an idealised display of pre-modern labour. The dream starts with images of communal idyll: the villagers harvest rice together in an expansive field, dried blades trembling in the breeze. The careful compositional framing and deep focus photography show off the sweep of bare male torsos as the bodies move in unison, bringing to lyrical life to those imageries of distant days made otherworldly by the absence of machines.

One of the most extravagantly publicised facts about the making of the film is the effort expended by key members of the production team on researching, then recreating, the small details of Old Siam living as the rustic style of peasant existence. The production designer Ek Iamchuen has spoken admiringly of the 'pre-modern' beauty of the Siamese betel-stained teeth, which he asserted may be foreign and ugly to "*farang* [Western]" eyes, but is fascinating to the eyes of those appreciative of Thai-style beauty such as the crew of *Nang Nak*.[21] Pointing to superfluous details with no narrative function – such as bamboo prong used by Mak to catch fish, the different interior of each of the main characters' houses, the weave and dye of the fabric of the peasant-style costumes, or the clever design of the deceptively simple-looking bamboo bed – Ek described the process of recreating such objects and filling the frame with them as one of an enchanted encounter with the exotically foreign,

[21] Nonzee, *Nang Nak*, 161.

superior wisdom of the "Old Siamese way of life".[22] On the screen, the well-publicised obsession during the pre-production stage with tracking down the correct look of old artefacts and objects translates into enframed images that is less concerned with easily comprehensible narrative exposition (since it can be assumed that every Thai knows the story anyway), than the virtuosic demonstration of heritage through intervals of excess.[23]

Narrative stereotype of Thainess

It is worth returning to Jameson's characterisation of the fundamental attribute of the nostalgia film: its visual appeal depends on the spectator's recognition of historical stereotypes, thus reducing the film to a "mere narrative confirmation of those same stereotypes".[24] In *Nang Nak*'s case a similar dynamic can be traced. While the visual register plays on the idea of *boran* rusticity, transforming into a series of spectacular images a world of intimate connectedness between nature, spirit and human beings, at the narrative level, the causal trajectory plays out as a restoration of Thai harmony. What is interesting to note here is the role of the symbolic narrative of Thainess – the restoration of village harmony through the intervention of enlightened, divine

[22] The promotional strategy uniformly insists on the obsessive depth of research undertaken by the whole of the crew into the details and look of the period. Wisit wrote the screenplay as a pastiche of classical literature. See Wisit Sasanatieng, *Nang Nak bot phapphayon ton chabab* [Nang Nak Original Screenplay] (Bangkok: Macaroni Books, 1999). According to a report, the cast and crew were required to take part in a crash course about Thai history. See Jim Algie, "Supernatural Sensation," *Asiaweek*, 24 December 1999. After the film Nonzee even published a behind-the-scene account, whose largest part details how 'the Thai people used to live'. Nonzee, *Nang Nak*, 85-131. More fascinating still are the references Nonzee made to the more unorthodox side of the background research process involving mediums and premonitory dreams. See interview with Siwaporn, "*Nang Nak khong Nonzee* [Nonzee's Nang Nak]," 96-97.

[23] In the 1959 *Mae Nak Phra Khanong* there is a scene where the recently married Mak and Nak are out in the paddy field, dressed in the iconic peasant costume signifying 'the backbone of the nation'. In Mak's hand there is indeed the bamboo prong for catching fish. But the comical, parodic tone of the scene provides an instructive contrast with *Nang Nak*. Here, Mak and Nak, along with several friends, are playing at working in the field. Soon the husband drops his prong and makes to bundle his newly wed in his arms. Cut to a comical close-up of a buffalo turning its face away, as if reacting with pious disapproval at such frivolity. In the dream sequence of *Nang Nak*, the villagers are really hard at work. Mak steals away to greet Nak. In an erotic gesture, he asks for the mouthful of betel nut she is chewing and inches closer to her body to take it into his mouth. The male villagers spot the couple in their private moment of intimacy and begin to shout mocking words, making teasing gestures. But the spectator here is situated outside, watching the pictorial tableau of villagers teasing each other, rather than sharing the joke of 'peasants hard at work' from the inside as in the older version.

[24] Fredric Jameson, "Transformation of the Image in Postmodernity," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London; New York: Verso, 1998), 130.

authority – in organising a hierarchy of knowledge, power and morality in the story world. The filmic narration asserts the superior authority of a character based, to a strong degree of visual likeness it seems, on the historical personage of the Buddhist monk Somdej Phra Buddhajarn (Toe). It situates as less authoritative than him the fictional character of the village abbot, and discredits entirely the intertextual figures drawn from the Mae Nak legend. The latter are the midwife who fails to save Nak and the baby, and the Brahmin exorcist, who in some previous filmic versions (such as the 1959 Saneh/Rangsee film) successfully defeats Nak by containing her spirit in a clay urn.

The causal logic of action of *Nang Nak* comprises of three parts: the couple's involuntary parting; Mak's return home to Nak, who at this stage is already a ghost, though the husband remains innocent of this fact; and finally the villagers' battle to drive the fearsome ghost of Nak to her rightful realm, forcing Mak to see through her deception. In the first part, parallel editing shows the couple involuntarily performing their social duties while apart: he a lowly foot soldier in war, she an anxious wife, ploughing the land until he returns. This editing device emphasises the bond of love between them, especially the cross-cutting sequence where both simultaneously fight for their lives: the injured Mak being treated in a Bangkok temple while Nak is in painful labour at home in Phra Khanong. At this stage the film introduces the figure of the nineteenth century monk: Somdej Toe. The real historical figure is said to be greatly admired by the early kings of the Chakri dynasty; and is associated especially closely with Mongkut. Somdej Toe is incorporated into the story world as the old, quietly authoritative Bangkok monk who saves Mak's life; a figure emblematic in this narrative scheme of the reformist Buddhism associated with this nineteenth century king.[25] During that dark night in which the husband and wife are each struggling for their lives, extreme high-angle shots of the feverish Mak suggests the presence of a watchful spiritual force, framed in striking contrast with the low, frantic close-ups of the midwife, whose wealth of superstitious rites prove futile to save Nak.

[25] As Pasuk and Baker summarise, it was Mongkut who, as soon as he came to the throne in 1851, initiated the reform of existing Buddhist practices, resulting in the introduction of a hierarchy-bound, centralising institution of monkhood and a rationalist doctrine of Theravada Buddhism. See *Thailand, Economy and Politics*, 231.

The first shot introducing Somdej Toe as a force of true Buddhist knowledge in the story world is a close-up of a hand, which gently feels for Mak's pulse as he lies gravely injured – the hand that gives back life. The monk pulls Mak back from the brink of death as his wife loses her life, and the life of their child, under the unschooled care of the midwife. Worse than the futility of her ritualistic incompetence, after Nak's death the midwife commits the immoral act of stealing from the corpse that quintessentially modern icon of marital union: her gold ring. For this act she is punished with death as the first murder victim of the ghost Nak. The degree of the midwife's crime against the couple's love is such that the sight of her murdered corpse is the most grotesque spectacle in the film. Monitor lizards – a lowly beast and abject metaphor in the Thai language – feed on the corpse's meat; a close-up gives a flash of the beasts flickering their monstrous, blood stained tongues. In contrast to Nak's traumatic death, and the disrespectful theft of her most prized worldly possession, Mak recovers to full health. As soon as he does so, Somdej Toe suggests that he become a monk; but the reluctant loyal husband asks for permission to return to Phra Khanong to see his wife. The monk blesses his journey home with the cryptic warning to remember that all is according to karma.

Somdej Toe will appear again at the narrative climax, when the spirit of Nak, pushed to destructive fury at Phra Khanong's attempts to reveal to her husband the truth of her spectral being, threatens to destroy the whole community. Meanwhile, in the second part of the narrative when Mak returns home to her, and remains unwittingly under the ghost's power of illusion, it is up to the comical village abbot to use whatever lies within the limited purview of his authority to restore the village world to its original harmony. But he proves neither able to persuade Mak of the truth nor to encourage the villagers to remain on the path of peace. The latter's futile, increasingly desperate, attempts to save Mak from the spirit of his wife result in a nightly toll of revenge, as one by one Nak murders any of the villagers who tried earlier in the day to reveal to her husband the truth. (Her sin of murder is artfully conveyed through images of malevolent nature – all weeping treetops and howling wind in nightly blue filter – bypassing the horror genre's code of visceral gore for play of images signifying *boran*-style magical power and the governing presence of

the unseen.) It is instructive here to point out the visual devices deployed to emphasise the contrast between the rough-and-ready, limited authority of the fictional abbot with the auratic, judicious authority of Somdej Toe – a fictional caricature pitted against an illustration of 'national history'. The Bangkok monk is often idealised through striking, dead centre framing, sometimes through long shots of him serenely seated in front of an altar. Shot in low angle, this compositional framing gives a deferential treatment to the figure, rendering him visible through the visual field of someone crouching. In contrast, the abbot with the lazy eye and comical voice is shot as if he is simply one of the villagers, indistinguishable from them except for his faded saffron robe. Off-centre composition and irreverent high angle shots of his bald head, along with a few comedy scenes at his expense, conveys the limited extent of his power (see figs. 32, 33). A ghost insanely in love ultimately proves too much for his witless, but well-meant chanting.

It is instructive to note how the narrative crisis necessitating Somdej Toe's restoration of peace is compositionally motivated. After Nak murders Um, the villagers gather at the temple to tell the abbot that they have engaged a well-known exorcist to come to Phra Khanong to overpower the spirit. The abbot's reaction signals that he is unconvinced by the exorcist's power, though he can do no more than tell the villagers to stay calm and carefully deliberate the situation. An impatient male rudely brushes aside the abbot's authority. The man forcefully announces his own plan to burn down Nak's house that night in the hope of driving her away. (In the old versions of the tale heat weakens her power.) The abbot is even more perturbed by this plan, and voices his concern for the innocent Mak's safety. But in an exercise of the tyranny of the majority the man asks for a show of hands in support of his suggestion, and a small army of male villagers gathers. They prepare themselves for the night ahead in stereotypically *chao baan* fashion by getting drunk. The suggestion then is that the villagers are boorishly incapable of taking the right action; while the village's moral centre, the abbot, is kindly but ultimately ineffectual. The Brahmin exorcist arrives, with his tangled long hair, beard, and rosary bead; in previous versions he would have vanquished the ghost with his store of ritualistic power. But in Nonzee's remake this intertextual reference must give way to the

rationalist approach of the Buddhist monk drawn from history. The exorcist digs up the corpse of Nak in an act of merciless violation of what remains of her body, an act which takes the wrathful spirit over the edge. Amid the burning wooden hut, while the village temple now lies in disarray, the spirit takes possession of the exorcist's body and kills him, the disembodied sound of her hysterical laughter conveying that she is indeed the unbridled force of love, whose power is too great for the whole village to contain. At which point, mercifully, Somdej Toe comes to the last minute rescue. The monk magically appears in the forest clearing where Nak's body is buried, an entrance utterly unmotivated in narrative terms, since there is no suggestion as to how he came to learn about the mayhem in Phra Khanong. His discrete entry in the frame is as *deux ex machina*,[26] a magical presence which immediately calms the howling rainstorm to a sacred hush. He goes to the grave and calmly calls up the spirit of Nak "for a conversation". The skeleton of a woman cradling a blanket bundled in the shape of an infant slowly rises, changing in front of the spectator's eyes into the corporeal form of the young wife that she had been on the screen for the most part. Neither the spectator nor the watching villagers hear what is said between the monk and the spirit, but she is persuaded to finally take leave of Phra Khanong. *Nang Nak* ends with Mak and Nak bidding their second farewell, before the closing shots reveal Mak clad in saffron robe, a monk at last. The overall shape of the narrative is in the end revealed to be a Buddhist quest, in which the human husband passes into the next stage of manhood. While the spirit wife learns to suppress her untamed longing and acknowledges her sin in murder, enlightened by a figure whose narrative power comes from his embodiment of the national past.

[26] The magical intervention of Somdej Toe is clearly a reworking of the resolution involving the boy monk in the sequel part of Saneh's plot template. See fn. 19. In the version with the novice who flies through the air, *Sanya jai Mae Nak Phra Khanong*, he is introduced as the disciple of a wandering monk. The latter only appears in the frame once, as a mysterious figure of authority whose face the spectator never sees. The novice's mission is to persuade the spirit of Nak to accompany the wandering monk, who will help her atone for her sins. The wandering monk of this version is a generic *luang ta* (an affectionate term of respect for an abbot or an old monk). In Nonzee's remake, the generic figure becomes the abbot who lacks sufficient moral power to compel the vengeful spirit to repent; and the task falls to the historical figure of Somdej Toe.

Exotic love

To render an object exotic is to make it appealingly foreign in the reductive idiom of clichés and stereotypes. To self-exoticise is then to project for the enticement of the 'native' gaze a 'native' object as if it were foreign. This self-exoticising dynamic underscores *Nang Nak*, and nowhere more so than the element of the film that still remains to be explored: its re-visualisation of the love between Nak and Mak as a ravishingly romantic 'foreign' custom of *boran* times.[27]

While jealousy is a key compositional motivation of the 'sequel' versions such as *Sanya jai Mae Nak Phra Khanong* (see fn. 19), where the spirit breaks loose from the clay urn that entraps her and tries to prevent Mak from remarrying, the Nonzee remake abandons the suggestion that such coarse attachment is the tie that binds the ghost to a suffering limbo. And perhaps more significantly, his version imbues the character of the husband with an idealising glow of family-loving tenderness, domestication and credulity quite absent from the classic versions. Compare for instance the moustachioed Mak of the 1959 *Mae Nak Phra Khanong*, who resembles the *nak leng* [hard man] hero in his fondness for alcohol and fist fights, and does not show nearly the same degree of emotional devastation upon realising that the wife he has come home to is already a spirit.[28] The romanticisation of the transcendental power of Nak's passion, and Mak's perfect loyalty as a

[27] See also Rey Chow's reading of the Hong Kong film *Rouge*, which partly anchors this section. Chow observes in relation to Stanley Kwan's ghost romance, the mutual implication between its narrative level and the "ethnographic" claim of its visual aesthetic. The former tells a story of a courtesan's lost love, and is based on a book written in the style of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly genre of melodramatic romance; the latter elegantly displays, during the flashback sequences, the clothes, hair, decorative objects and stylishly decadent feel of the red light district of 1930s Hong Kong. What endows this cinematic re-presentation of a lost social world with the "memorable" feel of so-called "ethnographic account", rather than a mere series of stylised images, is the courtesan/ghost's excessive passion. Conversely, in Chow's rich conceptualisation, the ethnographic claim of *Rouge*'s visual aesthetic endows what would otherwise have been the hackneyed features of the fictional romance, of the obstacle to love between a well-bred young man and a courtesan and their suicide pact, with the profound weight of a lost rite. The visual aesthetic endows the predictable plot, the inevitable thwarting of the love of a fallen woman, with the sense of a lost and longed for "local custom". See her "A Souvenir of Love," in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, ed. Esther C.M. Yau (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 215-20.

[28] This is probably the only filmic version in which Mak shows not a jot of irritation at the ghost wife who refuses to leave him alone. In contrast, Mak of both the 1959 *Mae Nak Phra Khanong* and the late 1980s *Sanya jai Mae Nak Phra Khanong* demonstrates moments of pity for the suffering spirit of his wife, and during those moments the films suggest that he becomes vulnerable to her feminine guile. But his ultimate loyalty lies with the inhabitants of Phra Khanong; his concern to drive the spirit of Nak to her rightful place comes from the desire to see peace restored in the district.

husband, underscores the shift in tone from fantastical/slapstick to heritage/afterlife romance. In the 1959 version, as well as others based on Saneh's plot templates, the digressive narrative incorporates many comical set pieces; the most famous of which is the sequence of frightened grown men diving one by one into large clay urns to the echoing soundtrack of baying dogs. In his remake, however, Nonzee eliminates the slapstick component, retaining only the obligatory visual trope that defines the denouement: the moment when Mak sees the ghost of Nak's elongated hand snaking down the gap in the wooden floorboards.[29] What is significant to note is the manner in which the remake exoticises the romance of man and wife largely through pictorial tableaux of intimacy. Here, the bodies of Mak and Nak are displayed as visually fascinating objects, shifting freely between the eroticised register aestheticising male carnal desire and sanitised images of the bourgeois family ideal, or the union between the monogamous, loyal husband, and the extraordinarily dutiful wife and mother.

The organisation of visual point-of-view is one aspect of the narration that exoticises the couple's love. Their wooden house is nestled amid trees in a wooden clearing near the river with no neighbours within easy sight. When they are together, Mak and Nak are often framed as idealised objects of display. The spectator sees them as one, transcendental in marital union, either by taking the visual point-of-view of another character watching the couple or that of the cameras'. A sequence immediately after the eclipse shows Mak and Nak bidding tearful farewell on the pier, as he is about to leave for war. The editing and shot composition positions the spectator at a distance, assuming the visual point-of-view of the friend waiting in the rowboat to take him away. A long profile shot of the couple clasping hands, with foliage protruding into the edges of the image frame, gives a sense of spying into a private moment. The sequence then cuts to a close-up of Nak's crumpled face, an over-the-shoulder shot frame with the back of Mak's neck in the foreground, then cuts away to a reaction shot of the friend in the boat a little distance below watching the couple, transfixed. This pattern is repeated with variation so that the next close-up

[29] Interestingly, Nonzee also revealed how he had divested the final cut of *Nang Nak* of several gags for fear that the comic tone would result in "*khad khwam na cheua thue* [the loss of credibility]". See interview with the director in "*5 andap nang thai tham ngern 2542* [the Top 5 Highest Grossing Thai Films of 1999]," *Cinemag*, January 2000, 126.

becomes of Mak's face, then a tighter run of shot/reverse close-ups of both protagonists' anguished expressions, before cutting away again to the friend who now glances to one side to hide a tear. The spectator is cued into the sequence as the friend, watching as a sympathetic, awestruck witness to the strength their love (figs. 34-37).

The 'sex with a ghost' sequence deploys a similar structure to create an extraordinarily complicating play of multiple points-of-view. It starts with an establishing shot of treetops swaying against a threatening night sky, then cuts to an interior medium close up of Mak and Nak's reflections in a mirror, a key motif in the film, then pulls back to an extreme high angle shot showing the lovers slowing rising, making sexual overtures. Dissolves then follow of extreme close-ups of body parts, half concealed in chiaroscuro lighting, then abruptly cuts away to a shuddering image of an eye in the doorway, followed by a long shot of Mak and Nak lying horizontal across the screen – the view of a spy as we shortly discover. The sex the spectator sees appears to be organised from the visual point-of-view of the spying villagers, images snatched from the crack in the doorway, or from a bird's eye view. Yet from reaction shots of the spying villagers' incredulous expressions, the filmic narrator is also hinting at the possibility of a disjuncture between what they actually see (Mak without Nak), and what the spectator actually sees (the couple copulating). To complicate matters, the editing makes parallel cuts between the sex act and gruesome shots of Nak dying as she gives birth, conveying her subjective point-of-view in this unnerving flashback, the ghost's painful memory. What started out as an eroticised scene, a variation on an earlier one where Nak carries out the intimate act of shaving her husband, then ends with much greater uncertainty with the disquieting invocation of the conservative cliché that sex is a danger which a good, loving wife must risk for the satisfaction of her husband.

The spying villagers' incredulous point-of-view contrasts with Mak's credulous one, his unknowing surrender to the ghost's supernatural spell. Again a comparison with the 1959 version proves instructive: where as the Mak of the classic version discovers as soon as he returns home that his wife is already dead, Nonzee's Mak spends most of screen time in blissful ignorance of the fact, despite the

villagers' attempts to warn him or coming across himself uncanny signs of death and decay. The fact that Mak is a hero who knows much less than the spectator, and remains so for most of the film's running time, creates not so much suspense as an idealised image of a faithful man, inept in a hero's supposed role of the investigator of truth because of the purity of his love for his wife.

The *sakon* appeal of *Nang Nak*

It will come as no surprise to learn that Nonzee speaks from the position of a director enthralled by nostalgia. A glance at publication materials around the time of *Nang Nak's* release reveals that he is "intoxicated" by old photographs.[30] He once had an epiphany watching a traditional Siamese art tutor shed melancholic tears after stepping inside a provincial temple and realising how much its interior had been changed over the years.[31] And the inspiration for making *Nang Nak* came from his fascination with early photographs of Siam, whose stiff, embalmed air motivated him to breath cinematic life into them.[32] From this speaking position, the remake is the expression of a filmmaker's personal taste for nostalgia.

In accounting for *Nang Nak*'s success in Thailand, the most straightforward level of explanation identifies in the domain of reception the same penchant for nostalgia among viewers. In other words, such explanation relates *Nang Nak*'s record-breaking box-office success, as well as the concentration of period films from the late 1990s in general, to the so-called yearning of Thai viewers to re-experience *meua khrung thi baan yang ngam meuang yang di* [the times when our home/nation was good and beautiful – a common phrase for the nostalgic sentiment].[33] In this explanatory frame, contemporary Thai films that represent the past serve a significant

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[30] Siwaporn, "*Nang Nak khong Nonzee* [Nonzee's Nang Nak]," 92.

[31] Pongsak Prai-angkura, "*Chiwit thi mai yud sawaengha thathee khong Nonzee Nimibutr* [Nonzee Nimibutr: A Life of Constant Searching]," *Sinlapawatthanatham*, August 2002, 139.

[32] Nonzee, *Nang Nak*, 3-4.

[33] The film critic Nantakwang, for instance, comments that the "retro trend" demonstrates the "nostalgia" of Thai society. As he puts it, the trend of films such as *2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters, *Nang Nak*, *Fahtalayjone/*Tears of the Black Tigers (and others) reveals that "Thai society yearns for the beauty of bygone days and has great emotional attachment to the past". See Nantakwang Sirasoonthorn, "*100 lan up 'Nong Teng nak leng Phu Khao Thong' case study karn wang tamnaeng tua eng* [100m up *Nong Teng nak leng Phu Khao Thong* a Case Study of Market Positioning]," *Nation Sudsapda*, 7 April 2006, 42.

social function in recognising, and symbolically resolving, the anxiety of Thai viewers, who are simultaneously experiencing the loss of their history and culture, and the infiltration of cultural forces from elsewhere. Because films such as *Nang Nak* reanimate the past as an expression of the nostalgic sentiment of Thai filmmakers, they then connect with Thai film viewers who harbour a yearning to relive bygone days.

But this argument tends to assume that period films recreate the past in the representational register – as a retelling of old shared narratives – doing so as a symptom of the deeply shared undercurrent of nostalgia. When faced with a film that demonstrates the virtuosity of its 'new look' to the degree that *Nang Nak* does, it seems misleading to characterise the public embrace of the film as a symptom of the nostalgic sensibility of modern Thai subjects, who are so because of their intense experience of cultural loss.[34] Perhaps the question regarding the characterisation of *Nang Nak* as a film that successfully speaks to the Thai public, as with heritage films in general, has to be reframed so as not to assume too instant a focus on the nostalgic sentiment among *khon thai* leading to their taste for nostalgia products. Instead, what might be more fruitful to probe is the extent to which *Nang Nak*'s ostensible appeal to newness, its attraction as visual spectacle of a *sakon*/world-class and prestigiously authorial kind, gave momentum to the public sphere of reception that emerged upon its release. When this public sphere is understood as that which emerged in response to the film's multiplex 'instant peak', and which in turn supplied discourses endowing social, cultural, or symbolic, (rather than business) significance upon its

[34] In her article comparing *Nang Nak* and John Woo's films as instances of the stylistically postmodern turn, Anchalee accounts for the success of Nonzee's remake by emphasising the appeal of its spectacular new look. She deploys Jameson's characterisation of pastiche to describe the formal features of *Nang Nak* as the re-presentation of an old legend in a thrillingly novel visual aesthetics; and in part questions whether Nonzee's claim to reinterpreting the legend stretches beyond stimulating viewers with spectacularised images bolstered by virtuosic editing. See Anchalee, "*John Woo lae Nang Nak khwam teun ta nai yuk postmodern* [John Woo and Nang Nak: Spectacle in Postmodernism]." However, rather than exploring the connection that Jameson foregrounds between the nostalgia film and the schizophrenic subjectivity – the self unmoored from temporality displaying the symptom of loss of emotional affect – Anchalee speculates that the film's box-office success is due to its recognition of the deep emotional need of 'Thai viewers', who are "caught in the clash between old and new cultures". Ibid., 25. The explanation remains within the framework that speaks in terms of anxious Thais who are subjected to rapid modernisation, leading to disorientation and nostalgia. These anxious Thais – who specifically are they? – thereby seek emotional compensation for the loss of the traditional anchoring of their historical Thai self from cultural artefacts.

record-breaking box-office success. The question then is this: how did the public discourse of *Nang Nak* as a history-making Thai film relate to its textual aesthetic as a nostalgia film, which simultaneously offered the pleasure of connotative images of the *boran* and the claim to a thrillingly new level of stylistic finesse?

Of considerable interest here is how *Nang Nak*'s signalling of its attainment of a new aesthetic standard captured the interest of some of the key reviews of the film, extending to a strand of celebratory discourse concerning its overwhelming success among Thai viewers. Here, the textual and promotional claim to the film's new look provided the occasion for gauging the desirability and appropriateness of deploying *sakon* techniques and production methods.[35] The film critic Tee Tua (Mongkolchai Chaiwisut) found *Nang Nak*'s fixation with archival visual displays of "pre-modern customs [*prapeni thai boran*]" an impediment to dramatic development, commenting that after a certain point, its over-attentiveness to what he characterised as the verisimilitude of period details made him feel as if he was sitting through a "documentary". For this critic also, the rapid editing pace that signalled *Nang Nak*'s debt to "the contemporary film style [*style khong nang samai ni*]" compounded his boredom of watching something more like a "multi-vision slide", unnecessarily taking the focus away from the performance of the two leads as husband and wife whose time together has run out.[36] Yet Tee Tua fully conceded that, given the "crisis of confidence" in Thai films (of the late 1990s), and the uphill struggle against what he specified as Hollywood domination; *Nang Nak*'s claim to newness – simultaneously at the levels of style, thematic reinterpretation and production method – constituted that "significant step forward" which "Thai cinema and viewers of Thai films" had been eagerly waiting for. The cautiously optimistic ending of his review,

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[35] After the twin successes of *2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters and *Nang Nak*, Nonzee and his production team gave much due credit to the importance of 'lifting the standard' of the production process. They emphasised the significance of a clear division of labour among the crew, as well as proper specialisation in each of the production areas, such as art direction or costume. With these successes, Nonzee was also credited with being the 'first' Thai director to make 'proper' use of the storyboard in the pre-production process. As his domestic reputation soared, he began to talk of his aspiration to make filmmaking a real profession, one for which the key members of the crew are properly paid allowing for full professionalisation. For his next film, *Jan Dara*, he sought international co-production funds. See interview with Nonzee in Pinyo, *Khatha sek ma hai pen thewada: beuang lang khwam khid thi khub khleuan nang thai su yuk thong* [From Dog to God: Thai Cinema's Golden Age and the Thinkers Behind It], 16-30.

[36] Tee Tua, "Nang Nak," *Cinemag*, August 1999, 100-2.

signalling that the moment had indeed arrived for Thai cinema to turn itself around by producing serious work, found echo in an article in the same issue of *Cinemag*. Another well-known critic, Nara (Pornchai Wiriyapraphanont), asked readers not to tire of the "*Nang Nak* buzz [*krasae nang nak*]", since, in his view, its success signalled a turning point for Thai cinema as a whole. To him, Nonzee's successful, well-made departure from teen films, had implications for other Thai filmmakers. They should not rush out copycat "period ghost" remakes, but consider the significance of such new standard of practices exemplified by *Nang Nak* as its promotional strategy, the look of its trailer, the background research, its tightly planned production schedule and so on.[37] In both of these critical responses to the film, recognition is granted above all for *Nang Nak*'s timely contribution as the new standard bearer of Thai cinema. Such sentiment appeared to reverberate more broadly. A newspaper report entitled 'Classic Thai Ghost Movie Set to be Box-Office Legend' pointed out that "[i]t's generally admitted that the movie's cinematography, music and sound effects are significantly above normal Thai standards".[38] And it ended with a quotation of the voice of the common man: "I'm proud of this Thai product. It's a great effort."

Of course, *Nang Nak*'s claim to attaining the *sakon*/Hollywoodised style and standard of production did not go without dissent. A strand of criticism voiced the suspicion that its surface-laden aesthetic substituted stylishness for depth, as signalled by the above newspaper report: "some critics have pulled no punches against what they describe as beauty without essence".[39] More interesting still is the ironic comment ending Songyote's article, published in the history, culture and art magazine *Sinlapawatthanatham*, which contrasted *Nang Nak* with previous *chao baan* filmic versions. In characterising the older versions of the tale as mythic films

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[37] Nara, "*Ya pyung beua loei khrap* [Please Don't Get Fed Up Yet]," *Cinemag*, August 1999, 109.

[38] "Classic Thai Ghost Movie Set to Be Box-Office Legend."

[39] See also Prachuab Wangjai's critique of the period film trend. He characterises as a failure of their imagination the fixation with Thainess as a 'culture thing' of the past, rendered in images suggestive of 'the Eastern way of life'. Prachuab accounts for this trend as on the one hand a response of filmmakers acknowledging the charges previously flung at teen films that they were not Thai enough, and on the other an expression of their personal taste for nostalgia. "*Tammai thong yon yuk?* [Why Period Films?]," *Krungthep Thurakij*, 23 September 2000.

addressed to the popular classes, the film scholar described Nonzee's remake as a bid to transform the ghost myth into 'national history'. Without explicitly specifying who this 'national film' remake is now addressed to, he framed the new standard of filmic quality set by Nonzee as one "already highly familiar to us from *sakon*/Hollywoodised quality films [*nang nai radab sakon*] from elsewhere". And he related Nonzee's contribution in this respect to his previous experience as an advertising director, used to presenting a coherent image "product" capable of instantly capturing the imagination of consumers. How did Songyote read the projection of *Nang Nak*'s image as the vanguard of world-class national cinema? He ended his article with an ironic citation of a line of classical epic poem: the hero mounts his horse, swings his dagger, and to the consternation of his wife leaves the palace compound with the intent of slaying a *farang*.[40]

Such discourses, which cast *Nang Nak* as the bearer of a new Thai cinematic standard, recurred in the domain of its public reception with what appeared to be a greater degree of vitality than any comparable concern over the accuracy of its archival details. (Recall the spat over *2499.../*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangster's reception.) Whether expressed in the form of endorsing the film's turn to *sakon* stylistic and production practices as the only way forward for Thai cinema under the pressure of Hollywoodisation, or implying a more critical edge toward aesthetic self-Hollywoodisation, these public discourses of reception commonly recognised that *Nang Nak* encapsulated the following cultural logic. Its appeal as an exemplar of world-class national cinema is premised on the projection of the powerful image, not so much of Thai authenticity but of *thai sakon* agency: or the Thai mastery of the *sakon* aesthetic idiom, in the hope of penetrating a market dominated by the standard bearer that is Hollywood.

In this respect, such absorption over *Nang Nak*'s own pledge of its *sakon* appeal suggests an avenue for further speculation. The term of its embrace as Thai cinema's turning point – on the basis of its 'new look' accomplishments – would suggest the special propensity of the cinema in projecting the bourgeois imaginary of

[40] Songyote, "*Nang Nak: rue ja pen tamnan khong phi tua sud thaai* [Nang Nak: Legend of the Last Ghost?]," 71.

Thai heritage and global visibility as inherently intertwined. For this reason, the embrace of the film might have less to do with its power to recognise, and symbolically resolve through the filmic remembrance of the past as a compensatory fantasy, the experience of loss of the stable self of *khon thai* as they are subjected to globalisation. Instead, the celebratory dimension of *Nang Nak*'s reception – that which acknowledges the history-making nature of its Thai yet universal quality – suggests the cinema's centrality as the rehearsal ground for a class of narcissistically schizophrenic subjects to play out the fantasy of their historical role as ascendant market agents and bearers of cultural nationalism in globalisation.

To conceptualise bourgeois subjectivity as schizophrenic highlights the distinction between the appetite for heritage in its consumerist, acquisitive dimension, and the nostalgia resulting from the experience of loss, which contains the impulse to radically transform the present by reaching into the past and imagining a substantially different future. The "image fixation *cum* historicist cravings" that Jameson identifies in (primarily) late capitalist America, as a symptom of the loss of historicity in that society, can be contextualised as the product of the perceived failure of alternative political horizons, and the dissolution of bourgeois authority in defining society's cultural and moral tone.[41] In the contemporary Thai case, such craving occurs as a correlation of the urban middle bourgeois claim to have won authority in precisely these domains. The celebratory aspect *Nang Nak*'s reception – which drew attention to its achievements as a world-class film that visualises Thai heritage – is in this sense a manifestation of what Kasian fleshes out as bourgeois schizophrenia: the a-historical projection of "*Thainess as the Thais have never been*", and "*un-Thainess as the Thais may never be*" in the ideology of neo-liberal globalisation.[42] The historicist cum *sakon* attractions of *Nang Nak* licensed a mode of reception that naturalised as patriotically Thai the dream of capitalist advancement in that very same model of global economic domination of which Hollywood is emblematic – a logic of investment which would shortly blow up to hyperbolic proportion with *Suriyothai*'s

[41] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 287. See also Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London; New York: Verso, 1998), 78-92. Anderson argues that the third co-ordinate determining the conjuncture of the postmodern is technological saturation.

[42] Kasian, "Cultural Forces and Counter-Forces in Contemporary Thailand," 250. Author's italics.

release. The question is whether the pleasure of witnessing world-class Thainess, the nostalgia film aesthetic's compliance with the logic of narcissism, is largely one of bourgeois denial rather than bourgeois nostalgia: the investment in visually world-class heritage as part of the suppression of counter-narratives of historical experiences which threaten to challenge the established order, and the embrace of *sakon/*world-class aesthetic attainment as the projection of 'Thai national' capitalist gains on a scale logically and materially unattainable.

Festival display

Nang Nak's circulation in the Thai multiplex context was premised on the attraction of its pastiche of Old Siamness. In this original context of its circulation, viewing positions are taken up in the implicit understanding of the text's inscription of a touristic, exoticising mode of looking, and in relation to its world-class yet Thai claims. Upon its international circulation, pastiche was inevitably de-contextualised, threatening to transform what is effectively a non-representational film into a nationally representative object. In some cases, as this small anecdote illustrates, the circulation of this bourgeois fantasy in a properly international setting threw up some tough questions about how Thailand represents itself to itself, and the world.

9 November 1999, at the Odeon West End in Leicester Square, the showcase cinema of the London Film Festival. The Odeon that night was buzzing in anticipation of UK premiere of *Nang Nak*. The presence of a well-known British film critic, along with the impressive turnout of non-Thai cinephiles, was just one indication of the hype that was then beginning to grow around a seemingly revitalised, newly internationalised Thai cinema. Obliging to the convention of festival event, Nonzee was present to perform a Q&A with the festival's programmer for the Asia-Pacific region, Rayns. Festival format Q&As are often interesting for their unpredictability, insofar as they permit audiences to spontaneously shape the meaning of the film and the event of its screening, a public sphere of sorts. That night after the screening of *Nang Nak,* audience questions and comments gave the atmosphere a curiously explosive charge, revealing a clashing of desires to articulate, probe and take control of how the film might be regarded as displaying Thainess.

Nonzee, as soon as he walked onto the stage raised his hands together in a *wai,* the Thai form of greeting. Predictably one non-Thai member of the audience asked that inevitable naïve question about the accuracy of *Nang Nak's* 'representation' of rural life. The Thai diaspora, with so little opportunity for public visibility in the UK, sniggered in collective sarcasm; or perhaps more precisely, the urban-identified Thai students in that auditorium wanted to make their displeasure known at the questioner's association of Thailand with, after all this time, lush green paddy fields. Another, more knowing non-Thai member of the audience then asked cheekily why Nonzee showed the protagonists in a missionary position but not a single shot of them kissing. His witty 'that's not our culture' riposte provoked appreciative merriment. Tired of the pedestrian tone that the cross-cultural exchange seemed to be taking, a Thai male of the intellectual sort decided to raise a barbed comment identifying the social conservatism of *Nang Nak,* whose denouement appears to this questioner at least to be endorsing the 'father worship' ideology, which imposes authority from the centre over the local organisation of village life. His attempt to articulate a real Thailand underneath the mythic projection was extended by another leftfield question. Temperature was awkwardly raised when a young man demanded Nonzee's opinion on that year's film scandal, the news that the shooting of the Hollywood film *The Beach* had caused serious damages to an island in southern Thailand which had been used as its location, calling the director a liar when all he could offer was a blandly diplomatic response.

Although the London Film Festival Q&A was only a small fragment of *Nang Nak's* international life, the unpredictable charge that night – which flared up as a result of the de-contextualised display of the film as a 'national cultural' artefact – does point to a dilemma acutely raised by the spectatorial mode of address of heritage films. In what Rey Chow defines as the constitution of modern postcolonial self-consciousness through visuality, she emphasises the dynamic, not simply of watching the "third world" to which one belongs represented in images, but of watching oneself as spectacle, as film, as images "always already watched" by the West.[43] Self-

[43] Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 9.

exoticisation produces modern "third world" self-consciousness in this sense, through watching oneself as filmic images or spectacle. Chow further specifies that self-exoticisation, the aesthetic response stemming from a sense of cultural crisis in her definition, paradoxically insists on its own primacy vis-à-vis the West.[44] Chow is referring to modern China (and in relation to this dynamic operating in Fifth Generation films), but we can usefully learn lessons here from her broad brushstroke characterising the paradox that, as a logic of claiming national cultural representativeness, self-exoticisation both acknowledges the "third world" self in the dominating Western gaze and asserts the primordial status of what it purports to represent.

This paradox might be said to lie behind Nonzee's somewhat puzzling if not frankly bizarre reflection later on in a Thai film magazine interview, in response to the question as to why he thought *Nang Nak* had gone down so warmly in festivals abroad. According to him: "some members of the audience who cried told me they were touched by Mak. I think that's perhaps because when *our men* love a woman they remain with her, together as a family, until their dying days. *It's not something foreigners are familiar with*".[45] Fresh from its circulation in this properly international arena of cultural display, Old Siam spectacle and otherworldly love, fantasised as a *boran* custom implied to be equally foreign to Thais of today, threatened to collapse into an assertion of Thai exceptionalism. Reflected back to a Thai readership, the attraction of his *Nang Nak* in the eyes of the world was read through a creatively misleading cliché of cultural representativeness – of everlasting love and an unusually credulous 'Thai' man as a persistent and vital national custom.

[44] Ibid., 22-23.

[45] "*5 andap nang thai tham ngern 2542* [the Top 5 Highest Grossing Thai Films of 1999]," 126. My italics.

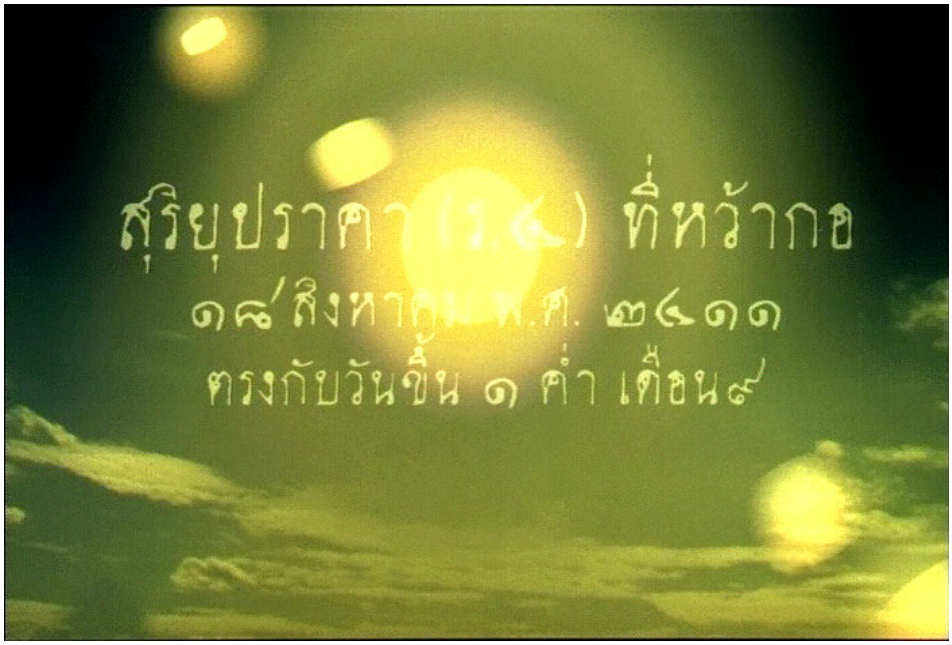


Fig 30. *Nang Nak*
"The eclipse at Wako in the reign of Rama IV 18 August 1868."

Fig 31. *Sanya jai mae nak Phra Khanong*
"Siam 1868 Phra Khanong canal."

Fig 32. the historical Somdej Toe in *Nang Nak*

Fig 33. the generic abbot in *Nang Nak*

The involuntary parting of husband and wife in *Nang Nak*. The friend's look confirms this as a tableau of an idealised couple.

Fig. 35

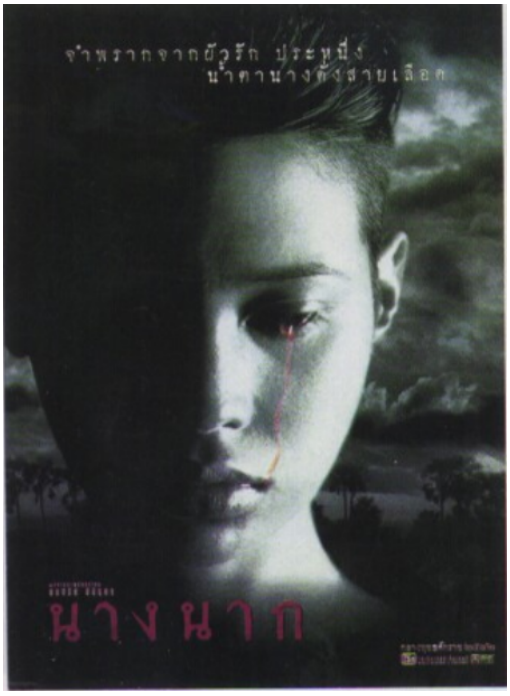
Fig. 34

Fig. 37

Fig. 36

Fig 38. Poster of *Nang Nak*

From Anake Nawigamune, *Perd tamnan Mae Nak Phra Khanong* [Mae Nak Classical Ghost of Siam], 8



CHAPTER 6. A hyperbolic act of cinema[1]

In its own promotional tag line, *Suriyothai* is *phapphayon haeng siam prathet*: the national film of Siam. This royal-supported biopic stands apart from other heritage films for the sheer inflated scale marking every stage of its existence.[2] Its unique production context was widely reported in the national and international media. Its claim to be the first serious, well-researched recreation of the life and death of the eponymous 16th century warrior queen, celebrated in official nationalist narrative as a valiant heroine who sacrificed her life in defence of her kingdom of Ayutthaya, attracted intense interest in Thailand, not least for the air of heroism spun around its venerated director, Chatrichalerm, in undertaking to recreate a lost world with so little visual record in the scale of the Hollywood blockbuster. Echoing the grandeur of *Suriyothai*'s production background was the extent of its promotional hype. The fact that it was released the year international festivals, critics and distributors were especially keen to identify the emergence of New Thai Cinema, the promise of *Suriyothai*'s global hype bolstered its domestic aura as *the* national film poised to take on the world. What *Suriyothai* offered, then, was less a film-experience than what might be described as a national-cinematic experience substantially orchestrated from above. As such, in writing about the *Suriyothai* phenomenon, the puzzle then becomes how one accounts for its hyperbolic scale, its monumentality as a national event of the kind resembling an 'act of cinema' addressed to 'Thais who do not usually watch Thai films'. The significance of *Suriyothai* probably lies here, rather than its textual 'representation' or 'construction' of the Ayutthaya past, as has been the focus of critical reviews of the film.

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[1] I have borrowed this phrase from Vivian Sobchack's apt description of the classical Hollywood historical epic as "a hyperbolic, even hysterical act of cinema". See Vivian Sobchack, ""Surge and Splendor": A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic," *Representations* 29 (1990): 24.

[2] The exception is of course its follow-up, the *Naresuan* trilogy. The first two parts of this '*Lord of the Rings*-style' trilogy, a biopic of the eponymous Ayutthaya warrior king celebrated in official nationalist history as the hero who liberated the nation from Burmese invasion, were released in early 2007. The third part is scheduled for release in December to commemorate Bhumibol's 80th birthday.

Producing and promoting hyperbole

Suriyothai has gone down in the Thai chronicle as the most expensive Thai film ever made, with a wildly escalated production budget of around 400 million baht, or just under ten times the production and promotion budget of *Nang Nak*.[3] One of the most intriguing aspects of its official image are the mind-boggling figures invoked to illustrate its history-making achievement, none of which added up to any clear idea about whether or not it made any profit. Information released to the Thai media about the domestic costs of promoting the biopic ranged mystifyingly from 100 million baht[4] to 200 million.[5] As the 2001 version was released, it was accompanied by projected figures for international sales, which varied entertainingly wildly in their estimates.[6] Then came the added cost of the Francis Ford Coppola recut, the trimmed down version for the international market called *The Legend of Suriyothai* (2003).[7] In contrast to the earlier projection of international sales, how the recut version fared in

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[3] The total budget figure for *Nang Nak* is taken from an interview with Nonzee in the 2001 Pusan International Film Festival publication. What is intriguing to note in it is his pointed comment about the drastic leap in the budget of high-profile Thai films. In the year of the *Suriyothai* fever, Nonzee observed: "People make the mistake of thinking that if you want to make a good film, you have to pour a lot of money into it. I am worried about that kind of mindset emerging with increased budget". See Ji-Seok Kim, "Interview with Nonzee Nimibutr," in *Bangkok Express: Close Encounter with New Thai Films*, ed. Kim Ji-Seok and Michelle Sohn (Pusan: 6th Pusan International Film Festival, 2001), 51.

[4] "*Suriyothai: songkhram ku ekkaraj thun thai vs. thun Hollywood* [Suriyothai the Battle for Independence: Thai Capital vs. Hollywood Capital]," *Corporate Thailand* 2001, 58. Benjawan Somsin, "'Suriyothai' Set to Gross Bt500m," *The Nation*, 8 September 2001.

[5] Parinyaporn Pajee, "Clashing over History," *The Nation*, 2 August 2001. Nantakwang Sirasoonthorn, "*Lob mong Suriyothai phan khwam pen nang?* [Sneaking a Look at Suriyothai as a Film]," *Krungthep Thurakij*, 17 August 2001.

[6] Somsak Techaratanaprasert of Sahamongkol Film International, one of *Suriyothai*'s financiers, optimistically projected prior to its domestic release that the film would earn a billion baht from international sales. On its release, *The Nation* reported that Chatrichalerm "said a $20 million sale [890 million baht] was possible", and it claimed that "[t]he film is expected to generate about $100 million in ticket sales in more than 100 countries". Striking a more sober note was a small article in a Bangkok magazine, *Metro* (now defunct), which pointed out that: "[r]umours – poo-pooed by industry insiders – that the deals with Cinemax or New Line could reach US$10 million would certainly tip the balance in favour of what's an extremely risky venture". See respectively "*Suriyothai: songkhram ku ekkaraj thun thai vs. thun Hollywood* [Suriyothai the Battle for Independence: Thai Capital Vs. Hollywood Capital]," 61. Naranart Phuangkanok, "Hollywood Meeting on 'Suriyothai'," *The Nation*, 17 August 2001. June McAuliff, "Making History," *Metro*, August 2001. The 'Coppola-presents' version was in the end bought by Sony Pictures Classics. No information was released about how much the deal was worth. But it is probably safe to speculate that had the film done reasonably well out of its international sales, that information would have been widely circulated to the domestic press, resulting in reports of a celebratory nature emphasising the global success of 'our exemplary Thai'.

[7] A report in *The Nation* claimed that this added another "86 million baht, bringing the total [cost] to Bt645 million". See Parinyaporn Pajee, "Suriyothai Goes Hollywood," *The Nation*, 14 March 2002.

the global market remains something of a mystery, unlike its domestic box-office performance. The 'history-making' figure cited consistently across the board as an acknowledgement of *Suriyothai*'s achievement is 700 million baht, or nearly five times the record previously held by *Nang Nak*.[8] In their headline-grabbing sensationalism, the figures begin to give us a picture of a film whose eventful image rests on the projection of scale surpassing 'the Thai norm'.

In the run up to its domestic release, the hype rained down hard: yards of articles and interviews, glossy magazine photo shoots of the huge cast, special advert slots on TV and in particular around the capital city.[9] A new development, and one which captured much attention, was the accompanying rush to produce *Suriyothai* affiliated merchandising. The beer monopolist Boonrawd Brewery came out with *Suriyothai* Singh beer cans, featuring images of members of the cast; the Petroleum Authority of Thailand produced *Suriyothai* tissue boxes to hand out to customers at its petrol stations; the EGV multiplex chain put out adverts "proudly presenting..." its special popcorn and soft drink combo deal featuring *Suriyothai* buckets and cups, with or without postcards.[10] Less mentioned but more significant is the claim on its release that *Suriyothai* broke the record for the greatest number of print duplicates, reproduced to facilitate the saturated release of the film nationwide.[11] The combination of saturated release and mega hype lent the deceptive air of a nation holding its breath in collective enthrallment. The film staged its royal world premiere on 12 August 2001, or Queen Sirikit's birthday, before going on general release five days later. Its opening weekend revenue was reportedly a record-breaking "Bt110 million nationwide".[12]

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[8] Panthiwa Uamjerm, "*2544: pee thong khong "nang thai" jak sobsao su rungreuang* [2001: Thai Cinema's Golden Year]," *Nang: Thai* [Thai Film Quarterly] 12 (2001/2002): 50.

[9] A report noted that advertisements for the film were put up "on 12-by-30 metre billboards at five locations along city expressways, banners on some 400 flyovers, and at least 50 bus stops around Bangkok". Alongkorn Parivudhipongs, "Feast for the Eyes," *Bangkok Post*, 12 August 2001.

[10] Another report pointed out that souvenirs of "30 types and 70 models" accompanied the release of *Suriyothai*. Profits from these souvenirs were apparently earmarked for royal charities. Suwat Thongthanakul, "*Phon thang thurakij jak Suriyothai* [Business Gains from *Suriyothai*]," *MGR Online*, 12 August 2001.

[11] Nai Samran, "*Suriyothai alangkarn nang thai* [*Suriyothai:* An Illustrious Thai Film]," *Krungthep Thurakij*, 18 August 2001.

[12] "'Suriyothai' Smashing All Records," *The Nation*, 21 August 2001.

On the month of its domestic release, an editorial in a well-regarded Thai business magazine hailed *Suriyothai* as "*nawattakam* [an innovation]"; and, in a revealing phrase rendered emphatic by switching to English, a "True International Capitalist".[13] The editorial of *Corporate Thailand* commended the filmmaker for setting his sights on capturing the international market, armed with what it admiringly described as unmatched strategic acumen in "*karn ok baeb* [tailoring]" the film precisely for it. The editorial then cautioned its reader not to accuse the film in knee-jerk fashion of "*chat niyom yon yuk* [regressive nationalism]" simply because it dealt with dynasties in antiquity. It cited as evidence that *Suriyothai* "*mai me laksana thang udomkarn* [is ideology-free]" the information drawn from the promotional material, indicating that one of the sources of its screenplay was an account written by a Portuguese adventurer in Ayutthaya. In *Corporate Thailand*'s view, the willingness to rely on non-Thai background material signalled that the biopic was no regressive ventriloquism of hypernationalism. Instead, it was a vanguard cultural commodity: a true international capitalist....made with Thai capital. Moreover, while it described Chatrichalerm in glowing terms as a most valuable Thai director who stood out for his apparent understanding of the taste of the Western film market, the editorial at the same time acknowledged that the film's mode of funding was exceptional in an altogether more old-fashioned sense, in its reliance on the network of elite connection, domestic capital and state patronage.[14]

The production of *Suriyothai* involved the unique alliance of royal prestige with monopoly capitalists, both public and private. The project got off the ground due to the personal connection between Chatrichalerm and the queen, who are cousins. In one interview, Chatrichalerm coyly specified that he made *Suriyothai* in order to fulfil the wishes of his unnamed *jao nai* [which means boss, aristocrat, royalty, or a 'higher being']. He was urged by his *jao nai* to make a historical film to teach Thai youngsters a thing or two about their own history, since "*khon roon mai khong rao ja leum prawattisat Thai pai laew wa me khwam pen ma yang rai* [our new generation

[13] Jumpot Saiyud, "Suriyothai 2002 True International Capitalist," *Corporate Thailand*, August 2001, 18.

[14] Ibid., 20.

of youngsters have forgotten Thai history – how we have come to be]".[15] The astronomical budget by local standards could not have been generated without what has come to be euphemistically termed the unaccountable "*ngeuan khai piset* [special conditions]" involving the queen's patronage.[16] According to *Corporate Thailand*, the funding for the biopic came partly from the "special fund (*thun piset*)" of the well-endowed Crown Property Bureau, combined with substantial contributions from state enterprises, major Thai companies, and currently the most powerful vertically integrated monopolist in the film industry, Sahamongkol Film International. Major sponsors included Boonrawd Brewery, the Petroleum Authority of Thailand, the Telephone Organisation of Thailand, Thai Airways, and Siam Commercial Bank.[17] This style of soliciting around half of its production budget from public and private Thai companies was highly unusual. Apart from the film monopolist, none of the other sponsors or investors had any interest, ambition or expertise in film production and marketing.[18]

In this respect, the financing of *Suriyothai* did not fit any of the recognisable models of a viable global film commodity. It did not attract international co-production investment, since Chatrichalerm himself had little presence as an international auteur (in stark contrast to his image in Thailand as a cosmopolitan filmmaker). Here, he stood some way away from the younger generation of actually internationalised Thai filmmakers such as Pen-ek, whose *Reuang…/*Last Life in the Universe and *Kham…/*Invisible Waves were internationally funded projects and cast Asian stars in key roles in the bid for global distribution. Neither was *Suriyothai* an example of a domestically funded film that attracted pre-sale interest, unlike *Tom-yum-goong*, which pulled international distributors on the strength of its kick boxing

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[15] "Pawae-Nontawee", "*Mom jao Chatrichalerm Yukol theung khrao thi "Suriyothai" ok thap* [Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol and *Suriyothai*: Advancing into Combat]," *Praew*, July 2001, 157-8.

[16] Pinyo, *Khatha sek ma hai pen thewada: beuang lang khwam khid thi khub khleuan nang thai su yuk thong* [From Dog to God: Thai Cinema's Golden Age and the Thinkers Behind It], 11.

[17] "*Suriyothai: Songkhram ku ekkaraj thun thai vs. thun Hollywood* [Suriyothai the Battle for Independence: Thai Capital Vs. Hollywood Capital]," 58-59, 61. And Suwat, "*Phon thang Thurakij jak Suriyothai* [Business Gains from *Suriyothai*]."

[18] Although a minority of filmmakers have recently begun to attract international funding, the most common type of financing remains domestically generated. This is increasingly taking the form of co-production deals between the vertically or horizontally integrated monopolists and small, though trendsetting production houses, as well as between the studios and companies from related media industries, such as television or advertising houses.

action hero Ja Phanom/Tony Jaa.[19] To be fair, according to the promotional account, *Suriyothai* took five odd years of pre-production work and around two-and-a-half years on top to shoot. It went into production in April 1999, at a time when international investors had not quite begun to look to Thailand for film projects to finance. It was not until Coppola lent his name and labour to the recut version of the film (which was not announced until early 2002) that any concrete strategy for global distribution could in all seriousness be said to materialise. Yet in the run up to its domestic release, *Corporate Thailand*'s unbridled celebration of its vanguard status as the new Thai international capitalist, along with other energetic projections of its global sale prospects, highlighted the extent to which the dream of international attractiveness underscored *Suriyothai*'s legitimisation on its home turf.

To introduce the theme slightly differently, what demands to be understood is the centrality of the *domestically circulated rhetoric of international credibility*. This is a different line of inquiry from one that focuses on assessing how the biopic was positioned for the global market, which would tend to assume that its international high gloss veneer was addressed from the start to non-Thai spectators. Stringer, for instance, points to its Coppola-led, hyped up exhibition in the marketplace section of Cannes 2002 as typical of the strategy of utilising the alternative, 'cultural' network of global distribution that film festivals symbolise, to endow a blockbuster from an unknown place with a viable image for global distribution.[20] This was certainly the case. But conversely, even at the stage where there was no concrete strategy of internationalising to speak of, the projection of an internationally viable image played a real if hallucinatory part in its self-mythologisation in Thailand as a 'national film' of *sakon*/global magnitude.

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[19] *Tom-yum-goong* was also financed by Sahamongkol Film International, who let it be known this time that the pre-sale deals came in at over 400 million baht. Sorakol Adulyanon, "*Neua 'Tony Jaa' me 'Tony Jiang'* [Greater Than Tony Jaa Is 'Tony Jiang']," *Matichon Sudsapda*, 26 August 2005, 12. Kong Rithdee, "Making an Impression," *Bangkok Post*, 27 May 2005.

[20] Julian Stringer, "Neither One Thing nor the Other: Blockbusters at Film Festivals," in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 206. He describes *Suriyothai* as, along with *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, "[t]wo of the most widely reported films at Cannes" in 2002. Ibid., 205.

Royal culture industry

Suriyothai held its world premiere in a gala event at the prestigious old Bangkok cinema with royal connections, Chalerm Krung. Both the king and queen presided over the evening's performance, styled in the fashion of a glittering state banquet. High-socialite invitees and foreign dignitaries attended on invitation, and in return they were given a gilded programme book to take away as a souvenir. The presence of the bi-lingual programme book produced to accompany the evening's performance replicated the trappings of high cultural live performances, distinguishing this premiere from any routine movie night.

The format of the book itself nicely reveals the distinctive combination of official and blockbuster kitsch. The first page of the book has a photographic portrait of Their Majesties. Then in gold graphics and traditional looking gold fonts, it goes on to list the evening's itinerary in the decorous style of a state diplomatic function, indicating the time of arrival of Their Majesties, the gala screening, followed by a midnight banquet at a royal palace. A plot synopsis and a flattering directorial biography follow, along with details and photographs of the cast in their resplendent costumes. At the back is attached a loose-leaf sheet on which is printed – one side in English one side in Thai – the lyric of *Suriyothai*'s theme-ballad, belted out by a Thai singer during its closing credits in the diva fashion of Mariah Carey. Disseminated in this fashion, the ballad appeared as if it were another addition to the canon of Thai patriotic poems or propaganda songs. In the programme book, the honorary actress requested by the queen to take on the role of the eponymous heroine, the real life aristocrat M.L. Piyapas Bhirombhakdi, intimates a strong, otherworldly bond between Sirikit and her 16th century counterpart. A quote from the honorary actress reads as follows: "This film "Suriyothai" has been inspired by Her Majesty the Queen [sic] admiration and respect for the great Queen Suriyothai and the film pay [sic] tribute to her valiant example".[21]

In his article on the exceptional political aura of the current Thai monarch in the contemporary period, the historian Somsak Jeamteerasakul points in passing to its

[21] *Suriyothai* World Premiere Programme.

cultural accompaniment: the emergence of a new type of royal "culture industry".[22] This industry produces culture and lifestyle commodities with an ostensibly hagiographic veneer of 'royal worship'. Their appeal derives from surreptitious association with monarchical wisdom, aura and charity, especially for Bhumibol and his popular second daughter Sirindhorn. Produced variously by private entrepreneurs, royal-owned companies, or the bureaucracy, they commonly share the goal of maximising consumers through promotional rhetoric that play on the affective attachment of Thai subjects for certain members of the royalty.[23] Examples of royal culture industry commodities, as Somsak mentions, include the best-selling *Khun Thong Daeng* book, a story written by the King about his favourite pet dog of that name, which was subsequently turned into a best-selling graphic book, and more recently a 'reality show' DVD of the other palace dogs; the upscale Golden Place organic supermarket, which advertises royal patronage and boasts a branch by the gates of the king's residential palace in the seaside town of Hua Hin; the 'we love the king' charity wristband and of course the yellow t-shirts. To a much more magnetic extent, royal culture industry goods or brands are often accompanied by the velvet gloss of educational uplift, well-living, charitable goodwill or cultural-national loyalty.

What drives the 'demand' for commodities of the royal culture industry? As chapter 1 touches on, a common explanation points to middle class cultural aspiration. Some historians have pointed, for instance, to the ready consumption of the middle classes of photographic images of Chulalongkorn in modern attire and casual poses, and for lifestyle publications celebrating the vogue for all things 'modern' in the palaces during his reign. In Peleggi's observation, the nouveau riche "quest of material sophistication and social distinction" accounts for the especially

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[22] Somsak Jeamteerasakul, "*Prachathippatai baeb lang 14 tula* [Post-14 October Democracies]," *Midnight University* article number 709 (2005).

[23] This relates to Patrick Jory's point that the proliferation of royal imageries in contemporary Thailand stems from multiple sources. To this extent "the monarchy is not in control of its own image". In his summary, such sources consist of: organs of the state; state enterprises; big businesses and companies with significant royal investment or close royal connections; privately owned print media; and lastly small-scale private producers. See Patrick Jory, "The King and Us," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (2001): 210. *Suriyothai*'s funding came out of the first three categories.

pronounced proliferation of these visual products during the economic boom.[24] In the case of lifestyle and cultural goods whose production itself is strongly associated with the royal family, this explanation needs further contextualisation, since they come bearing a heavy air of social obligation and polite compulsion. People are not necessarily coerced into buying them; but since they profitably confuse the distinction between the freely choosing consumer and the loyal Thai monarchical subject, such commodities circulate among a whole array of other culture or lifestyle goods as 'exceptional' products, and an exception to the market's usual rule.

The difficulty of deciphering the apparently voracious consumption of royal industry commodities is especially relevant in *Suriyothai*'s case. The film's record-breaking domestic box-office figure demonstrates a range of things, not all of which confirm its self-mythologisation. This image: of sold out screenings and snaking queues forming outside Bangkok multiplexes on the first day of its release; of discerning 'adults' who do not usually watch Thai films turning up in droves; of its accomplishment as a "megahit" at home;[25] is a selective construction facilitated by *Suriyothai*'s exceptional status in the above sense. For a start, the record-breaking gross revenue probably had as much to do with the ticket price hike as any concrete evidence of history-making attendance. Cinema operators complied with the advice from *Suriyothai*'s production company to increase the ticket price by another 20 baht or so, raising the multiplex rate for this film to around 120 baht. It was the special status that licensed both the exhibitors and producers to play on the idea that the special rate was akin to 'donating' to a charitable royal 'cause'.[26] And indeed the promotional information released made sure to advertise that part of the ticket profits would go to royal charities.

Suriyothai's royal association, along with the much-trumpeted claim to serious historical research, endowed it with a respectable pedagogical veneer. This proved successful in compelling educational institutions to endorse the film by persuading, or simply ordering, their students to attend screenings at commercial

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[24] Peleggi, *The Politics of Ruins and the Business of Nostalgia*, 168.

[25] Stringer, "Neither One Thing nor the Other: Blockbusters at Film Festivals," 206.

[26] The *Bangkok Post* announced that "prices will be set at 120 to 150 baht in Bangkok to help recoup the extensive production costs". See Alongkorn, "Feast for the Eyes."

cinemas. At the film's release, Sahamongkol Film International boss, Somsak, emphasised that many schools, as well as "other organisations" (possibly the civil service or state enterprises), had already made substantial group reservations.[27] On the day of its world premiere, a newspaper report claimed that *Suriyothai* had already raked in about 10 million baht in reservations.[28] Elsewhere, a journalist claimed that "[u]niversity professors have assigned "Suriyothai" as homework, and school classes receive special volume discounts to the performances".[29] And gossip flew wild about the bulk purchasing of tickets in high society, whose members were said to be under discreet expectation to treat this film as if it were an occasion for making ostentatious donations.

Monumentality and marketing hook

Another development external to the cinema might also help to explain the timing and scale of *Suriyothai*. This is the stylistic turn of royal commemoration events in the contemporary period toward 'cinematic' spectacle, constituting the aestheticisation of the bond between the monarch and the people. Major events of this nature in the past twenty-five years include: the 1982 bicentennial anniversary of the Chakri dynasty; the 1988 Year of the Longest-Reigning Monarch; the 1996 the Golden Jubilee of Bhumibol's reign, celebrated in a calendar of events culminating in a spectacular series of pageants and ceremonies in Bangkok; and the 2006 celebration of his Diamond Jubilee, which – for reasons discussed in chapter 1 – surpasses previous commemorations in affective intensity.[30]

Intriguing indeed to note that the beginning of *Suriyothai*'s long period of gestation overlapped substantially with the Golden Jubilee.[31] In other words, the long

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[27] "*Suriyothai: songkhram ku ekkaraj thun thai vs. thun Hollywood* [Suriyothai the Battle for Independence: Thai Capital Vs. Hollywood Capital]," 61.

[28] Suwat, "*Phon thang Thurakij jak Suriyothai* [Business Gains from *Suriyothai*]."

[29] Jennifer Gampbell, "Bigger Than 'Titanic': No Expense Spared on a Thai Epic," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 30 2001.

[30] See also Peleggi, *Lord of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image*, epilogue.

[31] In her article on *Suriyothai*, Amporn Jirattikorn argues that the biopic was made in response to three developments during the late 1990s: the 1997 economic crisis; the cult of Princess Suphankanlaya (believed to be a granddaughter of Suriyothai); and the 'offence' to royalists of the 1999 Hollywood remake of *The King and I*. At the height of the recession, the worship of

production process began amid a climate of increasing monumentality of royal spectacles; and it appeared to have begun within a few years of one the most monumental of them all. Such commemoration events are already in themselves cinematic, insofar as they transform physical ceremonial sites into spectacular sets connoting royal achievement and national heritage, and insofar as they interpellate Thai subjects as captivated spectators. Their presence each time as a special 'one-off' celebration, though one whose form is recurring with increasing frequency as anxieties about the future of the monarchy escalate, etches a landscape in which a 'royal' film commodity could then inveigle itself. Of course, major differences persist between state-sponsored commemorative spectacles and a public-private film initiative. Nevertheless, at the very least the scale and orchestrated intensity of these commemorative events prefigure the 'bigness' of *Suriyothai*.

The auteur's *barami*

To refer back to Wyatt's argument that high concept films are distinguished by their emphasis on marketability, involving marketing strategies orchestrated around a

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Suphankanlaya, a previously little known princess of Ayutthaya, briefly threatened to become the new 'religion of post-prosperity'. Her 'medium' was a female entrepreneur who rose to media fame after she claimed that Suphankanlaya had come to her in a dream when her life was falling apart, and inspired her to rise up above a failed marriage and rebuild her business. Amporn argues that *Suriyothai* could be seen in part as a royal reaction to a commoner's cult, which "spread via the assistance of the cosmetic business" – an attempt to overshadow it with a royal-endorsed cult of an exemplary female. This is a delicious speculation, but the time frame does not seem to quite fit, if we take into account Chatrichalerm's claim that the biopic took five years to prepare and some two years on top to shoot. In Sunait Chutintaranont's book about Suphankanlaya, he claims that interest in this princess only began to emerge in 1996, reaching its peak in March 1999. In other words, the cult reached fever pitch at a point when the five years background research for *Suriyothai* was coming to a close, and shooting was about to begin. See respectively, Amporn Jirattikorn, "Suriyothai: Hybridizing Thai National Identity through Film," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (2003): 299-303. An interview with Chatrichalerm in "Pawae-Nontawee", "*Mom jao Chatrichalerm Yukol theung khrao thi "Suriyothai" ok thap* [Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol and *Suriyothai*: Advancing into Combat]," 157. Sunait quoted in Prasatsri, "*Tamnan phra Suphankanlaya jak 'tad torn' su 'term tor'* [The Princess Suphankalaya Legend: From Omission to Embellishment]," *Siamrath Sapda Wijarn*, 21 March 2003.

And given the time frame, the idea to make *Suriyothai* could not have been primarily inspired by the Hollywood remake, *Anna and the King*. The latter was announced as a project in 1998, and the crew was denied permission to shoot in Thailand at the end of that year. (The film itself was also denied permission to be shown in Thai cinemas.) By the time the 'Anna controversy' came along, *Suriyothai*'s pre-production preparations were already well on the way. At the promotional stage, however, the rhetoric homed in on comparisons between the two films. Here, Amporn refers to interviews in which Chatrichalerm compared his film to *Anna and the King* as one Oscar potential to another (though conceding that they would probably compete in different categories).

single, immediately identifiable concept.[32] Like their predecessor the blockbusters, the strategy is to make high investment in a small number of products. The producer gambles on the prospect of a 'bonanza' style return on a film framed as a one-off, whose major attraction is visual boldness. It is easy to see how the defining features of the high concept mode of production: integrated marketing and merchandising, immediately identifiable concept, visual spectacularity over and above plot or character exposition, proved especially amenable to the production of *phapphayon haeng siam prathet*.[33] The orchestration of the promotion campaign, paced to generate maximum anticipation and hype, 'reproduced' a comparable scale of media saturation as state-sponsored royal spectacles. Equally, the latter's discourse of moral-cultural-national uplift, such as the emphasis on the goodness of these events in contributing to charitable royal causes, 'translated' seamlessly enough into the marketing hook that legitimised the film, the souvenirs, the accompanying merchandising, and of course the ticket price hike.

We can also recall Wyatt's observation that both high concept and blockbuster films try to minimise risks by relying on "pre-sold" or financially proven materials, such as casting certain stars, or adapting novels and plays already proven to be a hit.[34] It is tempting to see the subject matter of *Suriyothai* as a kind of pre-sold attraction in this light, and one that most clearly signals the film's privileging of bourgeois spectatorship. The death on elephant-back of Queen Suriyothai who fought disguised as a man to defend the Kingdom of Ayutthaya has, over the past century-and-a-half, become included as a significant moment in the official biography of the Siamese/Thai nation. In the mid-nineteenth century, the trope of Suriyothai's valiant death began to be held up as proof of unified Siam's long fight to safeguard her

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[32] Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, esp. chaps. 3 & 4.

[33] Although the word blockbuster is often attached to *Suriyothai* as a helpful general way of indicating its 'bigness', for analytical precision Wyatt's definition of the high concept film is more relevant. To call *Suriyothai* a high concept film focuses attention on what will prove likely to be its biggest historical contribution to Thai cinema: integrated merchandising, cross-platform promotion on a previously unthinkable scale, and saturated nationwide release. Quite useful in this context also is Wyatt's summary of the key stylistic difference between the blockbuster and the high concept: the former deploys traditional genres and established stars within each genre, while the latter privileges visual boldness and narrative hiatus at the expense of narrative and character complexity. See Ibid., chap. 2, 69-81. In this respect (as I go on to discuss), it is helpful to think of *Suriyothai* as a high concept pastiche of the scale of the classical Hollywood historical epic.

[34] Ibid., 15, 81.

independence.[35] A little later the royal nationalist historiographic tradition canonised her as a heroine of the middle Ayutthaya period.[36] A key example of the historiographic texts of this tradition is the chronicle compilation *Thai rop Phama,* which the historian Sunait Chutintaranont (who is co-credited alongside Chatrichalerm as the screenwriter of *Suriyothai*) characterises as "responsible for popularizing the image of the Burmese as an enemy of the Thai nation".[37] Its author Prince Damrong wrote that Queen Suriyothai was fatally struck by a male Burmese commander after steering her elephant in his way to protect her husband King Chakkraphat.[38] Projected in this manner as a heroine who sacrificed her life to defend her king and nation from the Burmese enemy, the royal nationalist tradition has been influential in canonising Suriyothai in the trope of the militaristic royal patriot.[39]

In Wyatt's summary, one kind of pre-sold attraction works by tapping into a theme currently fashionable in society, or a current national mood, anxiety and obsession.[40] In adapting the Suriyothai story onto film for the first time, the proclaimed seriousness of Chatrichalerm's research, re-interpretation and visualisation of Ayutthayan antiquity, combined with what might be described as the appeal of his authoritative enunciating stance, constituted the pre-sold attraction in this sense. The prince's pronouncement that his is a "level (*radab*)" of filmmaking virtually impossible to emulate in Thailand, a film that "all Thais must see, even those who don't usually watch Thai films",[41] made clear the biopic's target of address. The concept, or 'hook' tapped into the anxious perception that modern Thai society is failing to acculturate its future generations in Thai heritage. In endlessly

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[35] Piset Chiachanphong, "*Phra Suriyothai pen khrai? ma jak nai?* [Who Was Suriyothai? Where Did She Come From?]," *Sinlapawatthanatham*, August 2001, 31.

[36] Charnvit Kasetsiri, *Ayutthaya: History and Politics* (Bangkok: The Foundation for the Promotion of Social Sciences and Humanities Textbooks Project, 2000), 42.

[37] Sunait Chutintaranond, "The Image of the Burmese Enemy in Thai Perceptions and Historical Writings," *Journal of the Siam Society* 80, no. part 1 (1992): 96.

[38] Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Thai Rop Phama* (Bangkok: Bannakarn, 1972), 17.

[39] According to Barmé, the image of the valiant Suriyothai as a queen who dared to fight as a man for her country also caught the imagination of proto-feminist writers in early twentieth century Bangkok. As he demonstrates, they shaped Suriyothai into their own ideal of modern womanhood: her martial bravery was proof that all Siamese women are as capable as men in matters of public life. See his *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand*, 33-35.

[40] Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, 15.

[41] "*Suriyothai: songkhram ku ekkaraj thun thai vs. thun Hollywood* [Suriyothai the Battle for Independence: Thai Capital Vs. Hollywood Capital]," 59-60.

promoting the degree of background research that went into the production process, along with eulogising the pedigree of the production personages, *Suriyothai* promised first and foremost the thrill of an educationally uplifting experience: a history-making film which promised to rectify the malaise of amnesia among the nation's youth. Its 'concept' spoke very strongly indeed to bourgeois anxieties about young Thais' loss of connection with their historical roots.

Accompanying the advertised appeal of pedagogical uplift was the foregrounding of Chatrichalerm's own brand of enunciating authority. His canonised status as one of Thailand's leading film artists was secured largely through his social realist output of the 1970s and early 1980s. In what has often been seen as a break, in thematic and stylistic terms, from the lightness of films of the *nam nao thaithai* period, his early films feature the common man and woman as victims of modernisation.[42] Moreover, unlike most other rebels of the Thai new wave, one of Chatrichalerm's key achievements in this period was to maintain a relatively consistent enunciating stance as the chronicler of the poor and the dispossessed. It has been said that his aristocratic birth helped in dealing with the censor board during this period, while the fact that he could more or less finance his own films gave him greater leeway in the choice of subject matter and style. This was the original critical climate that established Chatrichalerm's reputation as the rebel artist, the intellectual who articulated some of the concerns of the 1970s' national-popular nationalist discourse to and for Thai cinema. Not surprisingly, given the consistent 'signature' of the films during the early and middle parts of his career – whether in terms of their thematic concerns, stance of ethical commitment, or differentiating techniques such as shooting with sound-on-film – Chatrichalerm has subsequently come to be designated as a leading Thai auteur. Over time however his reputation has become encrusted, passing over from rebel-vanguard into venerated national film artist who

[42] Examples of his social realist films include: *Thep thida rongraem* ('Hotel Angel', 1973), about a young northern woman tricked into prostitution in Bangkok. *Mue puen* (The Gunman, 1983), an ex-soldier sent to fight in the Thai army's covert, CIA funded campaign in Laos becomes a private hitman, while the soldier whose life he saved finds fame as a death squad police. *Thongphoon Khokpho ratsadorn tem khan* (The Citizen, 1977), an innocent northeastern migrant struggles to make an honest living as a taxi driver in Bangkok. But his car is stolen and justice is in short supply.

commands a unique speaking position due to his store of previous filmic, cultural and ethical achievements.

In promoting *Suriyothai*, Chatrichalerm's image as the national film artist of Thailand translated into his superior authorial ability to research Ayutthayan antiquity and distil the material into filmic form. The force of his superior power in imagining dynastic antiquity was repeated time and again by the cast and crew. A director of his generation, who helped out on the shoot, claimed that the prince marshalled his old university major in geology in the service of reading old maps and imagining the little details and episodes omitted from the historical chronicles.[43] A columnist invited to interview Chatrichalerm on set wrote in a tone of breathless awe of the virtuosity of the prince's imagining of visual details, conjuring to life in rich colours and moving images the few flat lines of the chronicles.[44] Shortly before the film's release, a big publishing house published Chatrichalerm's own 'chronicle' highlighting the historical records that illuminated his background research, *Jotmaihed Suriyothai* [The *Suriyothai* Archive].[45] This of course helped to enhance Chatrichalerm's image as the new source of authority on Ayutthayan antiquity.

As these examples suggest, several sources unconnected to *Suriyothai*'s marketing team played a significant role in helping to promote the film. In the months running up to its release, some high-profile journalists and academics sympathetic to Chatrichalerm's ambition wrote books and articles to help 'explain' the biopic. Either they were keen to seize the opportunity to increase awareness of Ayutthayan history, or they were mindful of the biopic's special status as a royal commodity, or probably a combination of both. In his introductory book, published the year prior to *Suriyothai*'s release and apparently intended as a viewing accompaniment, the historian Piset Chiachanpong applauds the prince's "progressiveness and courage"[46]

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[43] Piak Poster quoted in Anonymous, *Tam roy Suriyothai* [in the Footsteps of Suriyothai] (Bangkok: Sudsapda Samnak Pim, 2001), 16-17.

[44] Niwat Kongpien, "*Khwam jing kap jintanakarn khong mom jao Chatrichalerm Yukol* [Reality and the Imagination of Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol]," *Sinlapawatthanatham*, August 1999, 81-82.

[45] Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol, *Jotmaihed Suriyothai* [The Suriyothai Archive] (Bangkok: Praew Entertain, 2001).

[46] Piset Chiachanphong, *Suriyothai prawattisat jak phapphayon* [Suriyothai: History from Film] (Bangkok: Reader Publishing, 2001), 126.

in pursuing what he construes as a revisionist historical hypothesis, even calling the biopic an intervention into certain areas of academic research on Ayutthayan history.[47] He points out that no evidence can be found of Queen Suriyothai's birth lineage.[48] Therefore, in recreating the life of this protagonist from her adolescence, her marriage to a prince who subsequently became King Chakkraphat, to her valiant death, Chatrichalerm had to exercise sound historical judgment in plotting a sufficiently plausible account of her own royal background.

Strangely enough in this context, a controversy that might otherwise have undermined *Suriyothai*'s credibility seems to have had the obverse effect of enhancing Chatrichalerm's 'auteurist' speaking position. The biopic was released in the concurrent climate of Suriyothai revivalism,[49] and an increasingly open questioning of the received knowledge of her existence. Since the late 1990s – probably seizing the opportunity of the film's release – some historians began to publicly voice their suspicion about the story of Queen Suriyothai's heroic death as emplotted in nationalist narrative. The chronicles dating back to the period closest to when she was supposed to have perished on elephant back provide inconclusive or no supporting evidence. As the historian Hong Lysa summarises: "the name "Suriyothai" is not recorded in any Ayutthaya period source, neither Western nor Thai, not even what has been generally accepted as the earliest Thai source, the *Luang Prasert Chronicle* (1680). Her name in fact first appeared in the Bangkok period recensions of the *Royal Chronicle of Ayutthaya*".[50] And more challenging still is the hypothesis that there indeed did exist an Ayutthaya queen of Suriyothai's description, but rather than sacrificing her life to save her husband she co-operated

[47] Ibid., 131.

[48] Ibid., 117-20.

[49] Emblematic of the revivalism is the monument to Queen Suriyothai in the province of Ayutthaya. The project came into being during the 1980s, driven by Sirikit's enthusiasm. The erection of the monument was given the go-ahead by the short-lived military regime of the early 1990s, and was completed in 1992.

[50] Hong Lysa, "Does Popular History in Thailand Need Historians?" *Thai Khadi Seuksa* 1, no. 2 (2004): 38. She goes on to specify: "If the documentary evidence for Queen Suriyothai is contentious, that for any information beyond the royal woman having existed and were killed by "the other" is even more scanty, highly ambiguous and problematic, and do not really support more than speculation". Ibid., 39. The *Luang Prasert Chronicle* was written over a century after the queen was believed to have perished. See also the discussion in Piset, *Suriyothai prawattisat jak phapphayon* [Suriyothai: History from Film], 104-17.

with the 'Burmese enemy', a Hongsawadi king, assisting in his conquest of Ayutthaya in 1569.[51]

Given this ambiguity, and the perennially vexed issue concerning the credibility of historical films as historical representation, *Suriyothai*'s claim to legitimacy was consistently expressed as a heartfelt effort to teach future generations of the necessity of exerting an imaginative and critical interest in the past, rather than a claim to the accuracy of representation as such. This is a rhetoric whose weight of emphasis lies in celebrating the director's freedom in exercising his blend of authorial imagination and interpretative judgment. In an adroitly worded preface to his own 'chronicle', for instance, Chatrichalerm defends his freedom to interpret Ayutthaya's past in precisely in this fashion. With a gesture toward the convention of academic impartiality, he summarises the arguments of those who have questioned the veracity of Suriyothai's existence, and indicates his own position in the debate: (my translation) "I believe that the royal chronicles took real events as their raw material, but embellished them so as to make them seem more like fiction than reality. There is one exception in the *Luang Prasert Chronicle*, the only chronicle which remains remarkably faithful in its recording of real events".[52] He then proceeds to paraphrase the passage from the chronicle, which tells of the death of an unnamed queen (and her daughter) whilst supporting King Chakkraphat in the battlefield. From this, Chatrichalerm – in his capacity as an amateur though exceptional researcher of Ayutthaya – infers that there really did exist such a queen, without specifying her by the name. Instead, he then switches to assuming the stance of a feature filmmaker, and defends his prerogative as a creator of fiction to imagine what may or may not have really happened. "I am only a filmmaker, not a historian who must abide by evidence." *Suriyothai* (the screenplay and film) is the product of his imagination fuelled by several years of research, and must not be confused with "the historical Suriyothai". In one stroke the prince legitimises the film as *phapphayon haeng siam prathet* the basis of his painstaking labour of research, while asserting the necessity of

[51] Manote Tripathi, "Queen under Question," *The Nation*, 19 August 2001. And Thepmontri Limpaphayom, "*Suriyothai bon krajok ngao phra Suwat* [Suriyothai Reflected in Phra Suwat]," *Krungthep Thurakij*, 17 August 2001.

[52] Chatrichalerm, *Jotmaihed Suriyothai* [The Suriyothai Archive], preface, no page number.

exempting it from the exacting demands of historical inquiry on the basis that it is ultimately 'only' a fictional work of personal imagination.

Nevertheless, *Suriyothai* was far from justified on the grounds of being merely 'popular history' or 'popular entertainment'. In contrast, such productive ambiguity between 'real' research and 'fictional' film disclaimer gave the biopic the veneer of an innovative exercise in democratising the production of historical knowledge. Thailand's venerated film artist, not the doubters, now exemplified the democratic spirit of representing the past through new forms. In a gesture of intellectual openness, Chatrichalerm granted that he fully expected to be criticised – that the intention was always to provoke "our new generation to question the film's interpretation of history".[53] Similarly, in another interview the director expressed his ambition for the film in the committed, intellectually uplifting language of "sparking off debates and critical thoughts" about history.[54] But note that this enunciating stance, which positions the prince as the agent of the democratisation of historical knowledge, is a highly exclusive rather than a democratically open one available to any filmmaker. It is predicated on this particular filmmaker's store of merit as the nation's leading film artist. From this height only he extended his service to a national cause, and the implied role of his 'public' is to 'publicly' embrace such rarefied commitment to the cause of pedagogical uplift and democratisation of historical knowledge. In accordance with this logic, the columnist of the influential *Thai Rath* newspaper let it be known that in his conversation with Chatrichalerm after the preview screening, the latter, his old acquaintance of over thirty years, had personally extended an invitation for him to voice comments and criticisms in his column; thus, the columnist implied, demonstrating the magnanimity of the prince in allowing for open criticisms.[55]

What is worth emphasising is that Chatrichalerm's exceptionally authoritative speaking position is the product of a truly novel combination of the status of the film

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[53] "Pawae-Nontawee", "*Mom jao Chatrichalerm Yukol theung khrao thi "Suriyothai" ok thap* [Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol and *Suriyothai*: Advancing into Combat]," 162.

[54] Niwat, "*Khwam jing kap jintanakarn khong mom jao Chatrichalerm Yukol* [Reality and the Imagination of Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol]," 89.

[55] "Zoom", "*Du laew khrap "Suriyothai"* [My Date with *Suriyothai*]," *Thairath*, 19 August 2001.

auteur with the Buddhist-derived conception of aura or charisma, known as *barami*. The anthropologist Charles Keyes translates this word to mean "having merit and virtue"; when this is understood in the sense of an individual who emanates sacred or divine charisma, endowed upon him or her from having accumulated an exceptional degree of positive karma, or "the moral consequences of previous actions", either in previous incarnations or through conscious action in this life.[56] Traditional thinking on *barami* pointed to the king as its purest embodiment. His birthright claim to the throne was taken to be an indication of the unsurpassed degree of his accumulated merit and virtue, which thereby provided the legitimising basis of his rule. Alternatively, charismatic monks were regarded as possessing outstanding merit – accumulated in this case less in previous lives than through individual monks' exemplary practice of the example set by Buddha. Filtered over time into everyday usage, the word *barami* has come to signify in general one who possesses 'auratic merit'. The individual with auratic merit is capable of inspiring faith, loyalty or obedience in others, which consequently allows him or her to successfully carry out exceptionally complicated practices on a scale beyond the capacity of the ordinary person. In its contemporary inflection, the residual sense of possessing "the gift of grace"[57] through pious Buddhist practice or noble birth has been adapted to accommodate the more secular forms of exceptionalism, especially of the kind measurable in market terms. In this modern sense therefore, one can speak of a self-made tycoon as having 'proven himself' to be exceptional through accumulating wealth, power, and by extension *barami*.

The manner in which this word has been cropping up in recent years, in references to a small selection of prestigious Thai filmmakers is truly intriguing.[58] More so than anyone else, it is the director of *Suriyothai* who epitomised the apex of

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[56] Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhism Fragmented: Thai Buddhism and Political Order since the 1970s," (paper presented at the 7th International Conference on Thai Studies, Amsterdam, July 1999), 4-6.

[57] Ibid., 4.

[58] Tai Entertainment boss Visute, for instance, revealed that Nonzee had long harboured the idea of remaking *Nang Nak*, even before he directed his debut. But the director felt that he needed time to accumulate *barami* before tackling so nationally well-known a story. See "*Khui khang jor: Visute Poolvoralaks Tai Entertainment-Entertain Pictures* [Screen Sidebar: Visute Poolvoralaks Tai Entertainment-Entertain Pictures]," 83.

auteurist *barami*. A journalist analysing the biopic's groundbreaking strategy of cross-platform promotion pointed out that its success had much to do with the *barami* possessed by those involved, which then translated into the ability to secure advertising exposure and promotional hype on an unprecedented scale.[59] More tellingly, the owner of Sahamongkol Film International used the word in its modern sense to signal his faith that *Suriyothai* would turn out to be both be a domestic hit and an international box-office winner. Affirming his every confidence that the scale of investment in *Suriyothai* will prove to have been worthwhile, Somsak predicted in the run up to the film's domestic release: "I believe the *barami* [of those involved] will make everything turn out well".[60] His evocation of Chatrichalerm's charisma (compounded here with an implicit reference to the queen) condensed both the sense that the director had 'earned' his auratic merit through noble birth combined with an honourable track record as a filmmaker – and something else quite unprecedented beside. *Barami* now affirmed the dream of global success in what is ultimately a self-perpetuating logic. Only a filmmaker of a certain level of *barami* could pull off a 'big' film on a scale comparable to the Hollywood blockbuster, thus attracting both domestic mass audiences and the international market; and what endowed the filmmaker with *barami* in the first place were the real or imagined signs of his international status. This logic underscored the rhetoric so fulsomely parroted that *Suriyothai* is "spearheading the fight in the cultural war that enslaves us, which makes us addicted to Hollywood and Chinese movies".[61] It was present in *Corporate Thailand*'s bravura cover page characterisation of *Suriyothai* as a "war of liberation [involving] Thai capital vs. Hollywood capital" (see fig. 39).[62] Or, singing to the same militaristic hymn sheet, it affirmed one writer's certainty that the biopic

[59] Suwat, "*Phon thang Thurakij jak Suriyothai* [Business Gains from *Suriyothai*]."

[60] Quoted in "*Suriyothai: songkhram ku ekkaraj thun thai vs. thun Hollywood* [Suriyothai the Battle for Independence: Thai Capital Vs. Hollywood Capital]," 60.

[61] Quoted in Niwat, "*Khwam jing kap jintanakarn khong mom jao Chatrichalerm Yukol* [Reality and the Imagination of Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol]," 87.

[62] "*Suriyothai: Songkhram ku ekkaraj thun thai vs. thun Hollywood* [Suriyothai the Battle for Independence: Thai Capital Vs. Hollywood Capital]," cover page.

"reflects his highness's full determination to lead the Thai film army into the battlefield of the global film market".[63]

Enhancing the store of Chatrichalerm's *barami* is his foreign-educated trajectory, one of the things that singled him out among Thai filmmakers of his generation. A biographical detail which has never gone out of circulation since the beginning of his film career was his attendance at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) – studying film as his minor – 'with' Coppola.[64] By the time *Suriyothai* came along, Chatrichalerm's image as the most educationally cosmopolitan of the Cold War generation of Thai filmmakers had crystallised into a kind of magical confirmation of his *sakon/*world-class ability to penetrate the global market. The combination of his cosmopolitan experience, noble birth, and auteurist merit 'accounted' for his unique authority – when compared to other Thai filmmakers at least – to employ *farang* film professionals of the elite kind: an English composure who had composed scores for HBO and BBC, the Slovak cinematographer Igor Luther, and sound technicians from Coppola's Zoetrope. In the long promotional interview published in an upmarket Thai-language women's magazine, the prince signalled as much by neatly reversing the usually assumed term of Thai-*farang* dichotomy. Playing on the anxiety that the term *farang* has historically connoted agency and superiority over the term Thai, Chatrichalerm let it be known that an alternative hierarchy was established among his crew. *Farang* professionals were apparently placed under "all Thai supervision...To put it simply, we employed *farangs* to work for us [*rao jang farang thamngan hai rao*]".[65] And elsewhere he spoke of selecting Coppola's studio to carry out the post-production sound mix in order to ensure that the biopic only received "the best" of treatments.[66] Although Chatrichalerm explained the decision to employ foreign professionals in key

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[63] Ekarong Panupong, *Suriyothai lang maan maya* [Suriyothai Behind the Scene] (Bangkok: Sirimongkolkam, 2001), 169.

[64] In this description, whether the two were actually classmates or merely alumni of the same university is usually left ambiguous. However, in the Special Features section of the DVD of *The Legend of Suriyothai*, Coppola says that Chatrichalerm went to UCLA a couple of years after him.

[65] "Pawae-Nontawee", "*Mom jao Chatrichalerm Yukol theung khrao thi "Suriyothai" ok thap* [Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol and *Suriyothai*: Advancing into Combat]," 162.

[66] Pariyes Koomchaya, "*Kham hai karn khong mom jao Chatrichalerm Yukol korani Suriyothai* [Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol's Testinomy Concerning *Suriyothai*]," *Cinemag* August 2001, 72.

production and post-production roles as a means to enable "our people learn from the real professionals", this was in fact a striking reversal of a trend emerging in the years of *Suriyothai*'s production. As the biopic was being made, leading Asian directors such as Wong Kar Wai or Hou Hsiao-hsien were adopting Bangkok as their destination of choice for post-production work. Whether *Suriyothai* emerged the better film for it is a mute point. What counts is the symbolism: a Thai director with *barami* is now in a position to pay the Hollywoodised sum and to employ the West's very best.

Furthermore, Chatrichalerm's store of world-class 'merit and virtue' licensed the daydream – widely inflated in the run up to the domestic release – that *Suriyothai* was a strong contender for the Oscars. This may or may not have been a deliberate promotional strategy; and it was certainly true to say that the giddiest rhetoric of this sort came from all quarters. The writer Narong Janruang whose novel the prince once adapted, wrote an affectionate magazine piece in praise of him, which ended by wishing *Suriyothai* every bit of premature luck in winning the best foreign picture category at the Oscars: "so that all Thais across the nation can whoop in joy".[67] If the prince himself was careful to avoid sounding crassly expectant in this manner, he did not quite go out of his way to nip the wild projections of Oscar glory in the bud. A film reviewer reported on the day of *Suriyothai*'s general domestic release that Chatrichalerm diplomatically denied to him any dream of Oscar success, saying instead that the biggest personal honour for him was to premiere the film on the queen's birthday. But at the same time he reportedly conceded: "if the film were to be entered for the Oscars I doubt if I will win best director. Perhaps it's in the other categories that we might stand a chance. Our sound mix team for instance comprises of three past Oscar winners".[68] One of the film's major sponsors, Boonrawd Brewery, explained to the *Bangkok Post* that part of its calculation in producing the limited edition *Suriyothai* Singha beer cans was in case the Oscar nominations did materialise, since in that scenario a merchandising tie-in would greatly enhance the

[67] Narong Janruang, "*Korn ja theung "Suriyothai"* [Before *Suriyothai*]," *Sinlapawatthanatham* August 1999, 90.

[68] Nantakwang, "*Lorb mong Suriyothai phan khwam pen nang?* [Sneaking a Look at Suriyothai as a Film]."

brand's global profile.[69] Outside of Thailand, the domestically fanned *Suriyothai* fever tapped into the global media's appetite for stories featuring marginal countries executing nebulously large-scale projects. In this spirit, BBC Online used as the headline of its report: "Oscar hopes for Thai movie".[70] So teasingly did the statuette beckon as the hype grew world-class that at least one Thai-language reviewer, writing in the cinephile *Cinemag* magazine, intervened with a more sober assessment of *Suriyothai*'s chances. With subtle diplomacy Thida Plitpholkarnpim suggested that the confusingly large cast and weak overarching story line would probably count against any prospect of a nomination.[71]

On its release no more was made of the enthusiasm for historical debates that *Suriyothai* was meant to inspire. What immediately came to overshadow it were the stream of news of interested international buyers. On the first day it went on general release in Thailand, *The Nation* immediately reported that Chatrichalerm was preparing to travel the following week "to New York to negotiate with Hollywood film distributors in a bid to take Thailand's first cinematic epic to the world".[72] In early 2002, the dream of *barami*-induced bonanza reached its climax in the globally ubiquitous report that Chatrichalerm's UCLA fraternity mate Coppola had agreed to present the recut version for international distribution. In this real global setting *Suriyothai* stood or fell as a mere film rather than an internationally visible national event. Diplomatic silence shrouds the question of how much it was cut down to size by global distribution.

"A general air of historical eventfulness"

At this point a few of *Suriyothai*'s defining textual features ought to be incorporated into the discussion.[73] The overall organising narrative principle resembles a family

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[69] Bamrung Amnatcharoenrit and Nondhanada Intarakomalyasut, "Sponsors Set to Ride Suriyothai Fervour," *Bangkok Post*, 7 August 2001.

[70] "Oscar Hopes for Thai Movie," *BBC News*, 22 August 2001.

[71] Thida Plitpholkarnpim, "Suriyothai," *Cinemag*, September 2001, 68.

[72] Naranart, "Hollywood Meeting on 'Suriyothai'."

[73] The following textual analysis is based primarily on the 2001 version. This originally released cut is most relevant to the chapter, since it addresses domestic viewers. In other words, it exploits the allure of Hollywoodisation in order to maximise its consumption in Thailand.

romance.[74] Though it cannot be exaggerated how the cause-effect momentum is impeded to the point of incomprehension by the formidable pile up of excess intervals and subplots: the endless cameos of historical personages; the battles scenes with extras and elephants in their thousands; the transitional montage displaying ancient ceremonies and rituals, especially of enthronement; the opulent costumes and palace interiors; the spectacle of bodies ravaged by diseases annihilated in the modern world and by violent deaths through public execution.

The narrative falls into three parts. The first concerns the young princess Suriothai's initially hostile encounter with her betrothed, prince Tien of the northern principality, and her attachment to her childhood sweetheart lord Piren. She is tempted to flee the marriage, but once reminded of her duty to the cause of peace between the two dynasties she and Tien represent, she submits without much evident pain. After the marriage, Tien's father is crowned king and the couple follow him southward to the centre of power, Ayutthaya. The middle part of the narrative concerns the couple's attempt to live quietly amidst the destabilising rivalry for the throne. Tien is of a peace-loving disposition and wants to remain detached from politics, such that the politically astute Suriyothai, now as a dutiful wife to him, restrains herself from going against her husband's wishes. However, after his blood relative and ally king Chai Raja is poisoned to death by a favourite high consort Srisudachan, Tien cannot help but be drawn into the power struggle. Their lives endangered by the consort's scheming to secure the throne for her lover, Suriyothai calls on the protection of her adolescent sweetheart. Out of loyalty, the warrior Piren agrees to help eliminate Srisudachan and her lover so that Tien can replace the latter as king. The mission is successfully accomplished and Tien becomes king

[74] In this respect, *Suriyothai* borrows for its organising principle the fundamental narrative underpinning of the classical Hollywood narrative. According to this narrative convention – as Miriam Hansen puts it – "the resolution of larger-order problems tends to hinge upon the formation of a couple or family and on the restoration of familial forms of subjectivity". Within the specific context of the historical film, such structure turns history into conflicts among types personified, whose psychology and relationships tend to conform to a "masculinist hierarchy", and whose resolution is most often the achievement of coupledom and other familial forms of subjectivity. See Miriam Bratu Hansen, "*Schindler's List* Is Not *Shoah:* The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1996): 298. The influence on *Suriyothai* is evident in the underlying structural opposition between the virtuous wife and the *femme fatale*, the eventual punishment of the latter as the libidinous female, in contrast to the idealisation of the sexually sublimated moral Buddhist family.

Chakkraphat, while Piren is rewarded with the new king's daughter who looks exactly like the adolescent Suriyothai, thus resolving the love triangle in familial form. The final part of the plot, the cumbersome last hour or so of the film's running time after Tien's coronation, shifts abruptly from family romance to a rhythmically pallid war-action narrative, culminating in the battle where Suriyothai is killed.[75]

In her study of the "surge and splendour" of the classical Hollywood historical epic, Vivian Sobchack observes that its defining feature is the extravagance of scale at both the textual and extratextual levels. Everything about the epic looms over the spectator on an exaggerated scale, from the budget, research, running time, star, cast, costume, to spectacular enframed images distinguished by overloaded visual details.[76] It is by virtue of such "representational excess" that the classical Hollywood historical epic yields a particular "history effect". Through the repetition of excessiveness 'inside' and 'outside' the text, "the genre *allegorically* and *carnally* inscribes on the model spectator a sense of and meaning of being in time and human events in a manner and at a magnitude exceeding any individual temporal construction or appropriation". More specifically, the epic constructs a discursive and sensorial field in which the 'model subject' of American corporate monopoly consumer society – "the American, middle class, white (and disproportionately male) spectator/consumer" – could experience "a mode of temporality which constituted him or her as a historical subject in capitalist society before the late 1960s". That the mode of temporality encoded in the classical Hollywood epic took the specific form of transcendental scale, of "temporal excess" signifying the magnitude of "History", had, in her argument, much to do with a period characterised by the homogeneity of cultural values, certainty of progress, and American national self-confidence.[77] Sobchack emphasises that in this genre of epic, History emerges from the "narrative

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[75] As many have commented upon, the line of action involving war with the enemy is by far of secondary interest. The co-screenwriter Sunait describes *Suriyothai* as a film about the rivalry between competing dynastic houses rather than unpicking old sores about the Burmese enemy. Ekarong, *Suriyothai lang maan maya* [Suriyothai Behind the Scene], 57-58. The action involving the Hongsawadi King Tabinshwehti does take up remarkably little screen time. The king appears only twice in the first two hours or so of the film's running time, prior to the marching of his troops to Ayutthaya in the last part of the film.

[76] Sobchack, ""Surge and Splendor": A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic," 24-33.

[77] Ibid.: 29, 41.

construction of *a general historical eventfulness*",[78] or from mimicking the magnitude of the historical through exaggerated scale rather than from striving for representational accuracy and veracity. In other words, History is intelligible as "*empirically verifiable* and *material* excess" – and intelligible as sensation rather than thought.[79] The textual and extratextual significations of scale constitute the genre's reflexive structure in this sense.

Sobchack's argument offers rich suggestions for thinking further about *Suriyothai*'s scale. Here, the sense of historical eventfulness might be said to inscribe the 'model spectator' as agents of globalising Thai capital vs. Hollywood capital. In contrast to pre-1960s America, that mode of address is symptomatic of anxieties concerning Thai vulnerability in globalisation rather than an expression of national self-confidence. In the last part of the chapter, I want to try to develop the following point: in addressing itself to *khon thai* – the subject of the narcissistic sensibility – the hyperbolic act of the *Suriyothai* event promised, not the pleasure of inspiring critical thoughts about the nation's past, but the sensorial enthrallment of witnessing world-class yet Thai distinctions played out on an otherwise unimaginable scale.

Some of the extratextual significations of *Suriyothai*'s 'history-making' scale have already been dealt with in previous sections: the soaring budget, long years of preparation, the employment of international elite members of the crew, the director's auteurist charisma, and the over-hyped Oscar ambition. At the textual level we can first point to the length and ever-mutating versions of the biopic as a sign of its eventful excessiveness. First released in Thailand was the 190 minutes 'director's cut'; re-issued on VCD in 2001 and DVD in 2002. Then came the 2003 'Francis Ford Coppola presents' version, trimmed down to 142 minutes.[80] This was released in Thailand, both theatrically and on DVD, and in the same year as the 'full' 300 minutes version, released solely on DVD and VCD in Thailand. Fans can also buy the Making of Suriyothai VCD.

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[78] Ibid.: 28.

[79] Ibid.: 30.

[80] The 2001 version begins with the battle and death of Suriyothai. The Coppola recut begins differently, citing the conventional opening style of the Hollywood historical epic: a hand unfurls an antique looking map showing where Siam is situated. (This could also be a reference to the 1941 peace epic *Phra jao chang pheuak/*The King of the White Elephant, which begins the same way.) There is no battle scene in the opening sequence of this version.

The densely detailed enframed images and the excess intervals echo the grandeur of *Suriyothai*'s extratextual features, as do the sheer size of its cast. Initially there were suggestions that a Hollywood star of the 'grade' of Jeremy Irons might be approached for the voice-over narration.[81] The final result (for all the versions) turned out to be an all-Thai affair – but an affair to remember it is! Chatrichalerm's regular, Sorapong Chatri, is present, starring alongside teen starlets, middle-aged stars, retired actors and actresses, and celebrities from politics and high-society. *Suriyothai*'s story world spans most of the lifetime of the eponymous heroine. Its chronology starts from 1528 with Suriyothai as a wilful adolescent and ends with her death twenty years later. The narrative meanders scrupulously through the coronation and reign of each and every Ayutthayan king (seven in total). So here alone the film features an excess of kings using five male actors, and two child actors, plus another actor who plays the role of the enemy Hongsawadi king. Thai history thunders forth from the extradiegetic voice-over, a resounding male voice whose utterance in an impeccable central Thai accent is reminiscent of the disembodied drone of state radio broadcasters – the Thai equivalent of God's Voice. Deep focus photography evokes the magnitude of Ayutthayan antiquity. With its depth of field, the travelling shots take in the full scale of the opulent interior of palaces, the towering throne pyramid, long rows of bodies prostrated at the feet of kings. Similarly evoking the extravagance of antiquity are the resplendently draped ladies of the court, including their heavy gold jewellery. As with the best of the Hollywood historical epics, on display here too are fantastically bejewelled showpiece costumes. The 'breast plate' number in which a sex-goddess makes her silent cameo as a submissive queen of a tributary kingdom is not a million miles away from the history-making "gold lamé [costumes] with underwire bra" that Sobchack so deliciously notes as a favourite of the classical Hollywood epic.[82] The symphonic soundtrack of *Suriyothai* likewise groans with significance, "underscoring every moment by overscoring it".

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[81] Pariyes, "*Kham hai karn khong mom jao Chatrichalerm Yukol korani Suriyothai* [Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol's Testinomy Concerning *Suriyothai*]," 74.

[82] Sobchack, ""Surge and Splendor": A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic," 25.

Insofar as the casting of appropriately big stars can lend a general air of historical eventfulness to the epic film, the casting of an honorary actress with an impeccably elite pedigree as the eponymous heroine likewise 'represents' the exemplary significance of Suriyothai. An aristocrat by birth whose late mother served under Sirikit, and who is now married to a member of the Singh beer clan (one of the film's main sponsors), Piyapas embodies the combination of aristocratic breeding and industrial wealth that defines contemporary Thai high society. Chatrichalerm once used a revealing phrase to describe her suitability for the role. A regular presence on the society pages of glossy women's magazines well before she was asked to star in the film, the prince described Piyapas as somebody "of regal disposition with an unblemished past [*laksana thi pen jao lae mai me prawat dang phroy loei*]".[83] The well-publicised news that the queen no less had personally requested her to play Suriyothai confirmed this.

What is being emphasised here is that *Suriyothai* marked its own 'surge and splendour' as history-making *pastiche* of the *scale* of the Hollywood historical epic, demonstrating Thai world-class virtuosity through the "conceptual mimesis"[84] of the Hollywood epic's scale rather than solely citing its textual style. Since this national cinematic act legitimised itself through the rhetoric of its Hollywood/world-class scale, critical approaches that problematise the film text (to whatever degree) without extending a comparable critical focus to its terms of address as a cinematic event, may be in danger of missing the very logic of orchestrated distraction through which *Suriyothai* legitimised itself. I raise this point because, so far, the dimension of the '*Suriyothai* problem' concerning the feverish projection of its *sakon*/world-class credentials has been overshadowed by academic interests in appraising its quality as a historical fiction film; and more significantly, in identifying any possible departure from the anti-Burmese form of hypernationalist propaganda – effectively exploring

[83] Ekarong, *Suriyothai lang maan maya* [Suriyothai Behind the Scene], 75.
[84] Sobchack, ""Surge and Splendor": A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic," 36.

the textual features of *Suriyothai* in order to assert that this ideology is now culturally (and politically) archaic.[85]

In the historian Hong Lysa's assessment, for instance, she endorses Chatrichalerm's defence that the biopic is a fictional work of the imagination in order to assert the validity of historical films in 'popularising' the field of historical knowledge. In her view, if there are certain identifiable gaps between the final product of *Suriyothai* and the stated intention of the director to present a revisionist view of Ayutthaya's dynastic struggles,[86] then this reflects the profound difficulty of making a film set in a period about which so little is known, and should not be dismissed as the fallacy of turning to film to represent antiquity. She asserts that:

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[85] This is a partially convincing reading. The textual features of *Suriyothai* might be approached as the displacement of the Burmese enemy figure for the eulogisation of moral kingship according to the Buddhist philosophy of cakravartin (the king of kings, or the exceptionally meritorious king). As chapter 2 discusses, Tien/Chakkraphat is connoted as cakravartin through the idealisation of the adult character as the pious, Buddhist-practicing head of the bourgeois-moral family. Conspicuously absent when compared to the other (adult) kings in the story world are the characters of his other wives. Pre-modern kings may have consolidated their reign through multiple marriage unions, but Tien/Chakkraphat is here transformed into an exceptionally monogamous family head. His decorous, family centred partnership with Suriyothai contrasts with the other royal characters, especially the libidinous king Chai Raja and his highly sexualised consort Srisudachan. What Gerard Genette calls the narrating 'voice': the mark of extradiegetic narration upon the text, here privileges the restrained monogamy of Tien and Suriyothai as a transcendental force of morality in a world of deadly power struggles.

Accordingly, a scheme of binary contrast constructs as sexually 'deviant' figures those who threaten the pious, Buddhist heterosexual norm embodied by Tien/Chakkraphat and Suriyothai. Srisudachan is the *femme fatale* who crawls, crouches and reclines, in contrast to Suriyothai's uptight postures. Even if the dialogues states Srisudachan's motivation for taking a Brahmin lover as part of her plan to restore her dynasty to its old glory, the fetishisation of the actress's body undercuts any attempt at 'characterising' Srisudachan as a political mastermind. (The role is played by a star with an edgy, sexy image.) To underscore her illicitness, the narrative projects 'deviancy' onto the figure of her confidante and protector. The palace guard, Prik, played by an actress with a *tom* ('butch') reputation, is an unapologetic stereotype of the sinister lesbian killing machine, whose plot function is to eliminate whoever gets in the way of her altogether more feminine mistress. Prik's narrative-symbolic significance mirrors that of the other crucial figure in the binary scheme, the Hongsawadi king Tabhinshwehti. The Burmese enemy may not occupy a great deal of screen time, and battlefield violence or the other militaristic tropes may not here be the iconography through which the enemy's otherness is projected; but how intriguing to note that what comes to replace it is the suggestion of stereotypical sexual 'deviancy'. The sneering face of Tabhinshwehti stands out bizarrely among the large cast for being masked in porcelain white: literally a painted face dramatically offset by red lipstick and a pencil straight fringe. This touch of drag is apparently meant to convey the Hongsawadi king's 'complex' character.

[86] Hong is referring here to the treatment of the consort Srisudachan. As indicated in the previous footnote, the fetishisation of the actress's body contradicts the lofty claim that the most progressive, and historically 'revisionist' aspect of the film is its portrayal of Srisudachan as a politically astute brain motivated by the ambition to restore her dynasty to its former glory – no longer the evil harlot as she has been in royal nationalist historiography.

"[f]or all the disappointment felt by those who had expected *Suriyothai* to be as revisionist or complex as its publicity had led them to rightly believe, the film *by its very ambition of matching the most visually authentic and gripping that Hollywood can produce*, has "humanized" Queen Suriyothai".[87] To counteract the idea that the task of historical representation should be reserved for historians, this appraisal ascribes *Suriyothai* with "the momentum...for re-looking royal-national history as popular history".[88] That the biopic was not made by historians, and was not made under the methodological restrictions of academic historiography, accounts for its status as 'popular history'. Accordingly, there is implied in Hong's argument the assumption that the industrial commercial cultural producers' turn to the past contains a progressive impulse in recognising people's desire for 're-looking' other representations of the past than the narrative of hypernationalism. This redemptive dynamic of industrial commercial cultural production – the recognition of the desire to overcome hypernationalism – no doubt exists, but to elevate *Suriyothai* into an example of that is to lose one's hearing in the echo chamber of its self-mythologisation. For one thing, it is awkward to imply that *Suriyothai* is a typically 'popular' product of the nostalgia or heritage industry; when it so clearly exploited to the hilt the 'exceptional' style of market circulation of the royal culture industry product. For all the lofty rhetoric of its claim to democratise historical knowledge, it would be wilful to deny that *Suriyothai*'s special status did not also act as a special hurdle against a democratic mode of reception, characterised by free and public expressions of judgment; since no Thai heritage film wielded a comparable degree of suffocating authority to inculcate the spectator as the appreciative Thai subject of royal pedagogical uplift. Consequently, public discourses of its reception either took the hagiographic route of least resistance, or criticisms had to be artfully phrased without forgetting to eulogise the filmmaker's commitment. And if one were to problematise rather than accept as admirable, inevitable, or of secondary concern, *Suriyothai*'s other myth of itself as equal in 'ambition' to Hollywood blockbusters; this draws attention much more acutely to the logic of cultural and political projection

[87] Hong, "Does Popular History in Thailand Need Historians?" 61. The italics are mine.
[88] Ibid.: 63.

of which it is emblematic. This is the inculcation of the narcissistic 'patriotic' spectator-subject in the effort to legitimise royalism and unaccountable capitalist expansion.

Is it then something of a blind spot to critically identify gaps and contradictions in the film text whilst readily acclaiming, as the historian Thongchai does, "*Suriyothai*'s ambition to be a film of world-class quality [*phapphayon khunnaphap radab lok*]"? On the one hand, his reading of *Suriyothai* is interesting for its wry implication that the biopic would have been the better had its narrative been more fully Hollywoodised. In his argument, its most imaginative contribution is to substitute the trope of the militaristic nationalist heroine with the Hindu-Buddhist figuration of the exceptionally virtuous wife.[89] (Believed to be one among the seven accompanying merits possessed by the extraordinarily meritorious king or cakravartin, this figure of *nang kaew* ['a gem of a wife'] is present in much of Siamese religious, philosophical and literary traditions.) *Suriyothai* gives a distinctly contemporary gloss on the exemplary attributes of the Siamese gem of a wife: the eponymous heroine is here as much a woman of astute public deeds and domestic accomplishments as a self-sacrificing heroine.[90] Endorsing the view that the biopic is no anachronistically hypernationalist, anti-Burmese diatribe, he goes on to suggest that it is nevertheless hampered by the contradiction between the idealisation of *nang kaew* and the convention of "Hollywood realism".[91] In presenting the heroine as an

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[89] Thongchai Winichakul, "*Suriyothai prawattisat haeng chat chabab nang kaew* [*Suriyothai:* A 'Gem of a Woman' Version of National History]," *Sinlapawatthanatham*, October 2001. See also Amporn, "Suriyothai: Hybridizing Thai National Identity through Film," 303-4.

[90] Traces of the *nang kaew* attributes celebrated in the distant past persist in this contemporary Suriyothai: in her nobility of birth, devotion to her husband, domesticity, beauty, decorum and sweet words. At the same time, her willing self-sacrifice: her lightening-quick transformation into a dutiful wife from a headstrong adolescent, and her suppression of youthful sexual volition for the sake of duty – with its shades of the libidinous heroine who sublimates sexual desire into spiritualised force for the greater good – might be said to hark back to hypernationalism's figure of the valiant Thai woman. Certainly the 'archaic' militaristic iconography crops up at the end of the film, when Suriyothai decides to ride her elephant into the battlefield, quite aware that to do so is as good as suicide. The low-angle camera frames the actress in the statuesque pose which celebrates death as the sublime expression of nationalistic love: a militarised body against the white sky, flags fluttering in the background. Meanwhile her modern attribute as a woman of political acumen is narrated through scenes of her discreetly advising Tien/Chakkraphat on matters of palace politics and even battle strategies.

[91] Thongchai, "*Suriyothai prawattisat haeng chat chabab nang kaew* [*Suriyothai:* A 'Gem of a Woman' Version of National History]," 56.

exemplary *nang kaew*, the didactic "flatness" of her figuration contradicts the convention of character development regarded by him as typical of the Hollywood narrative convention. Thongchai's manoeuvre is clear: if there had been greater willingness to overturn the didactic Siamese narrative tradition for a much more adventurous degree of immersion in "Hollywood realism", *Suriyothai* might have accomplished what he describes as its aim to be a "*sakon/*universal epic". And in so doing it would have truly fulfilled the mission to tell the story of Ayutthaya in an imaginative new way, for Thai and *sakon/*global viewers alike. Here, Thongchai's reading pointedly turns the term *sakon* into a standard of filmic judgment, thereby specifying the film's failure as one of creative inhibition: the unwillingness to unleash the full force of the imagination and represent the court struggles of Ayutthaya in the form of a truly *sakon/*universal epic. Nevertheless, in defining *Suriyothai*'s claim to *sakon* advancement as a matter of the director's creative aspiration, and something to be acknowledged as an admirable (though unfulfilled) intention in this sense; it also displaces the question of how that very claim was marshalled with the greatest of excessiveness – not to contextualise Chatrichalerm's creative engagement with the tradition of the classical Hollywood historical epic – but to position the spectator as captivated Thai subjects in *Suriyothai*'s hyperbolic field.

That ambiguous term *sakon* can signal many things when describing Thai films. At its best it implies engaging with film forms and techniques from elsewhere in order to come up with new, boundary-challenging ways of telling stories about Thailand; or it implies re-engaging with old Thai film forms in order to tell compellingly new stories to Thailand and the world. The ideal of creating an exemplary *thai sakon* film can draw inspiration from Hollywood, or it can look to other industrial, independent and non-industrial traditions. But the dominant mode of its articulation is always fixated on 'matching' Hollywood – since it is the global dominant. When faced with a film that ostensibly speaks of its intention to 'resist' Hollywood by enacting something undeniably Thai on a rival scale, a necessary distinction has to be made between the personal aim and ambition of the filmmaker, and the mobilisation of that rhetoric as a strategy of legitimisation that relies on as it indulges bourgeois narcissism. The former bears little relevance to the task of, as

Hong puts it, studying *Suriyothai* "for an understanding of the cultural politics in the turn of the millenium Thailand".[92] The latter raises acutely the failure of this sensibility to give shape to new dreams of outward engagement, new ideas of Thai contribution to the world, without reducing the term *thai sakon* to absurdly militaristic metaphors of market conquest and provincial projections replicating the scale of the world's biggest and 'best' in answer to the desire to be seen as world-class. Such fixation with Hollywood debases what might otherwise be an idealising term with which to begin to imagine the Thai-universal, as it stymies a whole host of alternatives of experimenting with new forms and practices of *thai sakon* cinema that is genuinely capable of making a contribution to a better film culture on a global scale.

Captivated viewers?

Underneath the official face of the enthralled Thai public, responses to the event of *Suriyothai*'s domestic release must remain a matter of some speculation. Anecdotally speaking, it is accurate enough to say that the film was far from universally admired; and those who professed to like it did so from a defensive, true-blue royalist or contrarian – "actually it wasn't all that bad" – stance. What is interesting to try to track, however, are less the informal judgments about the visual or narrative aspects of the film, than comments indicating an unruly range of responses to the cinematic event's inculcation of the narcissistic, monarchical spectator-subject.

As I touched on earlier, given the excessively authoritative veneer of *Suriyothai*, no act of viewing or discourse of its reception could avoid referencing – being a response of some sort to – its special status as a royally endorsed film, which nonetheless circulated in the same market as any other products of a multiplex calibre. If the task of reconstructing any concrete context of filmic reception with sufficient historical or cultural sensitivity is complicated enough in general, a reading of the unstable enmeshment of the orchestrated patriotic spectator with concrete experiences of viewing is rendered that little bit more difficult by the half-paranoid intimations of *Suriyothai*'s 'untouchable' aura. Whether propelled by the history of

[92] Hong, "Does Popular History in Thailand Need Historians?" 63.

state-instilled fear of 'touching' royalty, or by a nervousness more 'rational', viewers in 2001 were palpably conscious that they had better banish to the realm of the ephemeral any unruly thoughts or experiences of watching *Suriyothai* – those of a kind one step further removed from the constraint which demanded of its reviewers a diplomatic acknowledgement of the 'commitment' of its director, before making whatever criticism the critic so wished (if that were indeed the case). Or better still – such thoughts had best be uttered through a mask of anonymity and the protective cloak of an alias.

So to that disembodied, badly regulated, generally juvenile public sphere of cyberspace, where the gabble on *Suriyothai* strayed. A few days after its release, a fascinating forum erupted on the widely accessed *Phujadkarn* newspaper website *MGR Online*, which published a provocatively titled article: "*Ruam phon khon* "*mai du" Suriyothai*"; a title that might be translated incorporating the insolence of its rhetoric as 'gather ye refuseniks'.[93] Its author Siriporn Woochaiphum announced she was boycotting *Suriyothai*: "unlike many other Thais marching rank-and-file into the cinemas in collective acknowledgement of its grandeur". Bound still to the convention of praising the "commitment" of the director and his team, and making it crystal clear that she had no doubt as to the artistry of a film that probably deserved the accolade of "*"sud yod nang Thai"* ['the very best of Thai films']"; Siriporn explained that her stance stemmed more from the wish to take a stand against the marketing tide: the "excessive stimulation" of entertainment news; the advertising hype "seeking to turn filmgoing into a basic necessity for addicted modern urbanites"; and the new iron affliction – the "trend" of the "100 baht or so" multiplex film consumption. Her refusal to succumb to the *Suriyothai* fever was for her no less than "*teun jak* [waking up from]" consumer capitalist stimulation. Rather than pile the blame *Suriyothai*'s production and promotion army, she conjured up into being the figure of the greedy cinema operators, who she then accused of seizing opportunity of the hype to hike the ticket price.

[93] Siriporn Woochaiphum, "*Ruam phon khon "mai do" Suriyothai* [the literal translation is Rounding up None-Viewers of Suriyothai]," *MGR Online*, 22 August 2001.

Siriporn's parting shot: "you can love the nation [*rak chat*] and ignore *Suriyothai*!" spawned a wildfire of responses, a remarkable 132 entries when I came across it on 30 August. As to be expected, the blogs varied from enthusiastic agreement, humorous incomprehension ('what's the big deal?'), to angry rebuttals. Whatever divided them (and they were of an unusually high volume for a single article); all were clearly emboldened by the anonymity of cyberspace. In this respect – and given the lingering perception that whatever needed to be said about *Suriyothai* above and beyond cheerleading and repeating marketing rhetoric had best be expressed informally – it is not too far-fetched I hope to approach the forum as one symptomatic indication of the efficacy or otherwise, on the ground, of the model of the captivated Thai spectator *Suriyothai* tried to inculcate. A few striking patterns can be noted from them.

For some mischief-makers, it was just irresistible not to respond with sly laughter. These were the bloggers who, in a tone of mocking earnestness, adopted the voice of one who had fully assumed that model position of the enthralled and uplifted Thai spectator. The target of their jest, it appeared, was really elsewhere: the political interpellation of the obedient Thai official nationalist subject. Such is the charm and bite of those entries which affected the earnest tone of the politically innocent, and chastised the writer for failing to follow in the example set by royalty. Entry number 28, 'waste of space', wrote: "*jao fa jao phaen din yung song thod phraned loei* [after all, our glorious monarchs have graced the film with their attendance]". Mocking innocence extended to a hand-wringing gesture of sympathy for the writer, while insinuating (spuriously, with slight paranoia, or knowledgeably?) the presence of 'dark influences' safeguarding the biopic's official, history-making image. Entry 26 warned the writer: "*dieaw ja tong me khon ma room kranum nae nae nang reuang nee tae mai dai rok* [you'll be squashed to bits for sure. Don't you know you can't touch this film?]"; then proceeded to allege the presence of some Orwellian big brother who, according to 26, had been ordered to keep a close eye on those who dared to criticise the film. Entry 103 – alias ;) – noted that unlike other new releases, pirate VCD copies of *Suriothai* were nowhere to be found. This was because, the smiling icon alleged: "*thang beuang bon ham ded khad* [strict prohibitions from the

palace]". Such scandalously gossipy insinuation proved irresistible for others, who seized the moment to assume the voice of the keeper of national orderliness and monarchical inviolability. Entry 107, signed *tamruad* [police]: "*khun thi ok khwam khid 103 ya khid wa tam thi yu khong khun mai dai* [to 103, don't assume we can't trace your address]". Entry 120, in a few inspired puns, warned the "*fye* [the 'buffalo-esque']" 103 to mind his or her head, in the event of "*ja done tee…n* [a stray stick…or foot]". Altogether more opaque is entry 108, who adopted the alias 'a real Thai citizen' to speculate that entry 103 was likely to be a foreigner: "*khun khong mai chai khon Thai*", or at best a parasite born on Thai soil – "*ma asai phaen din Thai kerd*"; and should restrict his or her mouth to the sole bodily function of swallowing food. It is hard to work out whether this particular blogger was adopting a darkly deadpan tone, or every word was sinisterly meant as typed. With the uncertain exception of the last entry then, sly humour emerged as one playful strategy of evading the pressure to turn all and sundry into a national army of patriotic spectators. The blogger could mock the scale of the *Suriyothai* 'fever' by parodically assuming either the position of the humbly enrapt monarchical subject, or the cowardly, conspiracy-alert subject of the authoritarian state.

Secondly, where the battle line was most heatedly drawn had less to do with to play or not to play at being subservient monarchical subjects, as how to respond to the forces and pressures of consumer capitalism. Siriporn's railing against the marketing hype and the ticket price increase caught the imagination of some of the bloggers, who then heartily endorsed her call for a boycott. Entry 82 declared that he too had made up his mind not to go see the film since it was "*promote weur pai noi* [somewhat overly promoted]". Entry 77 refused to see the film on the ground that if this level of promotion was needed, there must be something wrong with it. Entry 58 was already "*im* [full]" from the TV promotion, and feared that sitting through the whole three hours might make him "*ouag* [throw up]". Entry 30 had already seen the film, but reported with a subversively light touch that "*rao khonkhang…ja kep tang…kern farang pai nid na* [we were, shall we say, a little ahead of Western films in terms of price]".

These dissenting voices accepted in common that marketing hype is a sufficiently powerful force necessitating conscious refusal. Their critics were those who denied that hype had anything to do with their action as market agents. This stance came up quite a bit, expressed as a commonsensical bundle of sentiments coalescing around the themes of democratic rights, consumer choice and individual liberty. Some defended their personal right to see *Suriyothai* while firmly insisting on a clarification: the decision to see or not to see it had nothing to do with patriotism or nationalism of whatever persuasion. Simultaneously, while exorcising this ghost of hypernationalism he or she would be equally vigorous in denying that marketing hype had any impact on individual desires and demands. Entry 69 dismissed as nonsensical Siriporn's attempt to link the boycotting of the biopic to patriotism, reasoning that whether he personally decided to watch it or not "*khong mai kiaew kap mai rak chat rue rak chat…du phro yak du* [wouldn't really have anything to do with patriotism. I'll see the film if I want to]". Entry 16, 'freedom lover', called the issue a matter of "*sitthi suan bukkhon* [individual rights]", reminding Siriporn that nobody was making her pay the increased ticket price of 120 baht she so objected to. If she did not wish to see the film that was her business, but 'freedom lover' did not think it was right to start flinging around the idea of patriotism. Entry 35: "*khun mai du kor reuang khong khun* [if you don't want to watch the film that's your problem]", similarly insisted that seeing *Suriyothai* would neither increase nor decrease the patriotism of Thais. Entry 12 clarified that he or she would be seeing the film for sure, and had been wanting to do so for a long while, "*mai chai ba tam krasae* [not because I'm following the trend like some crazed person]"; and added that Siriporn's call to boycott the film as an act of patriotism smacked of an attempt to draw irrelevant connections: "*man mai kiaew kan loei*".

Implicit in this stance is the investment in consumer individualism, the urge not to have the meaning of personal actions, choices or preferences framed within determinate social structures. This contrasted with another, also passionately expressed stance, which articulated the importance of paying above the usual multiplex admission price to see *Suriyothai* as a kind of consumer patriotism. Defenders of this position accused Siriporn and bloggers who agreed with her of

hypocrisy in happily consuming Hollywood products yet discriminating against a rare Thai bid at Hollywoodisation. Entry 119 offered to treat Siriporn to a screening of *Jurassic Park* and wondered if her next article would be entitled "*ruam phon khon mai du Hollywood* [gather ye refuseniks of Hollywood]". His irritation was echoed in 88's suggestion that Siriporn save her poison pen for Hollywood blockbusters. Asking why this writer didn't call for a boycott when "*Titanic, Star Wars, Pearl Harbour…man ud khodsana* [*Titanic, Star Wars, Pearl Harbour…*bombarded us with promotion]", 'PAT' alleged a bitter discrepancy between the Thai media's hostile treatment of Thai hype when compared to its enthusiastic embrace of Hollywood hype. He or she complained that when Westerners whipped up some trend or other to manipulate Thais into seeing 'their goddam films', "*hai pai du nang thi man sang*", no one seemed to want to rally people round to a new critical consciousness. Pursuing a similar logic, entry 11 argued that the 20 baht hike was justified when compared to the tens of millions baht flowing out of Thailand in imports. At least the price increase in this case, he argued, would be going toward "*lod ni hai khon Thai khon neung* [helping to reduce a fellow Thai's debt]"; an entirely honourable thing given that the debt incurred in the first place because a compatriot was committed to "*thum thun sang samneuk rak chat* [investing massively to inspire patriotic consciousness]". Entry 17 applied a similar argument against number 15, who railed against *Suriyothai*'s TV promotion: "*khor thod* [with due respect]", if this were just a film made by some commoner or other would it have received the same degree of exposure? In contrast, 17 reasoned that the production of *Suriyothai* was at least preferable to *Titanic* for injecting 400 million baht into the national economy, creating jobs and businesses for fellow Thais, extending to the possibility of reaping back export revenue. Moreover, in 17's view, the biopic was "*khunnaphap…kor mai noi na farang* [every bit as good as any Western film]" – so why would a Thai be so "*jai dam* [mean]" as to withhold support?

As chapter 1 mentioned, one of the defining responses in Thailand to the 1997 economic crisis was King Bhumibol's speech calling for a 'return' to economic self-sufficiency. This timely speech on the king's part was immediately seized as a rallying call by a whole spectrum of what Kasian calls "anti-neoliberal globalization"

groups.[94] But alongside the radical communitarian or conservative communitarian opponents of neo-liberal globalisation, and threatening to overwhelm such oppositional discourses in its popularity, has also emerged this dream world of which the *Suriyothai* event is emblematic: the re-articulation of economic nationalism now as projected images and rhetoric of Thai 'nationalist' capitalist ascendancy within the neo-liberal global system. As this particular event demonstrates, such projection finds kitschily aestheticised form in the production of awesomely inflated scale addressed to the narcissistic spectator, conceptually rehearsing the pleasure of experiencing the magnitude of the nation's global market success. How effectively dominant a logic of bourgeois distraction the hyperbolic projection of Thai success on a *sakon/*global market scale now represents in contemporary Thailand may be the only question worth asking about *Suriyothai*.

[94] Kasian "Post-Crisis Economic Impasse and Political Recovery in Thailand: The Resurgence of Economic Nationalism," 333-5.

Fig 39. Cover page of *Corporate Thailand* August 2001
"*Suriyothai* the Battle for Independence: Thai Capital vs. Hollywood Capital"

CHAPTER 7: The *thaithai* heritage film

In some degree of contrast to the *thai sakon* heritage films, there is a fast growing body of films that draw inspiration from collective memory and aesthetic or narrative precedent of the unofficial kind – what might be termed the *thaithai* heritage films. These are often (though not exclusively) accommodated at the industrial margin as highly creative films without readily marketable concepts, whose novel reworking of aesthetic or generic conventions function as the equivalent of the experimental frontier for the Thai film industry as a whole. Consequently, *thaithai* heritage films tend to be made on a lower budget, and run the risk of performing indifferently or badly at the domestic box-office. The two films discussed in detail in this chapter, *Monrak transistor* and *Fahtalayjone/*Tears of the Black Tiger, both exemplify this fate. Conversely, a minority of the *thaithai* or unofficial heritage films have turned out to be surprise hits precisely because of their stylistic novelty: *Fahtalayjone* did so on this term in the international market, while *Fan chan/*My Girl succeeded on a similar basis in the domestic market.

In terms of their stylistic and thematic patterns, it is possible so far to distinguish three tendencies. The first is the playful homage to Thai cinema's lowbrow *nam nao thaithai* or ghost film traditions through the aesthetics of pastiche. The whole of the narrative and visual world of *Fahtalayjone/*Tears of the Black Tiger, *Hua jai thoranong/*The Adventure of the Iron Pussy and *Buppha rahtree/*Rahtree: Flower of the Night, play on this fascination. In *Cherm/*Midnight My Love, the homage sequences are moments of narrative stasis; and it is the taxi-driver protagonist's fantasy that motivates them. The second narrating strand, which overlaps with the first, evokes 'popular' memory through citing outmoded pop cultural artefacts or legends and myths. Alongside the example of films that pay homage to the lowbrow cinematic tradition, this includes the new, retrochic variant of the music-video movie. A key example here is *Fan chan/*My Girl, whose domestic box-office appeal was largely due to its humorous revival of the fey 'string combo' sound of early 1980s Thai pop. Both *Nang Nak* and *2499…/*Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters combine this fascination with gestures of historical verisimilitude.

The third, and in some ways most marginal aesthetic and narrativising tendency, returns to significant moments in the national biography but tells stories that do not allude to the official nationalist tropes of national independence, national harmony, or national trauma necessitating unity and moral leadership. An interesting example here includes *Satang* ('Copper Coins', dir. Bhandit Rittikon, 2000), set in the anarchic climate immediately after Second World War, which adopts the road movie formula to narrativise an ironic tale of a group of ordinary people's greedy (rather than heroic-nationalist) quest to retrieve a consignment of lost banknotes. Another is the 'copycat' *Kabot thao Srisudachan/*The Kingmaker (dir. Lek Kittiphraporn, 2005), set in the Ayutthaya of *Suriyothai*. But unlike the latter, this action-adventure B-movie marginalises the story of the warrior queen and emphasises the cosmopolitanism of 16th century Ayutthaya through its European protagonists, the multicultural extras in their 'national' costumes, and indeed the English-language dialogues.

Insofar as they tend to elude the official ideas of Thainess evident in *thai sakon* heritage films, the point of interest of *thaithai* heritage films become their configuration of the people – whether through textual representation or through mode of address. This chapter explores two exemplary 'alternative' heritage films, *Monrak transistor* and *Fahtalayjone/*Tears of the Black Tiger, in this light. Both revive the category of the *chao baan* via a sentimentally retrochic aesthetic field, projecting the people's 'behind the time' rootedness as that which is aesthetically pleasing.[1] Both make a gesture of salvaging ephemeral aspects of *chao baan* culture: those artefacts or entertainments from below which have been forgotten, are now regarded as

[1] In other words, both films come out of the naturalisation of the idea of the non-coeval *chao baan*, or the idea of the people situated at a distance further removed from the modernity embodied by Bangkok. Until the 1960s, *chao baan* had direct associations with rural geographical spaces. With mass migration that direct association has been undermined, but the idea of the culturally *chao baan* people – whether they are rural, urban, or metropolitan inhabitants – remains. The invocation of the trope of *chao baan* 'backwardness' itself has been a persistent feature of both the royal national discourse of elite-led modernity and the left-radical critique of modernisation. Thongchai argues that the former projects the 'docile' *chao baan* under benevolent royal rule as simultaneously a mark of national harmoniousness, and a measure of elite progress toward modernity – or the attainment of distance from the people's 'backwardness'. While the latter, as Bowie points out, projects the *chao baan* pastoral in order to gauge the destructiveness of modernisation. See Katherine A. Bowie, "Unraveling the Myth of the Subsistence Economy: Textile Production in Ninteenth-Century Northern Thailand," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (1992). And Thongchai Winichakul, "The Others Within: Travel and Ethno-Spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects 1885-1910," in *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*, ed. Andrew Turton (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000).

anachronistic, or had been associated with backwardness. At the same time, creative energy has gone into revitalising what might have been dismissed as anachronistic with the film technology and technique of today, and juxtaposing citations of ephemera of the recent past in unexpected and amusing ways in order to achieve an intended up-to-date look. As Wisit vividly put it to his crew, the aim was to make his film "*choei jon new* [so behind the time it's new]".[2]

Monrak Transistor after 1976

Pen-ek is regarded domestically and internationally as one of the leading figures of New Thai Cinema. In contrast, Wat Wanlayangkul, author of the 1981 black comedy, Monrak Transistor, was among the thousands of radicals forced to flee Bangkok after the 1976 massacre to join the CPT's rural insurgency. He returned to the metropolis after the amnesty.[3] Shortly after that, "with nothing to do whatsoever", Wat wrote the slim novel, inspired apparently by Charlie Chaplin's 'little man' comedies, and most likely personal memories of his own provincial childhood.[4] Some twenty years later, anticipating the New York-educated Pen-ek's adaptation of his novel, Wat commented, "the film ought to work well as a blending of Pen-ek's vision and mine. He's a very modern guy, whereas I'm largely provincial".[5] The cosmopolitanism of this filmmaker, Wat seemed to imply, was likely to transform his old novel into a different kind of work occupying another place in cultural life. A different era would be brought to bear on a comedy he wrote as a young man who had just lived through the most violent crisis of modern Thai politics, as one who experienced first-hand state persecution, displacement and ideological defeat. This is indeed the case. A comparison between Wat's novel and Pen-ek's film reveals the substitution of the novel's Marxist theme of structural economic exploitation of the peasantry with the

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[2] See "*Nonzee Nimibutr producer "Fahtalayjone"* [Nonzee Nimibutr Producer of *Fahtalayjone*]," *Cinemag*, August 2000, 73.

[3] Between 1974 and 1976, Wat was an active writer and journalist within the student movement, working for a radical student newspaper. After he joined the CPT, he was stationed in the northeast, where he edited the guerilla literary magazine. See biographical information in Benedict R.O'G Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones, *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*, (Bangkok: D.K Book House, 1985), 294-5.

[4] See interview with Wat in Cherdpong Laoyond, *Mue acheep thang nan: Monrak transistor* [We're All Professionals: Monrak Transistor] (Bangkok: Rawang Bantad, 2002), 135, 37.

[5] Ibid., 137

general sentiment, prevalent after the economic crisis, that the nation had been misled by globalisation and needed to return to its core. In the filmic adaptation, the utopian expression of nostalgia for the rural pastoral in the novel's epilogue (and prologue) is transformed into humorous rural retrochic images.

Wat's novel charts the misadventure of Pan, the country boy with "a golden Adam's apple"[6] but only an average voice and no stage presence. Pan nurses the dream of becoming a *lukthoong* singer,[7] swayed by florid advert jingles and rags to riches stories of fame constantly blasting from the beloved transistor radio won in a local singing contest. Conscripted into the army, he leaves his heavily pregnant wife, Sadow, to tend their watermelon crop, the meagre financial source of their livelihood as agricultural smallholders. His misadventures begin when he comes close to winning a singing contest near the army camp, and on the spur of the moment goes AWOL, following a large *lukthoong* band to Bangkok. Clinging to the gay band manager's promise that he too will go far one day, "but only if you do as I say",[8] Pan puts up with running errands for the other band members. His day seems to arrive when Daddy invites him out alone one evening; but to his horror, Daddy tries to interest him into having sex. Struggling to break free from the manager's advances, Pan ends up killing him. In the rest of the book, the hero's adventure descends from one nightmare to the next. He flees the murder scene to work as a farm labourer, but soon gets into trouble for siding with a friend against the boss. After a fight, Pan and the friend escape back to Bangkok. They hatch a botched mugging plan, for which Pan alone gets arrested. He ends up in jail, bailing excrement up from the sewage well to feed the vegetable patches; and, in a key symbolic episode, loses his balance falling head first into it as if kicked by "an invisible foot".[9] Eventually he crawls back to Sadow, now an angry mother of two, the second fathered by an itinerant salesman who turned up in the village to show open air medicine-selling movie. The novel ends

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[6] Wat Wanlayangkul, *Monrak Transistor* (Bangkok: Dok Ya, 2000), 9.

[7] *Lukthoong*, literally translated as 'the music of country folks', is a genre which masterfully combines the folk and indigenous lyrical and vocal tradition with Western pop/rock instrumentation. In its earlier incarnation, the influence of Latin rhythm and percussion arrangements can also be detected. In the period of its emergence during the 1960s and 1970s, the radio was instrumental in popularising *lukthoong* music.

[8] Wat, *Monrak Transistor*, 73.

[9] Ibid., 173.

on a happy note of sorts, a rapprochement between the anti-hero and the ordinary woman at home in *Bang Nam Jai* – 'the village of kind-heartedness' – who is just about able to forgive him.

References to *lukthoong* songs popular around the end of the 1970s, as well as a sarcastic sideswipe at yet another coup, by "some general gourami or other",[10] sets the novel in the contemporary time of its writing. And in keeping with the radicalism of its period, Wat sets into play the tension between the lushly nostalgic rural imageries, and the ironic narrating voice which develops, through comedy, the period's key realist themes of capitalist exploitation of the peasantry and ideological deception of the people through instigating their desires for consumer goods. The novel begins with a prologue, which in fragmented, highly visual prose delivers a pastoral of rural Thailand. The village *Bang Nam Jai* that Pan abandons for city lights comes across in this framing device as an idealised if not quite pious place. In a playful twist on the myth of the natural abundance of the Thai nation, the village boasts not only of limitless fish and rice, but plenty more salubrious stuff: "young men and women drink jaggery beer at the edge of the forest, playing illicit card games in the bamboo clearing".[11]

Once the narrative proper begins the romantic framing vision is suspended, and the narrator paints another picture of the young couple stuck between rock and a hard place. Carry on as smallholders in the lovely village of the kind-hearted and they will starve; dream of *lukthoong* fame in the city and it will end in tears. The couple grow watermelons on credit-purchase, lovingly tending to the fruits that get bigger each day like the child in Sadow's stomach. A good crop raises their hope of making money, but their debt to the local capitalist consumes most of the profit. A neighbour comforts them by pointing out the measly 175 baht leftover is not that bad, "be grateful you're not in the red!" The narrator reports Pan's inner thoughts: "He fiercely resolves to work harder next time, to grow a bigger crop and get a better price. Perhaps this way the child too will get a half-decent education like everybody else. If it finishes high school that will do very nicely. No need to get as far as a

[10] Ibid., 58.
[11] Ibid., 1-4.

Ramkhamhaeng finalist. But anything to give it a head start. Not like its parents, out of school after grade four and now working like buffaloes. Or he could do something else. But what?"[12] The hero then dreams a hashish-fuelled dream of fame. His fantasy is situated in this sense as the product of the same economic system that puts a lie to the notion of rural self-sufficiency. At the same time, Wat adroitly exploits the gap between character point of view and the higher knowledge of the narrator, that authority to distance readers from rooting for Pan to succeed and become one of those Cinderella stories. Sometimes the florid prose conveying Pan's inner thoughts, parodying the radio adverts, makes ironic comedy of his eager penchant for the latest city fashion and frivolities. The narrating voice establishes that he has fallen under the spell of the radio, whilst addressing the reader as the more educated, the more worldly type than the hero; those who will know from the start that no triumph awaits him in Bangkok.

The comical reworking of the literary trope of suffering migrants in the metropolis puts the reader in the position of one who can see the hero's fate, the invisible foot and the sewage well up ahead, but cannot warn him, rather than one who sympathises with the plight of the morally innocent. This allows for a different note to be struck in the ending, whereby the sudden assertion of Pan's self-realisation and the suggestion of survival through resilience substitute pathos, and sympathy for the defeated, with a utopian claim to renewal. After his time in jail, Pan goes home to Sadow and the land, part of which, the narrator mentions in a small yet telling detail, has been sold off in his absence.[13] The existence of home at the novel's end is a melancholic sight, marked by neglect and time passing, the transistor radio now a faded blue. Significantly, the closing paragraph ends with a thinly veiled reference to the violence in 1976. The morning Pan wakes up once again in *Bang Nam Jai*, just before he does so he dreams his old dream for the last time. The transistor radio seems to suddenly start up, bombarding the slumbering hero with the usual adverts selling dreams of a 'pearl white' face, lottery draw wealth and instant fame. Pan sees

[12] Ibid., 63. Ramkhamhaeng is an open university in Bangkok. The lyric of a popular *lukthoong* song during the late 1970s refers to the sweetheart of a fisherman who is a finalist there. The fisherman waits in their hometown and wonders if a degree will make her forget him.

[13] Ibid., 163.

himself fully made up, wearing a ridiculously large neck-tie, garlands of flowers round his neck, singing his heart out on the stage before the invisible foot topples him over. Then he sees himself through the mocking 'eyes' of the transistor dial knobs, and recognises himself as the foolish, gullible consumer that he had been of its manufactured dream. In his dream, another manifestation of himself, the heroic Pan, marches up to "the transistor of dreams and delusions" and kicks it to dust. In reality, he wakes up to the sound of the transistor radio playing some song or other as it has always done, but with a different realisation. The radio is a mechanical voice of indiscriminate "truth and lies, ugliness and beauty"; and in returning home a broken man, he is at least free of its spell. The narrator concludes: "this man is like a bird with broken wings, emerging from the detritus with a weary heart that has been flung to extremes of left and right. Now it is entering peace in the calm of dawn at *Bang Nam Jai*".[14] It is hard to read these few sentences as anything other than the nostalgic voice of a defeated radical. By ending on this note, the self-realisation of the once naive hero and the forgiveness of a rooted woman, the epilogue retrieves the pastoral idea of the rural homeland now as a place of renewal against the other Thai nation of the metropolis. The real nation at the margin will carry on somehow, whatever becomes of the centre, providing for the prodigal son a place of return and the possibility of survival.

Monrak transistor after 1997

For better or for worse, in updating the misadventures of Pan to contemporary Thailand after the economic crisis, Pen-ek's film divorces itself from the concerns of the novel's own time. Although *Monrak Transistor* is still 'about' a country boy with big dreams, it is no longer concerned with developing the same theme of the invisible hand in the metropolis that reaps the benefit from exploiting rural labour and hope with the invisible foot. Instead, the economic crisis of globalisation provides a background setting. It becomes a direct point of reference when the gay manager tells Pan to be grateful he has a job as the band's errand boy, "with the economy shot to hell right now", or in hotel banquet sequence where the rich dress down as the

[14] Ibid., 174.

destitute, in a fancy dress charity night whose theme is "extending our sympathy to the poor". But rather than developing the theme of the cause, culprit, effect or victim of the economic crisis as such, the visual style of *Monrak Transistor* presents the idea of the goodness of Thai/rural self-sufficiency. That is to say, the playful visual and aural pastiche connote the safest level of expression of the sentiment – widespread after the trauma of the economic crisis – that the nation must look again at its core. And it does so by stylising images of the village, now renamed *Bang Nam Lai* [the village where the water flows], as retrochic. Substituting the novel's parallel strategy of representing Pan's village as the site of economic exploitation and, in a different register, nostalgically evoking the image of quiet dawn in the 'same' village as allegory of national-popular resilience; the filmic enframed images now fashion an amusing dreamworld of aesthetically pleasing 'backwardness'.[15]

As a musical, *Monrak Transistor* cites the *lukthoong* cinemascope musicals of the 1970s.[16] The village of *Bang Nam Lai* and the Bangkok of the story world are set in contemporary Thailand, but the diegetic and extradiegetic musical track draw from the canon of classic *lukthoong* songs of the 1960s and 1970s. The twinkling curled fonts of the film title similarly pay homage to the flamboyant font style perfected in hoardings advertising *lukthoong* bands during this period. Similarly, the poster advertising a singing contest, which attracts the star-struck Pan's attention, displays the graphics of this age rather than a more contemporary look. Elsewhere, the film delights in juxtaposing the retro look with modern signs. The first shot is a close-up of an old-fashioned brand of laxative, held still for the duration of a mobile phone conversation. In a recession struck Bangkok, Pan's upwardly mobile, shell-suited,

[15] In Pen-ek's own comment, he saw Pan as "a parody of Thailand". The naive provincial boy who strays into the city in search of fame is meant as an allegory of a nation apparently ignorant of the natural riches at its doorstep and foolish to grasp so rapaciously for economic growth. Thailand's mistake was in persuading itself to acquire globalisation, when right here you could "cast a net in the water and catch an armful of crayfishes…still we had to try to be the Fifth Tiger". See "Pompanor", "*Nad kan ma da: Wat Wanlayangkul Pen-ek Ratanaruang chamlae Monrak transistor* [a Dual Date: Wat Wanlayangkul and Pen-ek Ratanaruang in Conversation About *Monrak Transistor*]," *Matichon Sudsapda*, 14 January 2002, 68. Yet what is interesting to note is the substitution of the figure of parody alongside the connotation of the stylishly behind the time rural place. If Pan is meant as the embodiment of the crass aspirations of boom time Thailand, he also represents the displacement of that figuration from the middle class to the *chao baan*.

[16] The most famous of them, *Monrak Lukthoong* ('The Magic of *Lukthoong* Love', dir. Rangsee Thassanaphayak, 1970), might have provided inspiration for the title of Wat's novel.

speed-dealing friend wields the brick-sized mobile phone of the previous economic interval – the definitive icon of crass prosperity during the 1980s boom. For a story now updated to the era of digital iPods, there is something more anachronistic still about the presence of a transistor radio, its retro appeal completed with an oversized dial knob. The presentation of the village itself connotes the idea of the charmingly *chao baan*, in a visual logic parallel to the clichéd movie image of the sunlit, white picket fence suburbia Americana (see fig. 29).[17] Sadow's warmly coloured wooden house by the canal, with its large veranda, farmyard animals, and neighbours who drop by on rowboats, readily connotes the idea of the simple rural life. Likewise the connotation is made via the pleasing play of contrasting bold colours; the comic framing so that the pigs and ducks become points of visual interest in their own right; and the aestheticised glow of neon lights at the village fiesta. The scene at the fair where Pan first serenades Sadow delights in its own retro aesthetics: bright pink neon tubes form the silhouette of a ferris wheel; farmyard animals partying along with the *chao baan* on the muddy dance floor; young girls in loud sarong-style wrap skirts shimmying to catchy *lukthoong* beat; a pick-up truck painted a gaudy hot shade. That the protagonists, Pan and Sadow, are played by famous young stars of the Bangkok entertainment scene adds the pleasure of watching a performance as playful quotation: the attraction of 'real' stars impersonating the style of *chao baan* being through speech, body language and clothes. The occasional break into 'behind the time' songs and whimsical clarinet soundtrack sustains the dreamy feel of the rural part of the film, told as flashback, and self-consciously marked as a sentimental setting for "a cute love story" by the old jail warden who acts as the character narrator of Pan's misadventures.

The character narration provides an interestingly different gloss on Pan's tale of woe, when compared to the comical, ironic voice of the novel's narrator. The filmic adaptation shifts humour onto the level of visual puns, citations, homage,

[17] The pro-filmic creation of *Bang Nak Lai* deliberately aimed for a retro rather than representational look. Pen-ek remarked in an interview that the village fiesta scenes bear no relationship to actual existing *lukthoong* shows in small towns. He revealed: "I did scout provincial temple fairs for ideas but gave up after two weeks. There's nothing 'classic' left about them…backup dancers these days move like they're Whitney Houston". See "Pompanor", "*Nad kan ma da: Wat Wanlayangkul Pen-ek Ratanaruang chamlae Monrak transistor* [a Dual Date: Wat Wanlayangkul and Pen-ek Ratanaruang in Conversation About *Monrak Transistor*]," 69.

including the display of Pen-ek's own auteurist tic. If the novel's mischievous overturning of Adam Smith's metaphor exposes Bangkok's American Era prosperity as premised on rural exploitation, the film's reference to the invisible foot and various allusions to excrement comprises little more than scatological visual jokes, which often recur in Pen-ek's films (see his *Ruang…/Last Life in the Universe*). Another intertextual in-joke sends Sadow to an open-air film screening, where she catches clips of *Fahtalayjone/ Tears*..., now given new, irreverent dialogues by the live dubbing of the medicine salesman. Meanwhile the character narration, the voice-over and direct camera address of the jail warden, does not provide an ironic commentary on Pan's tragic-comic descent so much as a cue for sympathetic spectatorial identification. Coming from an aged, wizened, dark-skinned actor who looks and speaks like *chao baan*, and is not playing at being one, the invisible foot metaphor turns into a generalised, humanistic observation about the victimisation of the good or the sheer bad luck of some of them. Unlike the novel, the filmic narrating voice itself sympathetically confirms rather than undercuts Pan's point of view. The novel's narrator sceptically questions Pan's talents as a singer with several scenes of his average but earnest performance, whose unremarkable quality (save for one inspired moment during the contest he almost won) is signalled as such through the narrator's own commentary, the putdowns of other characters, or through Sadow's inner voice, resistant from the start to her husband's dream of finding good luck in Bangkok. The filmic narration, in contrast, indulges in Pan's 'golden Adam's apple'. The *lukthoong* musical sequences are beautifully sung by the actor who plays the protagonist, Supakit Kitsuwan. While the sequence of events leading up to Pan's murder of Daddy has been changed around from that of the book, so that Pan of the film comes across as a natural talent robbed of his prospect for advancement. His big break comes when he substitutes the male singer in the band on stage one night, and (unlike the book) gives the performance of his life to rapturous audience applause.[18] Thrilled by the

[18] In the book Pan's voice is drowned out by the band, and the female singer he will shortly sleep with tells him his voice is not suited to style he is trying to imitate, a style made popular by the *lukthoong* star Surapol Sombatcharoen. Daddy's harassment occurs later on rather than that night. Significantly, Sadow does not happen to be in the audience watching him perform. In the film she comes to find him in Bangkok that day, and is directed to the show that night. Close ups of Sadow's

audience's reaction, "you're going to make it!", Daddy invites him to his house; and the night ends with murder, causing Pan to flee. The combination of the actor's enchanting performance on the stage and the narrative event, which gives the impression that the young man is regretfully denied his big break by the manager's unbridled lechery,[19] brings the spectator closer to sympathetic identification with Pan's character point of view than the slapstick dynamic exploited in the novel of making the reader anticipate the worst and laugh in ironic recognition with the downfall of the little man of no talent.

The basis of identification the spectator is encouraged to feel for Pan as things get from bad to worse in Bangkok highlights the fundamental differences in the conception of social existence underpinning the Wat's novel and Pen-ek's film – as 'alternative' art works of their eras respectively. In the novel, the reader is asked to empathise with Pan and Sadow for the impossibility of holding down a decent livelihood as agricultural smallholders, and simultaneously distanced from over-identifying with the young *chao baan*'s dream of success in the city. The culprit given allegorical shape through the symbolism of the transistor radio and the continuous downward spiral of narrative event linking the village with the hero's city sojourn is 'the system'; while the little man's redemption comes in the eleventh hour through self-realisation, ending the novel on a utopian note of resilience as he wakes up from his dream. In the film, the spectator is positioned as a tourist of the village concept, a non-representational dream space which eternally transcends the hellish Bangkok of the main narrative. In the narrative sequence, the basis of spectatorial identification with the hero-victim is as a sympathetic admirer of a naive man of talent, whose prospect for advancement has been denied. The culprit is either the

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enchanted, tearful reaction as she witnesses his talent endows the scene with emotional pathos, and is important for cuing spectatorial identification with Pan's estimation of his own talent.

[19] The gay band manager is another visual joke. In Wat's novel, this 'Daddy' who teaches Pan that only subservience will take him far is a caricature of strongman military leaders during the post-war. Daddy's attempt to entice Pan into sex is juxtaposed with a sordid description of a home-movie being simultaneously projected upon the wall, recording the gang rape of one of the female singers in the band. Here, the writer brings together two of the most vivid symbols of post-war modernisation: the paternalistic despot and the prostitute. In Pen-ek's film, the visual transposition of the caricature dislodges the allegory of the post-war strongman leader and heightens the homophobic edge of the jokey image. Daddy is now a comically grotesque pervert with his Elvis quiff and sunglasses, dressed in tight pants and silk shirts half unbuttoned, dangling heavy gold chains on his chest.

band manager as a rotten individual or a 'sexually deviant' type, or fate, or plain bad luck. Here, despite the references to the Bangkok of globalisation there is no configuration of 'the system' as such, since the hero, if it were not for culprits of an individualised or random nature, was on the verge of finding fame within it. Aesthetic energy shifts then from grasping the structure that puts the likes of Pan up against the invisible foot, to narrative presentation of an individual's undeserved unluckiness cushioned by the pleasingly retrochic visualisation of the rural homeland. Denied the rewards that his natural talents ought to bring, Pan becomes a figure of pathos, and identification with him is something akin to indignation on behalf of and sympathy for a decent man who loses his job through no fault of his own. The last shot of Pan and Sadow in tearful embrace captures the pathos of reunion and the cathartic relief of returning home; but there is no comparable gesture of defiance.

***Fahtalayjone*: the *thai sakon* film and the *chao baan* spectator**

While Pen-ek appropriates the category of *chao baan* primarily for visual retrochic and liberal/ethical moral identification, the technicolor-inspired, multiple genre blending *Fahtalayjone/*Tears of the Black Tiger is more fascinating still for its accompanying rhetoric of returning Thai cinema to its *chao baan* spectator, and its articulation of the discourse of Thai filmic quality – the projection of the Thai (yet) universal filmic standard – to pastiche of astonishing creativity.

In an interview with an arts magazine just before the release of his debut, Wisit (who had been an acclaimed director of retrochic advertisements) described the striking colour scheme of *Fahtalayjone/Tears*..., which cut fuchsia against turquoise, canary yellow with green against burnt orange, as a national cultural intervention of sorts. Speaking of his wish to return to Thai films "what might be regarded as our national colours, the vibrant colours of a hot climate", he contrasted the colour scheme of his debut with what he implied to be the cult of imitation among Thai filmmakers. He commented: "if you go out to the provinces you'll see wooden houses there painted bright blue, or temple sermon signs painted in bold contrasting colours. Yet Thai films today don't use this colour scheme because filmmakers feel it's *choei* [outmoded]. We prefer to shoot like *farang*, to go for that blue filter look. It's nice

but it's not us."[20] Similarly, Wisit described the excessively artificialised pro-filmic creation of *Fahtalayjone*/Tears of the Black Tiger as inspired by indigenous aesthetic forms now considered anachronistic. For instance, the yellow sunbeam backdrop and the pink mansion house interior with its sweeping staircase allude to the iconic interior of the *nam nao* melodramas, and the bold, simple shapes and colours of the set of the folk opera *likay*.

In her illuminating analysis, the critic who goes by the penname of "Sariya" argues that Wisit was at the same time inventing a new discourse of Thai film heritage through the art historicist formalism of his film.[21] She points out that *Fahtalayjone/Tears...* cites an array of mass cultural precedents informing the aesthetic experiential field of Thais "aged 30 and upward". These include old Hollywood movies, old Thai movies, Thai romance fiction, the postmodernised look of contemporary advertisements, and old Thai television soaps of the period when they were shot in studios using simple, artificial sets.[22] Here, plot and narrative progression are of little interest in themselves. Instead, the narrativisation privileges the play of visual and aural pastiche as the primary level of viewing pleasure, and makes redundant the codes of action or enigma.[23] The story of the star-crossed lovers, the gentlemanly bandit Seua Dam ('Tiger' Dam) and the well-bred young lady Rumpoey, references the melodramatic fiction of doomed destiny and love across the class divide. The look of the heroine alludes to the fifties Hollywood melodrama with glamour close-ups and dresses in the style of the Dior new look (see fig. 40). While the actress who plays Rumpoey clinched the role after Wisit noted her passing

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[20] Penkae Soitong and Sittirak Tulaphitak, "*Wisit Sasanatieng rabai see prajam chat hai "Fahtalayjone"* [Wisit Sasanatieng and the National Colours in *Fahtalayjone*]," *Season*, August-September 2000, 50.

[21] "Sariya", "*Fahtalayjone na raek khong prawattisat nang thai ruam samai* [*Fahtalayjone* the First Page of Thai Film History for the Contemporary Period]," *Nang: Thai* [Thai Film Quarterly] 9 (2001): 23. See also Pracha's discussion of the film as a pioneering example of the new *thaithai* aesthetic. In Patcharee, "*Woharn khong phap lae ngan khien: karn meuang thi mong mai hen* [The Rhetoric of the Image and Writing: Invisible Politics].

[22] Ibid.: 19, 21.

[23] The Thai language title of the film, *Fahtalayjone,* meanwhile, refers neither to the thing itself, a type of herb or an old-fashioned herbal treatment, nor gives a clue to the story world (in the way that the English language title hints at heartbreak and a pulpy plot). Wisit revealed that inspiration for the Thai title came while strolling in a shopping centre in Bangkok which specialises in retro goods, and coming across this old-fashioned herb, whose name struck him as appropriately "*choey* but stylish". Penkae and Sittirak, "*Wisit Sasanatieng rabai see prajam chat hai "Fahtalayjone"* [Wisit Sasanatieng and the National Colours in *Fahtalayjone*]," 50.

resemblance to the heroine of Rattana's *thai sakon* film *Phrae Dam*. The Western part of the *Fahtalayjone/Tears*... humorously cites both Sergio Leone's Westerns, through the close-ups of exaggeratedly spitting cowboys or the shootout sequences, and the 'Suphan Westerns' popular during the 1960s and 1970s.[24] These were Westerns set in what had once been the Thai Wild West, Suphanburi province in the central region, featuring bandits, or 'tigers' (*seua*). Indeed, the aged ringleader Seua Fai of *Fahtalayjone/Tears*... is played by Sombat Metanee, who rose to stardom during the 1960s playing the handsome *seua* who turns out to be the bureaucracy's guardian of law and order. The musical soundtrack evokes the 'golden age' of *thai sakon* songs.

As "Sariya" points out, the intertextual virtuosity of *Fahtalayjone/Tears*... both inscribes Wisit's own memory of his film viewing experience; and, insofar as it is a homage to outmoded mass cultural forms that reside within the living memory of Thais of his generation (those born during the 1960s), turns the flotsam elements of the recent decades into an authenticating aesthetic precedent.[25] The 'national film colour scheme' or the 'Thai film tradition' *Fahtalayjone/*Tears of the Black Tiger pays homage to is a category of the here-and-now, a tradition invented through the voracious allusion to otherwise unconnected generic icons and rules, rather than a restorationist strategy of faithfully preserving previously established art historical categories. What is intriguing to note, however, is the basis upon which Wisit's quintessentially postmodern mode of aesthetic expression could be framed as a return to the *thai sakon* filmic and cultural tradition.[26] The ideal implication of the term, which speaks of the correct degree of adapting *sakon* influences so as to become

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[24] Or *tom yum koong* Westerns as Wisit called them. The sour prawn broth reference is of course a play on the spaghetti Western.

[25] "Sariya", "*Fahtalayjone na rak khong prawattisat nang thai ruam samai* [*Fahtalayjone* the First Page of Thai Film History for the Contemporary Period]," 20.

[26] His claim to the 'retrieval' of the *thai sakon* aesthetic tradition is made on both textual and extratextual levels. In the long interview with the arts magazine, Season, Wisit remarked: "all of our cultural forms bear the influence of the west. This much we can't deny. The question is whether we adapt them properly, or whether we simply copy them wholesale". See Penkae and Sittirak, "*Wisit Sasanatieng rabai see prajam chat hai "Fahtalayjone"* [Wisit Sasanatieng and the National Colours in *Fahtalayjone*]," 52. The examples he raised of the *thai sakon* aesthetic at its very best are: the European influenced architecture of the reign of Chulalongkorn and the *thai sakon* popular songs. In this context, it is not surprising that Wisit chose to dedicate *Fahtalayjone/*Tears of the Black Tiger to the *thai sakon* filmmaker of the 1950s and 19560s, Rattana.

expressive of Thai cultural energies and experiences, is here articulated to an aesthetic mode whose defining characteristics are precisely hybridity, intertextuality, pastiche, and historicism.

Two further elements can be noted from Wisit's mobilisation of the *thai sakon* tradition. It is clearly a discourse of dissent, but dissent from what or whom? In his criticism of the fad for using blue filter lens among other contemporary Thai films, it is likely that the examples he had in mind are the conglomerate teen movies of the 1990s. Since it is this cycle of movies that systematically adapted the neo-noir look of the rain soaked, eerily urban city shot in blue filter, to create fashionably atmospheric enframed images of the (primarily) Bangkok cityscape. And of course, among the contemporary Thai film genres, it was the teen cycle that came to be regarded as the guilty culprit of slavishly imitating Western film techniques without the accompanying skill of 'selective modernisation'. At the same time, Wisit associated that so-called un-Thai, 'cold climate look' with the taste affectation – not of teen film viewers – but of "intellectuals or those who had studied abroad [*phuak thi rian meuang nok*]". He claimed: "they tend to prefer *farang* styles and *farang* graphic colour schemes."[27] Whether his comment can be substantiated or not is beside the point. What is interesting is his mobilisation of the elite discourse of the cult of imitation to situate the cultural intervention of his film. Through it, Wisit simultaneously differentiated *Fahtalayjone*/Tears of the Black Tiger from the un-*thai sakon* attractions of the teen films, whilst distancing himself from the so-called educational elites and intellectuals of the present day, who are now framed in contrast as slavish imitators of the *sakon*/West.

At the same time, just prior to its release in Thailand, when asked what he thought viewers would take away from *Fahtalayjone*/Tears of the Black Tiger, the director invoked the spectre of Thai cinema's authentic spectator: *chao baan*. With an edge of defiance he asserted that he expected little from "the elites or intellectuals", since he did not think they would appreciate or understand his film. The test of its success or failure would, for him, rest instead on its popularity among the people: "I would like *chao baan* to like this film...I think they will like it, and others who watch

[27] Ibid., 51.

Thai films with innocent eyes [*du baeb seu sai borisut*], without affectation".[28] The irony is that on its release, precisely the reverse happened. The film sank at the domestic multiplexes and did not seem to succeed in gaining much of an afterlife in the video stores, the main distributional site of *chao baan* film viewing in the present. But it has of course succeeded brilliantly in capturing the interest of those with cultural or intellectual interest in alternative Thai film aesthetics, such as "Sariya", or the filmmaker Apichatpong, who upon film's release pithily embraced its formalist intervention with the phrase "*pen nang thai lang yuk postmodern* [a post-postmodern Thai film]".[29] Again, whether there were any grounds for Wisit to assert the compact between his film and the authentic *chao baan* spectator is not of as much interest as why he chose to situate *Fahtalayjone/*Tears of the Black Tiger in this fashion. In his description, its Thainess consists simultaneously in returning to the *thai sakon* textual tradition and the *chao baan* spectators. The speaking position he (and his film) occupies can be regarded as one of a dissenting bourgeois cultural nationalist discourse insofar as it directs the 'cult of imitation' critique against the figure of globalised elite producers and consumers, whilst inventing a new complementariness between two residual traditions of Thai cinema which had up to now been in contention. In the past the idea of the *thai sakon* film had implied aesthetic departure from the 'backwardness' of the *chao baan* films, and was embraced in this logic as the embodiment of the progress of Thai film production toward the international standard-bearer of Hollywood. In contrast, Wisit articulated the *thai sakon* film and the *chao baan* film culture as congruent elements, since each is equally emblematic of Thai cinematic heritage. The visual and aural pastiche of *Fahtalayjone/*Tears of the Black Tiger – marked as a return to the authentically *thai sakon* aesthetic of the past rather than an attainment of the current *sakon/*global standard of pastiche – now also constituted the returning of Thai cinema to its authentic *chao baan* spectator. Like Pen-ek's creation of *chao baan* retrochic in *Monrak Transistor*, there is something quaint about Wisit's revitalisation of the category of the *chao baan* spectator. Both play on the longstanding idea of the people as embodiment of Thai authenticity,

[28] Ibid., 54.

[29] Apichatpong Weerasethakul, "Star Talk: *Fahtalayjone*," (www.bangkokcinema.com, 2000).

situating themselves in the established position of the cultural or political elites who speak for or gaze sentimentally at *chao baan* from the outside.

Retrochic and counter-heritage

Throughout the chapter I have been loosely using the term retrochic. As far as their visual style goes, both *Monrak Transistor* and *Fahtalayjone/*Tears of the Black Tiger certainly conform to Raphael Samuel's characterisation of retrochic as a "double-coded" aesthetic, a technology-led revival of past styles, which "plays with the idea of the period look, while remaining determinedly of the here-and-now".[30] The description of Wisit's film as 'so behind the time it's new' refers precisely to this "olde worlde but ultimately modern" appeal of retrochic. Yet in overlaying such visual aesthetic with the discourse of *chao baan* heritage, or the investment in the romance of the people situated 'behind the times'; there is an uncertainty as to whether, in this case, the double-coded aesthetic strategy could open up the redemptive possibility that Samuel invests in the best of retrochic.

In his defence of retrochic from the charges of superficiality and the vehicle of the a-historical commodification of the past, Samuel asserts its specificity from other forms of pastiche such as classical revivalism on two fronts. Firstly, in its "play of the incongruous or the bizarre", its characteristic lack of seriousness, "retrochic is untroubled by the cult of authenticity". Its lack of sentimentality about the past endows the aesthetic with inventive energy, since it is unhampered by the connoisseur concern to preserve period accuracy.[31] Secondly, drawing on the example of post-war Britain – "the boom in, and democratization of, new classes of collectables" from the 1950s onward – Samuel points out that retrochic has been the main driving force behind the popular renewal of interest in "the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life".[32] In his defence, the combination of its inventive stylisation past ephemera for the here-and-now and its accessibility, endows the retrochic aesthetic

[30] Raphael Samuel, "Retrochic," in *Theatres of Memory* (London; New York: Verso, 1994), 83.

[31] Ibid., 112.

[32] Ibid., 114.

with the possibility of generating excitement in the past through "the juxtaposition of old and new".[33]

In this argument, the power of retrochic to "animate the inanimate" and awaken the possibility of "alternative histories" depends a great deal on its lack of deference for received knowledge about the past or for the established categories of classification and preservation. It also implies a strong degree of investment in the potential of industries that drive the revival of recreational interest in the past, such as heritage or fashion, to reach a broad swath of people and recognise the strength of appetite for previously untold stories about everyday aspects of the past, or the energy to look into the 'flotsam and jetsam' elements of the past for inspiration. The question that might be asked of the retrochic turn exemplified by *Monrak Transistor* and *Fahtalayjone/Tears*..., has to do with the hierarchy of looking, signification and representation that persists in them. To what extent does the residual form of this discourse – in this case the attachment to *chao baan* timelessness – override any potential for the nostalgia or heritage industries, and their characteristic aesthetics of pastiche, to offer irreverent and challenging ways of appropriating the store of untold stories about the past? Or to put it slightly differently, within the logic of the industrial commercial commodification of the past, can retrochic be mobilised to subvert the bourgeois dynamic of textual representation and address that spectacularises *chao baan* as timelessly rooted figures in a way that also infantilises? The examples of *Monrak Transistor* and *Fahtalayjone/Tears*... would suggest the limit of the discourse of alternative heritage, which revives and 'modernises' the image of *chao baan* as, to some degree, an alternative to the idea of the royal-national embodiment of cultural continuity, yet remains within the fantasy of the people as the unthreatening, easily knowable object of the gaze.

Using this conclusion as a starting point for further explorations into the possibility of films of a counter-Thai-heritage nature, the underlying question to develop would be: what might a film that subversively mobilises the figure of *chao baan* look like? And from which position might its filmmaker speak? Fruitful areas for comparisons and contrasts are, firstly, the retrieval of *chao baan* cultures, idioms,

[33] Ibid., 113.

milieus and experiences among the non-industrial forms of contemporary Thai cinema. I have in mind primarily, but not exclusively, the films of Apichatpong, which offer an astonishingly intense film-experience premised on sensorial liberation and narrative enigma; yet who is increasingly speaking the language of a subtle return to the narrative and visual tradition of popular Thai cinema. Within this move, as consistent as the 'avant-garde Apichatpong' of multiple narrative structures and hypnotic sensorial experience is the Apichatpong who subverts the Thai bourgeois gaze projecting the knowable *chao baan*. In his films, most strikingly *Sat Pralad/*Tropical Malady, *Baan phi porb* (Haunted House, 2001), the body language and gestures of the *chao baan* protagonists are a source of mystery, whose physical presence in concrete places or sublime landscape is captured through documentary observational techniques, yet what they yield are far from knowable through stereotypically ready-made concepts. The other departure remains within the industrial setting, among mass commercial, VCD-oriented comedies, which do not address the bourgeois spectator and do not adopt a bourgeois speaking position – whether of the affirmative or dissenting variety – in their reworking of the trope of *chao baan*. Indicating this most recent turn, what might be called the aesthetics of 'the people's pastiche' perhaps, is the Isan-camp comedy *Yaem Yasothorn*, whose visual spoof of the artificialised sunbeam and fluttering rice field of *Fahtalayjone/*Tears of the Black Tiger (see fig. 41) is accompanied by the parody of the idea of the innocent village damsel and the manly village hero; whose dialogues in the Isan language make wry, dirty fun of Bangkok-speak.

CONCLUSION

This study has conceptualised the heritage films, which rose to visibility between 1997 and 2005, as an example of an industrial commercial public culture shaped by four determinants: the film industry's search for cultural legitimacy, the international profile of Thai films, the shifting terms of the ideology of Thainess after hypernationalism, and bourgeois narcissism in globalisation. The official heritage films are a symptom of a visually saturated conformist culture, divorced from history yet preoccupied with the past and frightened about the future. However, as the preliminary observations in chapter 7 suggest, one should not rule out the possible emergence of counter-heritage films that explicitly subvert urban bourgeois investment in royal-nationalist Thainess and Thai global prestige. What remains to be done is to pinpoint the constraints that make up bourgeois heritage cinema in relation to the conditions of possibility of alternative or oppositional departures for Thai film culture as a whole, using as our conceptual frame the three key terms proposed by the study: the heritage film, spectatorship, and *sakon*.

The heritage film

In their official guise, heritage films reinvent, by the techniques of visual fascination, the narrative clichés of elite and commoner duty toward Thai independence and moral leadership as personified by royalty and institutional Buddhism. The basis of their claim to national prestige is the nostalgia film aesthetic, whose combination of narrative conventionality, pastiche, and enframed images exhibiting high production values through the use of advanced audio-visual technology, signal in this context 'historical verisimilitude' and 'world-class' comparability. Meanwhile the high concept strategy of film production, which integrates marketing hype with a distinctive visual style, helps to amplify the heritage film's 'national' profile along with its veneer of global attractiveness. The intellectual and aesthetic conventionality of exemplary official heritage films referred to in previous chapters: *Hoam rong*, *Thawiphop*, *Suriyothai*, *Nang Nak*, *Bang Rajan/*Bang Rajan: The Legend of the Village's Warriors, *Yuwachon thaharn perd term pai rop*, *14 tula songkhram*

prachachon and *Talumphuk maha wataphai lang phaen din*, highlight the following constraints.

The semi-divine stature of the current monarch heightens the affective power of narrative clichés of Thai uniqueness. It is this specific moment characterised by the excessive prestige and 'megastar' visibility of the king – a veneer of 'hegemonic' authority propped up by intense propaganda, bourgeois anxiety, and a hefty dose of entrepreneurial opportunism – that renders comprehensible and emotionally compelling the 'critique' of neo-liberal globalisation in films such as *Hoam rong* and *Thawiphop*. In these cases, such critique is registered through the picturesque enchantment of the idea of Thais' indebtedness to royalty for national heritage – the nurturing of an indigenous musical tradition in the first example and the preservation of independence through selective modernisation in the second.

The limit that the current air of royal moral authority places on non-royalist and anti-royalist forms of social or historical intelligibility is not helped by the, on the whole, weak tradition of popular nationalism itself. In this context, what is striking about *Yuwachon thaharn perd term pai rob* and *Bang Rajan/*Bang Rajan: The Legend of the Village's Warriors, is the fact that they still resort to the 'archaic', hypernationalist trope of valiant Thai warriors to register 'critique' of economic globalisation. In the first case the – so to speak – unhappy ending featuring the father figure's death (the captain) and the 'betrayal' of the youth soldiers by the military prime minister seated far away in the capital – is where the narrative discourse acknowledges the sense of political impotence of its contemporary middle class. What the pathos of the ending taps into is the especially strong sentiment in the immediate aftermath of the 1997 currency crash that parliamentary political leadership during the globalisation boom was unreliable and weak in the presence of border-transcending economic and cultural threats. (To relate this pattern of narrative discourse to the political sphere, what earned Thaksin victory as prime minister in 2001 was partly the bullishness and media savvy with which he capitalised on this sense of impotence, by presenting himself as a strong leader who could stand up to the IMF while commanding visibility on the 'world stage'.) More interesting still is the tension implicit in *Bang Rajan/*Bang Rajan: The Legend of the Village's

Warriors. Here, the figuration of the people as tragic warriors left to defend 'home' on their own refers above all to the tragedy of a nation betrayed by feckless, 'absent' political leaders during the economic crisis; but that association has to be made through a plot that turns on the failure of the Ayutthayan royalty to protect its people by refusing the villagers' request for a cannon. To put it another way, the contemporary layer of meaning draws its power of 'critique' from the king's self-sufficiency discourse, whose logic of manoeuvre in discrediting political leadership as greedily capitalistic and lacking in nationalistic vision is to insist on the superiority of 'indigenous', agrarian, face-to-face communities, implying that such pastoral heritage has been destroyed by the political leaders of the contemporary period. Yet the plot framework from which this latest film version is adapted – a template mobilised in the 1966 *Seuk Bang Rajan* for the 'archaic' ideological manoeuvre of glorifying *chao baan* as valiant defenders of the nation and the throne – contains in it the possibility of questioning the role of royalty as agents of salvation.

By normalising a highly skewed view of the national past and nationalist historical agency, the insistent reproduction of the myth of royal and elite guardianship of national independence through selective modernisation – the most enduring legacy of official nationalism whether in the royal-nationalist or other variants – limits the national-popular historical imagination in more general ways. To some extent this accounts for the conventionality of a film that is not ostensibly 'about' royalty, namely *14 tula songkhram prachachon*. Its presentation of a widely-known story of a well-known student leader's experience of political disillusionment, a narrative discourse that remains wedded to the presumption that only elites make history, combined with the conceptually hackneyed yet visually thrilling chronicle-style pastiche of the 1973 demonstrations, can be regarded as one example of the failure of the historical imagination within an ideological framework that seeks to restrict the thematic range of historical knowledge, and to control the agency of its reproduction and dissemination.

The above point concerning the normalisation of a highly restricted historical imagination relates to the coercive dimension of royal prestige, namely censorship and propaganda, which sets further obstacles to popular-nationalist filmic

explorations of the past. The hagiography that distinguishes the public discourse of appreciation of *Suriyothai*, and the paranoia that underlies the film's unofficial reception, are clear examples of the continuing pressure exerted on the cinema and other forms of cultural life, requiring that they play a part in preserving the official royalist public sphere by conforming to the demonstrative projection of grateful loyalty to past royals and the current royal family. Much of this aspect of conformity has to do with self-censorship, or the fear of being seen to 'touch' royalty.

Having said that, the evident weakness of the current climate of royal prestige is its dependency on the merit of this particular monarch. In this context the categories of alternative and counter-heritage films are in a substantial sense anticipatory ones whose articulation proper may come in the future, where the possibility remains that Thailand will encounter something much closer to an unpopular, marginal or absent monarch, in other words to the situation present in the country during the first half of the twentieth century; or it will experience something else entirely unprecedented. As far as the here and now is concerned, two kinds of example can be identified to emphasise the point that even the current intensity of royal hegemony does not exhaust all the possibilities of heritage films. In the very interesting case of *Nang Nak*, the film text itself remains to a certain extent open-ended, unable entirely to contain the tension between the conformist visual and narrative gestures – the textual bid for legitimisation – and the intervals of visual excess. The former signifies history in the official nationalist frame: the opening eclipse shot establishes a mood of foreboding because the image itself connotes the loss of a wise and scientific king in royalist mythology, likewise the figuration of the historical figure of the monk as one who possesses pure wisdom draws on the real monk's status within institutional Buddhism. Nevertheless, the intervals of visual excess celebrate the 'foreignness' of the pre-modern world, through sensorially stimulating images signifying the inexhaustible power of supernatural spells and natural magic in the *boran*, as well as a 'foreign' kind of love that surpasses the fallen modern world in its otherworldly intensity.

The second example is a very recent body of period films that implicitly reverse the aesthetic hierarchy institutionalised by the idea of official heritage so as to

include unofficial, popular, or pop cultural dimensions of collective experience; namely the proliferation of the 'soft' alternative of retrochic, whether as humorous sentimentality and stylistic pastiche in the case of *Fahtalayjone/*Tears... or as bawdy humour and stylistic parody in the example of *Yaem Yasothorn*. Their playfully inventive aesthetic appropriation of what had for the most part been denigrated as the lowbrow, post-Second World War Thai movies and 'Isan hicksville' respectively, forms part of a nascent cultural turn characterised by fascination with unofficial or everyday experiences of Thainess, whose chroniclers are pop cultural producers, visual arts practitioners, and intellectuals drawn to transforming *thaithai* into a category indicating new possibilities of national-cultural subjectivity. All this might be taken as an early, and as yet on the whole a timid sign of a newfound appetite to invent national-popular traditions – perhaps the beginning of a belated return to the project of national-popular cultural intervention symbolised by the year 1973.

Moreover, the very recent visibility of *thaithai* heritage films highlights the dynamism of the market in providing an expanded horizon of identification with unofficial (or officially de-legitimised) cultural experiences. This is an example of the voraciousness of cultural commodification, an aspect that coexists with the culture industry's search for legitimacy and underscores what Hansen calls the characteristic instability of the industrial commercial public sphere. In a more immediate sense than the previous speculation concerning social existence after Bhumibol, then, the rapid expansion of the market for cultural commodities implies the potential for *thaithai* heritage films to acquire new forms of surface expression. The domestic expansion of the cultural market is especially interesting in this sense, insofar as it encourages the industrial commercial appropriation of subaltern experiences, some of which implicitly challenge the official discourse of Thainess. In other words national market integration, along with the extension of consumer subjectivity, brings with it the possibility of new intersubjective horizons initiated by commercial cultural monopolists' desubstantialised recognition of regional and popular class (or in a related dynamic, of non-heterosexual) identifications. The 1980s and 1990s teen films vividly demonstrated the difficulty of preserving official Thainess amidst the voracious momentum of cultural commodification and youth consumer identification.

In the near future, the combination of the nationwide expansion of the multiplex, the robust growth of the DVD and VCD market, and the emergence of new consumer groups such as the urbanised Isan mass (or the 'pink baht'), might lead to new kinds of film experiences that recognise an expanded sense of the *thaithai* self, or even the appetite to connect with unofficial aspects of the collective past that exceed the somewhat limited ambition of humorous pop cultural retrochic.

Lastly, one thing that has not so far appeared as a result of the international exposure of certain Thai filmmakers is the appearance of films that use the opportunity of foreign co-production to tackle invisible or unacknowledged dimensions of national history – especially those aspects of the past to do with the legacy of political repression, crisis, violence or rebellion stemming from contact with the outside world – in ways that would not have been possible with the restrictions of domestic funding, cultural conservatism and censorship. The example of the leading makers of radical historical films in contemporary world cinema, Ousmane Sembene, Edward Yang and Theodoros Angelopoulos, show that access to international funding and distribution can sometimes facilitate projects of this nature. To this extent, then, there remains the chance that in the near to medium future, given the greater opportunity for global contact and the prospect of more cosmopolitan experiences on the level of accessing and learning from the histories and cultures of others, some Thai filmmakers might use the liberty afforded by these dimensions of globalisation to make counter-heritage films. Though here of course the question of the filmmakers' own mentality – the degree of their submission to self-censorship or their propensity for intellectual-aesthetic rebellion – along with the (global or local) film culture that shapes them, remain the decisive factors.

Spectatorship

The *khon thai* spectator in the context of this study is the figure of the Thai culture loving Thai drawn for the first time to world-class (yet) Thai films. This hypothetical figure is a conceptual construction mobilised by film studios to endow heritage films with a veneer of legitimacy in the eyes of the urban middle bourgeois. And secondly the concept is implicit in the work of some critics and writers in their attempts to

account for the national prestige and intense public visibility of exemplary heritage films. The emphasis given to tracing the construction of this hypothetical spectator figure is intended to highlight a new compact between contemporary cinema and the bourgeois claim to national cultural authority, precisely through the figuration of 'the Thai spectator' whose mode of looking at the visual attractions on the screen is both influenced by and inflames the narcissistic yearning for Thai global prestige. If this methodological manoeuvre comes at the cost of inadequately emphasising those instances of reception that undercut or transgress the bourgeois narcissistic mode of cinematic experience, at least the study's tracing of the specific circumstances under which the bourgeois Thai spectator came to be constructed, largely in the effort to disavow the controversial figure of youth (and more recently perhaps the urbanised Isan masses), gives some sense of the contingency and volatility of efforts to institutionalise bourgeois sensibility and 'elevate' Thai cinema to the status of legitimised public culture.

A more general methodological point is to indicate the great potential for opening up the study of Thai cinema through tracing different realities of spectatorship, whether in the contemporary or historical context. The mobilisation of concepts of spectatorship and the public sphere would work well to extend the still narrow association of Thai film cultures with film production in different periods, a mode of film writing whose milestones have already been laid down by writers such as Dome Sukwong, Chalida Uabumrungjit, Jamroenlak Thanawangnoi, and Anchalee Chaiworaporn; and it would build on the conceptualisation of the relationship between film exhibition and public spaces in the works of Barmé and Nidhi referred to earlier. A theoretical tool that ought to be highly appropriate for this task is Hansen's paradigm concerning the potential of cinema to constitute an autonomous intersubjective horizon that recognises personal experiences made invisible in dominant or disintegrated forms of public life: the accidental gaps and margins for spontaneity resulting from the non-synchronous interaction between the production, distribution and exhibition sectors, as well as the insertion of film production and viewing into contingent social contexts.

Signs of the stirring of alternative practices of film production and exhibition in Thailand, or primarily Bangkok, over the past decade or so are evident in the growing profile of the film culture activist group Thai Film Foundation; the proliferation of short film festivals, the expanding general awareness of different possibilities of the film medium such as the short film, the experimental film, or the documentary film; the death of the mystique surrounding filmmaking at the hands of cheaper new technology; along with the current ubiquity of the concept of *nang indie* [independent film or cinema] itself. The question is whether these instances of 'democratising' filmmaking and exhibition also imply the emergence of an alternative public sphere of cinema in the substantial sense, entailing the possibility of broadening film viewing horizons, critical filmic creations, and staking out new, expansive modes of spectatorship. In this respect, the presence or the potential appearance of the kind of outward-looking, cosmopolitan cinephilia capable of challenging the narcissistic mode of patriotic spectatorship that accounts for the public prestige of heritage films, is arguably the most significant question guiding any research on the new *nang indie* 'movement', as well as film cultural activist practices within it.

In terms of film historical research, the following is a tentative indication of one possibility of historical revisionism: the paradigm of non-synchronicity as one of the conditions of possibility of constituting cinema as an alternative horizon of experience for subordinate social groups undergoing the displacements of modernisation could very fruitfully shed new light on the *chao baan* or plebeian cinema of the Cold War period. In this context, the margins for an autonomous, alternative public sphere of cinema might have been engendered through the following non-synchronous combination of practices. First of all, standardised practices of distribution developed in this period through dividing the nationwide market into regions (controlled by local monopolies), and a corresponding hierarchical organisation of the market into first-run, second-run and travelling screens. However, this pattern of standardisation coexisted with exhibition practices that in certain settings maintained a strong emphasis on localised, highly specific patterns of viewing, and on 'theatre experience' derived from older forms of folk

drama. Moreover, if the standardising aspects of the distribution and first-run sectors were geared toward exhibiting non-Thai films, the production sector tended to remain at the level of a cottage industry, whose most striking filmmakers operated as small, often family-run units. Additionally they were in large numbers Bangkok-based performing artists originally trained in other dramatic forms, as well as ex-journalists or writers – in other words, those who tended to possess a different class and social profile from their viewers. (This is applicable in particular to the last two categories.) Lastly, the textual mode of *ting tang* [excessively unreal attractions] lent itself extraordinarily well to the emphasis on spontaneity, and participatory, localised reception – in other words to the theatre experience – with its pattern of digression over absorption, genre mixing and intertextuality, the enormous attraction of stars over narrative coherence, and above all the contest to grab viewers' attention along the aural register, showcasing the razor wit and talent of the dubbers, which more often than not did not respect the cues of the visual register. This is a theoretical point until further historical research is done, but the *chao baan* cinema of this period may not have been primarily, as has been assumed, the site of the ideological deception of the popular classes (a critique vividly expressed by the 1960s and 1970s 'new left' accompanied by an implicitly feminised concept of the mass viewers of trashy melodrama). Such non-synchronous mixing might in some circumstances have provided a margin for the popular Thai cinema of this period to become a horizon of intersubjective recognition of personal experiences of 'plebeian modernity'.

Sakon

One of the main claims of this study is that during the last decade or so, the word *sakon* has emerged as a key term for imaginatively negotiating the relationship between globalisation, Thainess and Thai cinema. This is not surprising since *sakon* itself is a word, or more precisely in this case, a signifier with several possible meanings. Prior to economic globalisation – and as the periodising category of the *thai sakon* film suggests – the dominant sense of *sakon* appeared to indicate being, or trying to be, Westernised; or it was used to project some hypothetical Western standard for either Thai emulation or refusal. At the same time, the neutral

implication of the category of 'world-style' boxing or *muay sakon*, in relation to *muay thai*, is an early example of the other precedent, which prioritised the idea of universality, or the world in an expanded sense. This is an example of the kind of imaginative articulation of the Thai relationship to the outside world that undercuts or contradicts the conception of Thai inferiority or superiority against its other, the West.

The contemporary usage of *sakon* in the context of 'quality' heritage cinema primarily takes the expressive form of wish fulfilment, or the projection of the fantasy of Thai prestige on the world stage as compensation for the urban middle bourgeois anxiety about Thailand's actual marginality in the world system, and secondly to secure continuing national cultural authority on the basis of its claims to leadership in mediating globalisation. However, even within the limited logic of bourgeois narcissism, underscored by its obsession with projecting *sakon* as the enraptured eyes of the world for the exhibitionistic display of world-class Thainess, there is at the same time an indication that the imaginary of globalisation in Thailand may be acquiring new, potentially more expansive forms. Here, the simultaneous projection of 'global' market interest and 'global' admiration implies, if nothing else, the faint outline of an expanded sense of the world from the old habit of gauging Thai practices primarily in relation to the West – the product of the historically ingrained mode of imagining modernity as Western and the legacy of the previously institutionalised discursive frame for thinking about the impact of globalisation. That is to say, the highly global nature of cinema – in this case the globalised trajectory of film distribution, whether according to the mass commercial or film festival pattern – means that the conceptualisation of the expanded horizon of Thai cinema through the signifier of *sakon* (or its pop cultural Thailish accompaniment *go inter*), has to take into account the reality of other markets, the presence of other potential 'admirers' and 'competitors' for Thai films, over an above the habitual association of Thailand's victimisation by the West.[1] Of particular interest in this context is the extent to which

[1] A nice example of this expanding sense of the relationship of Thai films to the world is a recent report in *Bioscope*. Commenting on a Brazilian distributor's purchasing of *Phaed* (Alone, 2006), the horror by the directors Pakpoom and Banjong, the magazine writes: "Brazil might sound like a strange place to distribute Thai films, but this is in fact a new market with serious potentials.

the current mobilisation of *sakon/go inter* encompasses, or is preparing to encompass, new ways of conceiving the network that integrates Thailand into the regional market of the Asia-Pacific, or new senses of the possibility of Thai connection and engagement with fellow Asians.

Recently *Shutter* [the horror debut of this director duo] made the equivalent of 3 million US dollars there." The report goes on to mention that Wisit's latest film, *Pen choo kap phi* (The Unseeable, 2006), also a horror, has sold to "France...Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and Singapore" – a small sign of an active and neutral awareness of Southeast Asia over the tradition of denigrating one's neighbours. See "'*Phaed*' *khuang 'Pen choo kap phi' khai dee nai Pusan* [*Phaed* and *Pen choo kap phi* Sells Like Hot Cakes in Pusan]," *Bioscope* November 2006, 27.

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