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# *Nang Nak*: Thai bourgeois heritage cinema

May Adadol INGAWANIJ

ABSTRACT *From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, history has been flooding commercial Thai cinema as never before. These contemporary 'films that go back in time'* (nang yon yuk) *can be distinguished by their ambition to maximise visibility at both domestic and international levels. Their novelty in the Thai context lies in combining the aesthetics of the nostalgia film, the promotional practices of the high concept film, with the insistent claim of attentive historical representation as a mark of quality and seriousness. The article explores Nonzee Nimibutr's ghost remake* Nang Nak *(1999) as an exemplary instance of contemporary Thai bourgeois heritage cinema. It argues that the film's signification of heritage takes the narrative form of self-exoticisation, or the inscription of generically arcane Old Siamness for the fascinated gaze of the bourgeois Thai spectator. The article considers the tension between the self-exoticising aesthetics and the yearning for national self-representation, brought out especially acutely in this heritage film's international foray on the film festival circuit.*

KEYWORDS: Thai cinema, heritage film, film festivals, globalisation

The 'face' of a film (*naa nang*) and the first weekend peril (*saam wan antarai*): these have become increasingly common phrases as the multiplex has dominated film exhibition in urban Thailand, primarily Bangkok, from the late 1990s. The second phrase refers to the scenario whereby any film that does not produce healthy box-office figures during its first weekend of release stands in danger of being immediately 'bolted' to a graveyard slot. In theory, this test of instant demand applies to all films that pass through the multiplex, although it was not long before several critics began to point out that the main casualties seem to be Thai films, especially the less immediately marketable ones (Kao-e Taew A 2003). The suggestion here is that the multiplex generally makes it that much harder for non-Hollywood films to fight for a visible footing amid the PR machinery of whatever Hollywood blockbuster happens to be on globally saturated release.

One response is to play Hollywood at its own game, which probably explains the ubiquitous circulation in recent years of the other phrase, *naa nang*, the 'face' or 'surface' of a film – in other words the high concept film.[1] In the example of post-classical Hollywood, this kind of industrial filmmaking has often been criticised for churning out marketable yet superficial, 'low quality' films (Wyatt 1994: chap. 1). What is interesting to note in the Thai case over the past decade, however, is that those Thai films that have acquired the greatest national prestige have done so through articulating the production and promotion practices of the high concept film to the discourse of quality of 'national cinema'. They belong primarily to a genre of films I call the heritage film, whose distinguishing features include an emphasis on marketing, high production values, the presentation of Thainess as a visual attraction, the pastiche of historical personages and traumatic episodes in the biography of

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the Thai nation, and most significantly the wishful claim to quality as films of a *sakon* or 'international/Western' calibre (May Adadol 2006). This article discusses the textual style and domestic reception of an exemplary heritage film, *Nang Nak* (dir. Nonzee Nimibutr 1999), in order to explore how its circulation revitalised the discursive ideal of the *thai sakon* film, or the 'Thai film of an international/Western calibre'. In doing so, it situates the heritage films released after the 1997 economic crisis[2] in general as a symptom of what the political theorist Kasian Tejapira conceptualises as the schizophrenia of Thailand's culturally hegemonic bourgeois strata: the urban white-collar middle class who simultaneously yearn for Thainess and global prestige in globalisation (Kasian 1996).

**The 'new look' heritage film**

The legend 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 (Songyote 1999: 64). In recent decades it is mainly through the countless number of television soaps and filmic remakes that the legend has been kept alive.

As he was promoting *Nang Nak*, the director 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 19th century period in which Nonzee and his screenwriter, Wisit Sasanatieng, decided to set the story (Nonzee 1999b: 1). Collective memories of more innocent days long past 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.

*Nang Nak* has tended to be described as the product of a director's expressive – even heroic – vision (Nilubol and Ukrit 1999). This is in response to the film's striking visual scheme, 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. Immediately after its successful domestic run, the director's national standing was bolstered further by the international circulation of the film – something of a novelty at that stage.[3] Without underestimating Nonzee's imaginative power in endowing a well-worn legend with a striking new filmic 'face'; what is significant to note is the 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'.

The owner of the studio that financed *Nang Nak*, Visute Poolvoralaks, 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' (Suparp n.d.: 13–14). 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 due primarily to the domestic blockbuster success of his 1997 debut, *Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters* [*2499 anthaparn khrong meung*], and secondarily to 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 the studio Tai Entertainment came up with a promotional 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: first, the visual emphasis on the 'authentic look' of the protagonists; second, the foregrounding of *Nang Nak* as a director's film, subtly suggesting 'authorial seriousness'.

The trailer visualises the concept of 'Nonzee's new look remake' with a montage that neither resorts to the teaser (the voiceover), nor to snippets of dialogue. It has a pure image atmospheric pulse: it 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 from the previous filmic convention, which tended to deploy simple special effects largely for comic play. The trailer's 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. 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. Elements such as this 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 of stars. (This claim was reinforced by the fact that both actors who took the lead roles were then newcomers.)

It is 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*, then *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (*Cinemag* 2000a: 81). This positioning at once highlighted the 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.

### *Nang Nak* as nostalgia film

With its attentiveness to the display of pre-modern (*boran*) signs – especially during narratively redundant intervals – *Nang Nak* bears the aesthetic logic of the nostalgia film in Fredric Jameson's definition (Anchalee 1999/2000).[4] Its aesthetic is not 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; and in anticipation of the spectator who is now inscribed as both 'modern Thai' and the 'virtual tourist' simultaneously.

The narration arrests the story world at 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 19th century. The text caption specifies its precise date, 18 August 1868, and indicates that we are in the period at the very end of King Mongkut's reign. The historical event to which the opening image refers is the fateful eclipse correctly forecast by the ageing king, who died shortly afterward from malaria contracted during the journey undertaken to witness the phenomenon. Such an 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.

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 the narrative of Thai national independence: Mongkut's achievement at the tragic cost of his life symbolises the exemplary struggle of the elites of Siam/Thailand to maintain her independence through selective modernisation. In other words, the vision of the eclipse calls forth from Thai viewers their collective memory of the nation's past, or the idea conventionally held about what this episode signifies in the master narrative of the nation. 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.

Yet if the image of the eclipse speaks of the nation's biography in the conceptual frame of monarchical auras and the profound emotional bond sustained with their loyal subjects, such allusion coexists with other imageries that visualise the past as a pastiche 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. Such visual fascination with the *boran* continues in the opening credits that shortly follow, 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 very similar appearance to the ones seen in the mural. Excess intervals such as this opening montage, a picturesque pastiche of the pre-modern, recur as the main visual attraction during the 100 minutes or so of *Nang Nak*'s running time.

**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' (Jameson 1998: 130). In *Nang Nak*'s case, a similar dynamic can be traced. While the visual attraction 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, however 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 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); while situating as less authoritative than him the fictional character of the village abbot; and discrediting entirely the intertextual figures drawn from the Mae Nak legend, mainly the midwife who fails to save Nak and the baby, and the Brahmin exorcist, who in some previous filmic versions successfully defeats Nak by containing her spirit in a clay urn.

The narrative trajectory 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 19th 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, the monarch referred to in the opening shot of the eclipse. 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 19th-century king. 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. 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 flicking 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.

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 tree tops and howling wind in nightly blue filter – bypassing the horror genre's code of visceral gore for a 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 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 view of 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, convey the limited extent of his power. A ghost insanely in love ultimately proves too much for his witless, but well-meant chanting.

It is instructive to note here how the narrative crisis necessitating Somdej Toe's restoration of peace is compositionally motivated. After Nak murders the male friend who tried to warn Mak, 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, although 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 some previous films 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 bawdy 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 emblematic of national history. The exorcist digs up the corpse of Nak in an act of merciless violation of what remains of her body, an act that 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 from the inside, the 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 a *deus ex machina*, 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 decent human husband passes into the next stage of manhood; while the love-struck spirit wife learns to suppress her untamed longing and acknowledges her sin in murder, enlightened by a figure whose narrative power comes from his connotative association with the aura of the national past.

**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 of desire 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.[5]

While jealousy is a key compositional motivation of many of the previous film versions of the legend, 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* (dir. Rangsee Tassanapayak), who resembles the hard man (*nak leng*) 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. The romanticisation of the transcendental power of Nak's passion, and Mak's perfect loyalty as a husband, underscores the shift in tone from fantastical/slapstick to heritage/afterlife romance. In the 1959 version, as with many others, the narrative structure 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. 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 camera. 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 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 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.

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 tree tops 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 it 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 that 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. Whereas the Mak of the classic versions 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 his coming across 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 (Siwaporn 1999: 92); 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 (Nonzee 1999b: 3–4). From this speaking position, the remake is the expression of a filmmaker's personal nostalgic sensibility.

In accounting for *Nang Nak*'s success in Thailand, the most straightforward level of explanation identifies, in the domain of reception, the same nostalgic sensibility 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 'the times when our home/nation was good and beautiful' – a common phrase for the nostalgic sentiment (*meua khrung ti baan yang ngam meuang yang dee*) (Nantakwang 2006: 42). In this explanatory frame, contemporary Thai films that represent the past serve a significant 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 or heritage 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 (Anchalee 1999/2000: 25). Perhaps the question regarding the characterisation of *Nang Nak* as a film that successfully speaks to the Thai public, as with contemporary Thai heritage films in

general, has to be reframed so as not to assume too instant a focus on the nostalgic sensibility shared by 'modern (middle class) Thais'. Instead, what might be more fruitful to probe is the extent to which *Nang Nak*'s aesthetic appeal to newness, its attraction as visual spectacle of a *sakon* and prestigiously authorial kind, gave momentum to the public sphere of reception that emerged upon its release. And when this public sphere is understood as that which emerged in response to the film's 'instant peak' at the multiplex box-office, which in turn supplied discourses endowing social, cultural, or symbolic, (rather than business) significance upon its record-breaking revenue. 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. The film critic Tee Tua (Mongkolchai Chaiwisut) found *Nang Nak*'s fixation with archival visual displays of 'pre-modern customs (*praphni thai boran*)' an impediment to dramatic development; the rapid editing pace that signalled *Nang Nak*'s debt to 'the contemporary film style (*style khong nang samai nee*)' compounded his boredom of watching '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 (Tee Tua 1999: 100–102). Yet Tee Tua fully conceded that, given the 'crisis of confidence' in Thai films (of the late 1990s) and the uphill struggle against Hollywood's domination; *Nang Nak*'s claim to newness – simultaneously at the levels of style, thematic reinterpretation and professionalised division of labour among the crew – 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, 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 success 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 that went into the film, its tightly planned production schedule and so on (Nara 1999: 109). 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'. And it ended with the voice of the common man: 'I'm proud of this Thai product. It's a great effort' (*The Nation* 1999).

Of course, *Nang Nak*'s claim to attaining the *sakon* 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'. More interesting still is the film scholar Songyote Waeohongsa's ironic comment ending an article which characterised previous versions of the Mae Nak tale as mythic films addressed to the popular classes, while describing 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* quality films [*nang nai radab sakon*] from elsewhere', whilst relating 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 projected image of this national film product? He ended his article with an ironic citation of a line of a 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 Westerner (*farang*) (Songyote 1999: 71).

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* encapsulates the following cultural logic. Its appeal as a 'national film' 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 desire for Thai heritage and *sakon* comparability 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 compensatory fantasy, the experience of loss of the stable self of middle class Thais as they are subjected to globalisation. Instead, the celebratory dimension of the discourse of *Nang Nak*'s history-making success, articulated as the ostensibly 'Thai-style' attainment of a new, 'universal' filmic standard, suggests the cinema's centrality as the rehearsal ground for a class of schizophrenic subjects to play out the fantasy of their historical role as ascendant market agents and bearers of national progress in globalisation.

The 'image fixation *cum* historicist cravings' that Jameson identifies in (primarily) late capitalist America, as a symptom of the loss of historicity (Jameson 1991: 287), 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 (Anderson 1998: 78–92). In the Thai case, such craving for images of pastness occurs as a correlation of the winning of bourgeois authority in these domains, under the condition of increasing, and increasingly insecure, integration in economic globalisation. What became evident in *Nang Nak*'s reception was that while the discourse of its appreciation partly entails gesticulating a stance of 'refusal' toward Hollywood, the novelty of the nostalgia film form itself licences the projection of the dream of Thai advancement in that very same model of global economic domination. This is the sense in which partaking in the viewing of *Nang Nak* can be given a patriotic gloss, articulated to the official nationalist narrative of Thai independence through selective modernisation, and expressed in the rhetoric of standing up to Hollywood. To this extent, the logic of investment in the historicist cum *sakon* attraction of *Nang Nak* might be regarded as a manifestation of what Kasian fleshes out as bourgeois schizophrenia: the yearning for '*Thainess as the Thais have never been*', registered in this case in the acknowledgement of the non-representational, aestheticist appeal of the 'new look' heritage film; and for '*un-Thainess as the Thais may never be*', played out as the association of that aesthetic with advancement according to a projected global standard of filmic quality (Kasian 1996: 250; author's italics). The question is whether the substance of its fantasy is largely one of denial: the investment in visually fixated illustrations of the symbolic narrative of nation as part of the suppression of counter-narratives of historical experiences which threaten to challenge the established order, and the embrace of *sakon* aesthetic attainment as the projection of 'Thai national' capitalist gains on a scale materially unattainable.

**Festival display**

*Nang Nak*'s circulation in the Thai multiplex context was premised on the attraction of its pastiche of the *thai boran*. 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 'new look' claim to formal innovation and advancement in production. Upon its international circulation, such textual dynamics of pastiche, exoticisation, and formalist play were 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.

On 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 the premiere screening of *Nang Nak* in the UK. The presence in the audience 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 a festival event, Nonzee was present to perform a Q&A at the end of the screening. 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, which seems to have become a potent signifier of successful Thainess in a transnational setting. 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, urbanised 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 appeared, 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. The 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 inscription of the touristic mode of looking at 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 (Chow 1995: 9). Self-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 of cultural crisis in her definition, paradoxically insists on its own primacy vis-à-vis the West (Chow 1995: 22–23). 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 characterisation of 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*' (*Cinemag* 2000b: 126; my italics). Fresh from its circulation in this properly international arena of cultural display, the *boran* spectacle and the exoticising projection of otherworldly love, fantasised as an old native 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 *sakon* eyes was read through a creatively misleading cliché of cultural representativeness, of everlasting love and an unusually credulous 'Thai' man as a persistent, vital and unique national custom.

To localise Chow's broad conceptual brushstroke, the above logic of Thai exceptionalism might be described as an example of the emergent Thai bourgeois sensibility of narcissism: the specifically urban middle class (rather than 'modern third world Thai') investment in cultural goods that enact the trope of arresting the eyes of the world for their display of 'exemplary' Thainess. If we identify this sensibility as a compensatory fantasy driven by bourgeois schizophrenia, it could plausibly account for the often comical vanity gap that has, since *Nang Nak*, widened between the generally fantastical projection of 'international' (implying Western) admiration for 'Thai heritage' films by domestic taste and culture makers (May Adadol 2006: introduction and chap. 6), and the reality of film globalisation that partially constitutes the condition of the possibility of an independent or alternative 'new Thai cinema'. Broadly speaking, the latter entails the growing network of transnational contact between alternative Thai filmmakers, institutions or agents of world cinema, and cinephile critics and viewers on a global scale (May Adadol and MacDonald 2006). Nowhere is the effect of mistaken bourgeois identification of the global prestige of 'new Thai cinema' with heritage films 'of an international calibre' more piquant than its marginalisation of the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the anti-bourgeois aesthetic radical whose films consistently overturn the dominant filmic discourse of Thai heritage, consequently denying the 'patriotic Thai spectator' the narcissistic pleasure of certainty in Thai uniqueness in the eyes of the world (Anderson 2006).

## Notes

1. The 'high concept' film refers to a mode of industrial film production that prioritises the integration of style with marketing. In Justin Wyatt's clarification, the high concept film is distinguished by 'the look': the image of the film and especially the match between image and soundtrack; 'the hook': the marketing hook to facilitate cross-platform merchandising; 'the book': the reliance on narrative discourses that conform to generic expectations combined with simplified characterisation (Wyatt 1994).
2. Other examples of the heritage film include *Suriyothai* (*Suriyothai*, dir. Prince Chatri Chalerm Yukol 2001), *Daeng Bireley and the Young Gangsters* (*2499 anthaparn khrong meuang*, dir. Nonzee Nimibutr 1997), *Bang*

*Rajan: The Legend of the Village Warriors* (*Bang Rajan*, dir. Thanit Jitnukul 2000), *The Overture* (*Hoam rong*, dir. Itthisoontorn Vichailak 2004), *The Siam Renaissance* (*Thawiphop*, dir. Surapong Pinijkhar 2004).

3. 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.
4. In Jameson's terminology, the aesthetic of nostalgia films is 'non-representational', or connotative. In their 'overstimulating ensemble' of signifiers of pastness, nostalgia films 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. Their aesthetic field is dominantly pastiche: the visually fascinating citation of art historical generations, periods or styles (Jameson 1991: 16–24).
5. See Rey Chow's reading of the Hong Kong film *Rouge*, which partly anchors this section. She observes in relation to Stanley Kwan's ghost romance the mutual implication between its narrative level, which 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); and the 'ethnographic' claim of its visual aesthetic, which 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 representation of a lost social world with the 'memorable' feel of so-called 'ethnographic account', rather than a mere series of stylised imageries, 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' (Chow 2001: 215–220).

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