

# **Contemporary Thai Horror Film: A Monstrous Hybrid**

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# Abstract

This thesis aims to dispute derogatory and disdainful attitudes towards contemporary Thai film, ones that follow a long history of viewing Thailand and Thai culture as inferior. Through conducting a case study of the popular horror genre I illustrate that New Thai cinema follows a hybrid film form that has resulted in such condescending interpretations. This is an amalgamation of an earlier post-war 'characteristically Thai' film style that is a product of the lower-class rural context and the globally dominant EuroAmerican 'Natural Language' of horror. Furthermore, I illustrate that while Thai film in the post-war era targeted the provincial lower-classes, the post-97 New Thai industry has now shifted to an elite-sponsored model that promotes social conformity in the face of social crisis. My research indicates that the continued presence of lower-class characteristics from this earlier era of film disrupts the ideologically conservative agenda of New Thai productions and functions as a traumatic expression of lower-class subjectivity in this increasingly elitist age. The film form of contemporary Thai productions can therefore ultimately be attributed to the continuing and increasing level of social inequality within the country and the increasing political polarisation of Thai society in recent years.

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# Introduction

The Thai film industry is one of the fastest growing in Southeast Asia and has been breaking box office records since the birth of the new post-97 big-budget industry, often referred to as "New Thai Cinema."<sup>1</sup> Sparked by the structural reorganisation of the exhibition industry through a wave of urban teen dramas in the mid-1980s to early 1990s, the filmic renaissance of New Thai cinema was the definite product of the recognition of a new bourgeois urban spectatorship, one apart from the teen or provincial (up-country) niche audiences addressed in decades before (Ingawanij, 2006). Due to the establishment of new urban multiplex movie theatres from 1994 onwards, New Thai cinema instead addressed "the more 'respectable' swathe of potential film consumers brought into concentration by the Bangkok multiplexes" (ibid, 169).

After 1997, the Thai film industry therefore changed and developed into an industry capable of both standing beside and even competing against the high-grossing Hollywood productions the country had always been bombarded with and its exhibition sector had come to rely upon. New Thai cinema involved higher budgets, greater box office gross, greater technical proficiency, an urban viewer who arguably now had a renewed preference for Thai productions, savvy new film directors, an entirely new international presence and an all round greater emotional and financial investment in Thai film as a national industry.

My study will conduct a timely exploration of Thai cinema's transition from the characteristically Thai subaltern 'cottage industry' of the 1960s to the blockbuster contemporary New Thai industry. It will do this through conducting much-needed original research into the surrounding empirical social context and textual analysis of rare and forgotten Thai films, so substantially contributing to the limited body of knowledge that already exists regarding the development of Thai cinema. In an extremely original step, I

will deploy horror film theory to explore Thai horror films in order to dispute disdainful and discriminatory attitudes directed towards the form of contemporary Thai film and to support my central thesis that contemporary Thai films retain a formal hybridity that has evolved from specific historical and contextual circumstances that placed Thai film outside of the formal parameters of non-Thai films. This hybridity, I will demonstrate, stems from and is representative of the Thai lower classes and so the form of Thai film today is ultimately a product of the social inequality that continues to exist within Thailand.

## **Existing academic analysis of Thai Cinema**

In recognition of its recent successes, the New Thai industry has attracted much academic interest, with articles and books exploring both individual productions and the rise of the industry appearing in academic journals and edited collections. It is to this growing body of scholarly work that this thesis will contribute and extend by engaging and deploying non-Thai horror theory to explore and define the Thai film style and its lasting influence upon New Thai film. What is more, my thesis also contributes to knowledge of viewing practices. This is an under-explored area of film studies that becomes particularly significant when studying film that has developed outside of the Euro-American context and is suited to a different scenario of viewing film. It will also contribute towards the study of audiences, as it connects the conventions and development of Thai film with the various social groups within Thailand. In this way I will offer a distinctive contribution to this field, one that goes beyond empirical and contextual analysis and is not a part of existing academic exploration of Thai cinema. Existing analysis stops short of deploying actual film theory as a means of better exploring and ultimately understanding New Thai productions. To date in fact, few academic studies deploy film theory in their examination

of Thai film and instead undertake a largely mechanical empirical investigation involving textual or industrial analysis that does not, I argue, enable a critical engagement with the wider conventions of film on a global scale. Nor does it explore the viewing scenario that is so significant to shaping Thai productions or indeed the various audiences within the divided country and their influence upon the various entertainment forms.

Despite the increase and success of New Thai productions, there is relatively little academic study of Thai cinema, and virtually none prior to the 1997 New Thai movement. There exists no published English language detailed academic examination of the history of Thai film development. This is due to both the marginalisation of Thai film and its lack of accessibility via English translations and very few copies readily available outside of the small suburban-based Thai film archives. Prior to New Thai cinema, academic interest in Thai film was largely confined to empirical and anthropological accounts of the Thai film industry. Pre-New Thai film articles focusing on Thai cinema tended to take an anthropological perspective, documenting the industry and its viewers in an empirical sense, rather than paying attention to productions themselves in the form of textual analysis. Due to this focus however, this work actually provides a wealth of information that is as yet theoretically unassimilated. Annette Hamilton wrote a number of articles in the early 1990s concentrating upon Thai popular culture. This includes the 1993 publication 'Video Crackdown, or, the Sacrificial Pirate' for *Public Culture Journal* that examined the video rental market in lower-class Thailand. Hamilton also contributed the chapter 'Cinema and Nation: Dilemmas of Representation in Thailand' to Wimal Dissanayake's 1994 collection *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema* which is an early and insightful analysis of the state of the Thai film industry at that time. By far the most extensive early charting of the Thai film industry was by Thai academic Boonrak Boonyaketmala, who in 1992 contributed an article called 'The Rise and Fall of the Film Industry in Thailand: 1897-1997' in the *East-West Film Journal*.



This short collection of articles provides a wealth of information in the form of production statistics, the targeted audience, the cinemas themselves and the wider cultural environment in which this functioned, all of which is invaluable to my study's overview of Pre-97 Thai film. This thesis aims to deploy this knowledge in order to address and explore the critically neglected and almost-forgotten early eras of Thai film that have received extremely sparse attention from both Thai and non-Thai researchers but are crucial to understanding the hybrid nature of contemporary New Thai film.

Following the birth of the New Thai industry and the renewed academic access to and interest in Thai film, articles began emerging that examined the contemporary Thai film industry. For instance, Knee and Chaiworaporn's informative and well-researched chapter 'Thailand: Revival in an Age of Globalisation' in Ciecko's 2006 collection *Contemporary Asian Cinema* is concerned largely with the growth of the New Thai industry and its appeal, culminating with an examination of the blockbuster *Suriyothai* (Chatrichalem Yukol. 2001) and its alteration for the international audience. Rachel Harrison's 'Amazing Thai Film: The Rise and Rise of Contemporary Thai cinema on the International Screen' details the exporting and international success of Thai film alongside descriptions of the representation and championing of a 'traditional way of life' by productions in the modern era (Harrison, 2005). Two chapters in *Film in South East Asia: Views from The Region*, one by Chalida Uabumrungjit (2001) and one by Anchalee Chaiworaporn (2001) chart the development of Thai film from its beginnings in 1897 right up to the New Thai industry in immense detail, offering a wealth of information regarding productions, eras and filmmakers, all which this thesis will draw upon. The edited collection *Thai Cinema/Le cinéma thaïlandais* was produced in 2006 as part of the 12<sup>th</sup> Lyon Asian Film Festival's focus on Thai cinema (Meiresonne, 2006). To date this remains the only book-length publication focusing exclusively upon Thai cinema and contains short essays exploring Thai auteurs, stars, genres, film history and the contemporary industry by noted historians and journalists both Thai and non-Thai.

Yet, in these publications there is virtually no deployment of or engagement with specific film theory, and so such analysis is unable to concretely articulate the Thai film form within the global models of film nor engage with the wider implications to the study of film that this engagement with such a new and under explored non-Euro-American film form might offer. It is to this lack that my thesis will contribute, in its focus on both the post-war and New Thai industries. In particular this articulation will be through an analysis of Thai horror and its relationship to the dominant Euro-American model of horror. This offers a case study through which to indicate both the distinct stylistic nuances of the Thai film form and the relationship of cinema to the wider social context.

## **Horror Film Theory and the Natural Language of Horror**

As a means to distinguish the film style of Thai cinema through deploying film theory, my thesis will conduct an analysis of horror films. I contend that an examination of Thai horror through deploying horror film theory offers the most productive way of distinguishing and defining the characteristically Thai film form and assessing the hybrid nature of the New Thai industry while also connecting this to the wider cultural logics of the Thai context. My rationale that horror can help me explore and define Thai film as a film style is due to three main reasons:

Firstly, the notable success and frequency of this genre in Thai film makes it a staple and significant cornerstone of New Thai cinema and one which is therefore strongly representative of this industry, film style and wider Thai cultural logics. It can therefore offer a case study through which to illustrate the film style that my thesis is concerned with defining. Horror has been an extremely popular and prolific genre throughout Thai film history. Ghosts and supernatural elements were frequently inserted into early post-war

productions up to the present day and the New Thai industry distinctly continues this generic tradition.

This can be seen in such successful horror productions as *Nang Nak* (Nonzee Nimibutr. 1999), *Buppah Rahtree/Rahtree Flower of The Night* (Yuthlert Sippapak. 2003), *Shutter* (Pisanthanakun and Wongpoom. 2004), *Sii Prang/4bia* (Pisanthanakun et al. 2008), *Baan Phii Sing/The House* (Monthon Arayangkoon. 2007), *Krasue Valentine/Ghost of Valentine* (Yuthlert Sippapak. 2006), *Baan Phii Pop 2008* (Bunharn Taitanabul. 2008), *Long Khong/Art of the Devil 2* ('The Ronin Team'. 2005), *Ben Choo Gap Phii/The Unseeable* (Wisit Sasanatieng. 2006) and many more. In 2005 Thai scholar Alongkom Parivudhiphong understands that "six movies out of 20 top Thai hits of all time are ghost movies" (Parivudhiphong, 2005), and although figures change constantly and are difficult to track down, this is a believable figure. The highest grossing Thai film of 2004 for example was *Shutter* and in 2003, *Buppahrahtree* was the third highest. Writing in 2008 Chaiworaporn states "horror still fills the Thai screen. A quarter of overall film releases last year fell into this genre, followed by comedy." (Chaiworaporn, 2008:79). Horror is even purposely deployed as a means to attract audiences, with internationally celebrated auteur Wisit Sasanatieng asked to direct horror story *The Unseeable* "to help his producers, Five Star Productions, as his earlier films didn't make any profit" (Chaiworaporn, 2007:73) indicating how much of a profit guarantee the genre's popularity is considered to be.

Secondly, deploying the specific structural and thematic characteristics of the horror genre that have been recognised and defined by theorists begins to illustrate the ways in which Thai film differs and adheres to these non-Thai standard conventions. This approach elucidates the film style and hybridity of Thai productions that my thesis is concerned with exploring. Given the frequency and popularity of the horror genre in Thailand, the similarities and differences between the Thai horror film and the dominant Euro-American model of horror can indicate both the formal and thematic characteristics of Thai film and

its changing relationship to this standard throughout the decades up into the globally prominent New Thai industry. This not only defines the distinct characteristics of Thai film but also illustrates how these differ from the stylistic conventions of mainstream horror films that popular opinion dictates they should follow.

In such an analysis, the thesis will therefore deploy horror as a generic term, one that can be stretched to encompass Thai films that, as I will illustrate, do not necessarily adhere to particular horror conventions as defined by theorists. The deployment of this term when investigating Thai horror is informed by Steve Neale's exploration of genre, which illustrates that it is still possible for me to define these productions as horror films due to the contested and imprecise nature of the terms 'genre' and 'horror'. Neale indicates the vague and unfixed nature of the term 'genre' that "has been used in different ways in different fields" and indicates that many of these uses "have been governed by the history of the term within these fields – and by the cultural factors at play within them – rather than by logic or conceptual consistency" (Neale, 2000:28). This lack of logic and limiting connection to 'cultural factors' indicates the imprecise and problematic nature of genre categories. Andrew Tudor also recognises this when he connects this definition with a set of learned audience expectations that are "sets of cultural conventions" and will therefore "vary from case to case" (Tudor, 1974:18). This again stresses the imprecise nature of categories based upon a set of expectations that are constantly changing in their relationship to a variety of similarly imprecise conventions. Neale also disputes other imprecise definitions of genre as a system of categorisation, pointing out the difficulty of defining genres through a specific iconography by indicating that (besides the Western or the gangster film) many genres lack such visual emblems.

The designation of a specific horror genre is also highly problematic and contested, one that is difficult to define as a category, and indeed Peter Hutchings criticises the practice of reducing such a diverse category of film to a totalising term and set of conventions. This abstract and imprecise nature of 'genre' as a means of categorisation allows me to

refer to Thai films as horror films despite investigating their stylistic deviation from specific expectations. Neale also indicates that it is important to extend concepts such as genre beyond the limited context in which it has traditionally been theorised. This is a desire to which this thesis will respond and is part of the means by which the designation 'horror' can be deployed to describe 16mm era films. Neale posits that answering much of the confusion and dispute over genre as a term and set of categories requires

thinking of genres as ubiquitous, multifaceted phenomena rather than as one-dimensional entities to be found only within the realms of Hollywood cinema or of commercial popular culture (Neale, 2000:28).

This overarching conceptualisation indicates that while genre categories are ever-present and can always exist, attention must be paid not to the 'one-dimensional' defining of them but to the ways in which they are constructed and realised. For example, in encompassing the many diverse and global horror films assessed in her examination of Trauma studies, Linnie Blake similarly chooses to interpret genre as

a loose and ever-mutating collection of arguments and readings that help to shape both aesthetic ideologies and commercial strategies and that on examination can tell us a great deal about the culture from which such arguments or readings emerged (Blake, 2008:6)

enabling her to deploy such conceptions beyond limiting definitions to Japanese, German and American horror films among others. Both Neale's account and Blake's interpretation indicate that Thai film can be referred to as horror, yet, they are 'characteristically Thai' horror films that are different to some specific conventions and stylistics identified by theorists and my study will indicate how.

As a means to define the formal attributes of Thai horror films and assess their relationship to this loose and diverse genre, this study will deploy a set of conventions discerned by theorists through significant productions and their themes that continue to be regarded (and remade) as 'defining' works of the genre. In doing so it will be informed by what Hutchings calls the 'ideal of horror' (Hutchings, 2004:7). In his exploration of the

many ways in which the genre has been defined, Hutchings argues that critical attempts to define horror have in essence constructed a 'totalising' model that "exceeds localised uses of the term" (Ibid:7). Rather than a specific localised investigation, this definition operates on an 'abstract level' and therefore constructs "what in effect is an ideal of horror that is seen to lurk behind a whole range of horror films" (Ibid:7). It is this totalising abstract 'ideal of horror' that lies behind the vast majority of horror films and their theoretical analysis and it is in relationship to this that all horror films are therefore viewed and assessed. Films such as *Psycho* (Hitchcock. 1960), *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin. 1974), *The Omen* (Richard Donner. 1976), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper. 1974), *Halloween* (John Carpenter. 1978) and the various filmic incarnations of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* are all staple films of critical writing on the genre that crop up again and again in both academic readers and fan-produced histories of horror, so constructing this 'ideal'.

This abstract 'ideal' also begins to recognise film as a global model that takes influence from many different traditions and has been shaped by many different models of filmmaking. It acknowledges the relationship between texts on a global, national and regional level rather than simply reducing such a study purely to that of national cinema. Such a move follows Andrew Higson's argument that cinema cannot be defined purely through the national. To do so creates several difficulties. For instance such a nationalistic project "imagines the nation as limited, with finite and meaningful boundaries" and so the description of a cinema as 'national' is unable to acknowledge films outside of such an interpretation or incorporate other identities besides or beyond that of the national (Higson, 2000a:66). This term also does not employ concepts such as 'cross-cultural' or 'multi-cultural' which Willemen argues have been added to the 'standard menu' of analysis in film and media studies (2006:31). These terms, according to Willemen, are problematic because they "suggest the existence of discrete, bounded cultural zones separated by borders which can be crossed" and also suggest that there exists some kind of repository

of 'cultural authenticity' within miniature replicas of some original national culture (Ibid). Willemsen labels this a kind of 'cultural apartheid' which "fetishes the separateness of the cultures thus called into being" (Ibid:32). Instead, the study of an abstract 'ideal' of horror that underlies the construction of horror cinema in Thailand is one that adheres much more to the study of what Willemsen calls 'socio-cultural specificity' and 'national specificity' of film. These terms are different from the reductive concerns regarding national identity and instead address the specific formation of cultural norms which may relate not only to the national but also the various forces within and outside of such boundaries. The abstract ideal of horror therefore allows me to consider the specific socio-cultural formation of horror in Thailand and its relationship to regional, national and international models of film without reducing such an analysis to terms that film scholars recognise as unable to accommodate the nature of film as a complex and global medium.

As a means to describe this abstract 'ideal' I will deploy a term taken from Tom Gunning's (1991) analysis of early American film. In exploring the pre-1910 Cinema of Attractions as a culturally and historically specific model of film, Gunning criticises and refutes previous analysis which he sees as concerned purely with assessing film upon the progression to the attainment of a 'natural cinematic language' which seemed to be "understood as existing ahistorically" (Gunning, 1991:5). This supposed Natural Language of film lies behind all historical and cultural models of film and so is similar to Hutchings' 'ideal' of horror. I refer to this as the Natural Language of horror.

In an original and distinct move, my study deploys the formal conventions of this abstract 'ideal' and Natural Language of horror and the theory it has spawned as a means to investigate the film style and hybridity of Thai films since the post-war era, indicating how such texts contain elements that place them outside of the formal parameters of non-Thai films. In refuting such conventions I deploy original empirical research in the form of close textual analysis and wider contextual research, the majority of which has never been conducted before or used to better understand Thai film. On a structural level these

include the formation and distinguishing of a separate genre known as horror, the dominant narrative structure it employs, the effects horror aims to elicit from the viewer and the primary style of filmmaking employed to do this. I deploy Tamborini and Weaver's (1996) observation that the horror genre was created through a violation of 'Natural Law' (a result of the progress of the Enlightenment) as a means to distinguish Thai horror from such conventions. Likewise I also make use of the question and answer suspense structures that Noel Carroll (1990) calls the erotetic horror narrative, again arguing that Thai films do not follow such structures and instead deploy the concept of 'numbers' (Freeland, 2000: 256) (instances of visceral excess that are unconnected to narrative) to explain the visceral nature of Thai productions. I further utilize Noel Carroll's (1990) observation that horror is defined by the emotions of fear and disgust, indicating that the variety of 'numbers' in Thai productions discount this. Most significantly, I repudiate aspects of Screen Theory that have come to dominate the study of horror films. I use Miriam Hansen's (2000) 'classical principle' term that describes the voyeuristic scenario in which film must function in order to indicate how Laura Mulvey's viewing paradigm is not appropriate to understanding the shared pleasure of the Thai scenario.

After establishing the structural parameters of Thai productions through deploying such frameworks, I then employ theoretical models derived from this abstract 'ideal of horror' in order to further investigate and define this hybrid nature. This assesses the thematic and ideological similarities and differences of Thai productions to Hutching's (2004) 'ideal' of the horror genre and in particular explores their relationship to wider Thai society. Specifically it investigates the relationship between Thai horror and social inequality within Thailand. This deployment allows me to indicate that the political categorisation of Thai horror changes throughout the historical development of Thai film and in particular that the structural nuances I have previously defined can be interpreted as an expression of marginalised lower-class Thai society.



In such an examination I utilise Wood's (2004) now classic model of the horror film as representing surplus repression as the most notable, recognised and sustained discussion of the horror film that can indicate the progressive or reactionary nature of Thai horror at different historical periods. This is also coupled with Julia Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject and Barbara Creed's (1993) deployment of this to analyse the representation of the monstrous female abject within the horror film. The relationship articulated by the repression model is part of this abstract horror 'ideal' as this staple theoretical framework was part of the very basis from which contemporary horror film theory began and is automatically acknowledged or utilized in just about every anthology or reader of horror that addresses the relationship between horror and the social environment. My deployment indicates that Thai horror films represent the repression of female sexuality by the wider patriarchal nature of Thai society but respond to and negotiate different structures of inequality in different ways in different periods. This response becomes more conservative as the films move further away from lower-class society and become the property of Thai elites in the contemporary New Thai industry. For instance, I illustrate how contemporary New Thai productions depict Chinese and Cambodian characters as a damaging Other in order to uphold nationalistic and racist conceptions of Thai superiority.

I also deploy Trauma studies as a means to investigate the function of the structural deviations that have resulted in the hybrid nature of contemporary Thai films. Trauma theory concerns the study and research of the effects of traumatic events upon survivors and therefore works towards formulating treatment for conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder. Its application to film is a fairly recent phenomenon, one that has examined how mediums such as art, cinema and television function to represent traumatic mass events and experiences that may be suppressed and not adequately represented or explored in mainstream discourse, incidents such as the holocaust, the atom bomb or 9/11. Roy Brand defines trauma as "an experience that is registered

without being processed or experienced in the full sense” and so one that “cannot simply be expressed or represented due to the fact that there is nothing there to be expressed or represented” (2008:192). This lack of acknowledgement is one reason why theorists such as Blake (2008) and Lowenstein (2005) have specifically attached the horror genre to this branch of theory. They argue that due to their disturbing and disruptive nature, horror texts are crucially able to engage with traumatic events that are otherwise suppressed and so function as a means to mediate traumatic social events and upheaval for viewers. For instance, Blake posits that horror films are able to engage with and reopen what she calls ‘wounds’ that are otherwise sealed and suppressed by the process of nation building, a process which seeks to erase any conflict and resistance in its quest for homogeneity and conformity. Deploying this framework indicates that the hybrid nature of Thai films can be interpreted as a traumatic representation of the marginalised lower-class tier of Thai society that cannot be entirely erased by upper-class filmmakers.

Thirdly and finally, analysing horror films in particular enables me to pinpoint the specific empirical circumstances that have placed the film style of Thai films outside of the definitions of horror, so attributing such characteristics to the specific circumstances of Thailand and Thai society. This addresses the genre’s relationship to its surrounding social context, allowing me to label Thai films as characteristically Thai and also to indicate how they can be interpreted as the result of the social problems (specifically division and inequality) faced by Thailand, a key part of my thesis.

The distinctive formal conventions and thematic motifs of horror (as defined by theorists) are connected to the wider social context of cultural logics that produced these and therefore can both explore and distinguish Thai film as a distinctively Thai cultural product and film style. As mentioned earlier, this thesis is underpinned throughout by original empirical research that explores both the productions and the wider context. The structural and thematic aspects outlined in the previous paragraph can be traced to the specific Thai circumstances that produced a distinct set of formal horror conventions.

These include the communal scenario in which the films functioned, the social position of and attitudes towards the supernatural and the indigenous media that is already present.

The deployment of theoretical frameworks also provides a connection to the wider social context of Thai society on a far deeper ideological level. These theoretical models provide a means to interpret and distinguish what Gelder refers to as “the rhetorics of horror” (2000:1) which circulate within a culture and surface in horror texts. These rhetorics originate from social anxieties, as Paul Wells states in his opening sentence “The history of the horror film is essentially a history of anxiety in the twentieth century” (2000:3). The disturbance produced by this anxiety and articulated in horror texts is actually “a disturbance of cultural and ideological categories we may have taken for granted” (Gelder, 2000:3). By its very nature therefore, horror addresses various cultural concerns that enable a critical engagement with the points of tension within a culture, most notably that of the Other, and can therefore articulate the wider concerns of Thai society at different historical periods and the distinctive way in which they are manifested in this popular Thai genre.

## **Theoretical framework**

In order to fully establish the relationship between Thai films and the unequal socio-political hierarchy of Thailand (to which my thesis argues the hybrid style of New Thai cinema can be attributed), my perspective is informed overall by the Marxist ideas of Louis Althusser (1977). His approach allows me to connect the hybridity that infuses and disrupts contemporary Thai productions with that of the marginalised lower classes within Thailand by illustrating how such attributes disrupt the seams of the elitist ideology that is now propagated by Thai films.

Althusser attempted to define and theorise ideology, arguing that it is “a system of representations” (Althusser, 1977:233) that represents the “profoundly unconscious”

(Ibid:233) means through which individuals are determined and shaped in relation to the dominant conditions of existence. It “reinforces or modifies the relation between men and their conditions of existence” (Ibid:234) conditions that are the result of particular economic and political social structures but which ideology represents in a way that implies such relations are not only natural and immovable but also the best form of social organisation for all involved. This functions to dispel the contradictions in this lived experience and appears to provide resolutions to such difficulties, ones that Althusser argues are actually false. Althusser further indicates that ideology is not mere abstract representation but also constitutes a concrete means by which the state can manipulate its subjects into the acceptance of unfair and unequal conditions of existence. What he calls “the ruling ideology” (Ibid:234) is therefore “the ideology of the ruling class” (Ibid:234). Althusser labels the institutions that propagate such false ideas as Ideological State Apparatuses. These constitute education, the family, religion, the media and many more such social institutions. These all construct people as subjects within specific structures of power, subjects that are conditioned by the patterns of behaviour and thought that those who control society dictate they should follow in order to maintain the (supposedly) desirable status quo.

This is particularly relevant to my study of the contemporary New Thai industry. I argue that as part of this transition to a blockbuster industry after 1997, Thai productions shift from being a lower-class form of entertainment that negotiates lower-class experience for the rural and urban poor, to that of a top down model of ideological manipulation. I interpret this shift through a Marxist template, specifically Althusser. Such a theory becomes relevant to my study as a means of explaining and interpreting how in the New Thai industry Thai elites have appropriated film as a means to uphold the dominant system of inequality that continues to exploit lower-class, rural dwellers and women and ethnic minorities.

Deploying such a framework then enables me to attribute the hybrid nature of contemporary Thai films to the unequal and divided nature of contemporary Thai society. While contemporary Thai film is now the property of elites and functions as an Ideological State Apparatus, these productions cannot entirely erase the structural deviations that are a result of lower-class preferences. Despite their new classification, as I illustrate in the final chapter, Thai film continues to be disrupted by such attributes. These are even embraced by certain productions as Thai society becomes increasingly more polarised, indicating how institutions such as film are pulled between the competing forces within the hierarchical and unequal contemporary Thailand.

## **Existing Attitudes towards Thai film**

This historical connection between lower-class Thais and Thai film that Althusser's model reveals is one that has resulted in the denigration of Thai film within Thailand, an attitude that can be paralleled with corresponding attitudes towards Thai film from outside of the country. My desire to investigate the form of Thai cinema and its relationship to the wider Thai context is partly motivated by a need to counter such responses to popular New Thai productions from non-Thai and Thai elite sources. I aim to challenge existing perspectives that denigrate New Thai texts as low quality inferior productions with little regard for their popularity and success among the wider Thai population.

Despite such remarkable growth and achievement for such a young and under-funded industry, successful New Thai productions continue to receive negative comments and reviews and to be regarded disdainfully as poor quality films. This point of view originates from foreign non-Thai international viewers and reviews and also elites and intellectuals within the country, both perspectives that have traditionally been outside of the primary Thai popular audience. Impressively high-grossing *Shutter*, for instance, that even enjoyed a 2008 Hollywood remake, is regarded merely as poor imitation, with a significant

amount of non-Thai reviews singling out and denigrating its aesthetic similarity to Japanese ghost films such as *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata. 1998): “there is nothing remotely original about the new Thai horror film ‘Shutter’” (Beyond Hollywood, 2005).

One review from the Toronto International Film Festival is particularly harsh, describing the 4th highest grossing film for 2003, *Buppah Rahtree*, as “an incredibly lame horror/comedy” that is ‘clumsy’, ‘inept’ and “goes from semi-interesting to all-out disaster” (Nusair, 2004). Film scholars May Adadol Ingawanij and Richard Lowell MacDonald record accounts of the smash-hit *The Iron Ladies* (Youngyouth Thongkonthun. 2000) from its showing at a London film festival that refer to this successful production as possessing an ‘impoverished aesthetic’ (2005). Likewise in a review that denigrates the film and lauds its success simultaneously, the 2005 huge surprise smash hit *Holy Man* is singled out by Thai film scholar Anchalee Chaiworaporn as a crude slapstick “crappy B-grade comedy” (Chaiworaporn, 2006a:77) that nevertheless became “the year’s movie phenomenon” (Ibid) within the blockbuster multiplex industry. Thai film critic Kong Rithdee, who writes film reviews of Thai productions for English and Thai language Bangkok newspapers, describes the ghostly antagonists of *Baan Phii Sing* as “crudely ham-fisted” a status that causes the film to “lack sinister nuances and fail miserably to inspire fear” (Rithdee:2007). Director Ekachai Uekrongtham, who is ethnically Thai but grew up and was educated in Singapore, struggles to describe the Thai release version of his film *Beautiful Boxer* (Ekachai Uekrongtham. 2003) when compared to the international version, he states:

Thai people don't really want to go deep – I shouldn't say that, but the majority of the audience just wants entertainment... there are more comedic scenes in the movie that ... I don't really like them; they are very, for want of a better word, ‘local’ (Interviewed in Williamson, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

All these disparaging accounts run counter to the success of such productions that are attained even alongside the high-profile release of Hollywood blockbusters, indicating their success with the popular Thai viewer.

I contend that this is a flawed interpretation by those outside of the primary audience for these productions, one that must be refuted in order to understand Thai cinema as a unique film form and culturally specific product. The success and popularity of these productions within Thailand indicates that the comments represent a point of view and set of expectations that lie outside of the target audience of Thai cinema, indicating that films are being assessed not by the nuances and conventions that make them successful in Thailand, but by the extent to which they deviate from a ready-made foreign model of film. As a means to refute this and investigate Thai film as a distinctive style of filmmaking, my thesis is underpinned by Post-colonialist theorists and Thai studies scholars, who indicate that this perspective is a result of attitudes towards Thailand that were formed in the colonialist era.

## **Post-Colonialism**

Post-colonialism is one theoretical approach that can explain the reasons behind this derogatory stance. My arguments are underpinned by this perspective which indicates that non-Thai viewers and Thai elites are assessing and criticising Thai film according to its relationship to a Euro-American model and then automatically attributing a flawed and derogatory nature to its deviation. This illustrates the need to counter such attitudes by building a comprehensive framework of Thai cinema that can demonstrate its specific film style and form, a task I undertake in this study.

Post-colonialism propagates the notion that the defining abstract Natural Language of the horror film is one taken from a globally dominant Euro-Amerocentric model of film that has erroneously been positioned as superior to the non-Western Thai model. The derogatory attitudes towards Thai film are in keeping with Edward Said's post-colonial notion of Orientalism. This discourse constructs the 'Orient' as an exoticized and unorganised place over which Europe as 'the real' retains authority. The idea of a defining Natural Language

of film that is taken from Euro-American origins adheres to this. This discourse originates largely from the nineteenth century and the age of “unparalleled European expansion” (Said, 2003:41) across the globe, an age of imperialism and conquest that both produced and relied upon the ‘strength of the West’ as opposed to the weakness of the Orient. The Oriental person is constructed as “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, “different”” while the European is “rational, virtuous, mature, “normal”” (Said, 2003:40), a division that enabled “the sense of Western power over the Orient” to be “taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth” (Ibid:46). Although this moulded ‘fake’ culture was actually produced and partly invented by the colonialist encounter, Dirks argues that it is now actually recognised as genuine, such is the extent to which global society has been modelled upon the discourses produced by the colonialist project (Dirks, 1992). The disdainful attitudes towards Thai film echo the false Orientalist construction of Thai culture as inferior, debauched and excessive when it is assessed through the framework of a Euro-American governed colonialist hierarchy. Indeed it seems to be assumed that the Euro-American interpretation of Thai film is an accepted norm, when rather this is undoubtedly one of Dirk’s cultural constructions, indicating that the discourses of colonialism are still alive and must be countered.

## **The Representation of Thailand**

Scholars specialising in Thai studies argue that Thailand has long been subjected to such a construction. Peter A. Jackson (2005) recognises the strong presence of this Eurocentrism in the traditional cultural interpretations and exploration of Thailand, indicating the need for my thesis to counter such assumptions when they are transferred to the analysis of film. According to Jackson, common Euro-American accounts of Thailand champion the notions of excess, paradox and contradiction, ideas which can easily be viewed in the earlier criticisms of Thai film. In the non-Thai imagination Thailand was specifically incarnated as an exoticised land offering a debauched and chaotic lure:



an imperfect importation of Western culture fused with the savagery of the Orient. This orientalist ideology involves the comparing and contrasting of a 'superior' 'developed' and 'safe' West with an 'inferior', 'lawless' and 'underdeveloped' East. As Thai film critic and journalist Kong Rithdee comments when exploring recent filmic representations of Thailand by non-Thai filmmakers, "the impressions Thailand makes on the world still concern superstition, debauchery and fantastic Orientalism" (Rithdee, 2005).

For instance, European and American filmmakers have continually used the country as a setting for both exotic locations (as in *Alexander* (Oliver Stone, 2004) and *The Man With The Golden Gun* (Guy Hamilton, 1974)) and as a fantasy land for western protagonists to experience pleasure, danger and adventure (as in *The Beach* (Danny Boyle, 2000) and *Bridget Jones 2: The Edge of Reason* (Beeban Kidron, 2004)). This reinforces not only an exotic and paradisiacal depiction of Thailand but also panders to conceptions of western superiority over this colourful, childish and simple land where very little meaningful infrastructure, industry or domestic authority is ever represented. This is also represented in literature; as a popular contemporary travel handbook states "in a world gone increasingly dull, Thailand remains a land of magic and mystery, adventure and romance, a far-flung destination still strange and exciting in a Westernized world" (Parkes, 2000:1). This colourful description emphasises a chaotic and unorganised element. American filmmaker Seth Grossman (writer and director of feature film *The Elephant King* (Grossman, 2006)) states that "the Thailand that *farang* (foreigners) see, ... is colorful, foreign and extreme in its pleasures and deprivations" (quoted in Rithdee, 2005) a conception he is well able to identify having been a regular visitor to Thailand since 1997. He therefore chooses to convey this as a filmic representation of Thailand in his narrative of a young American researcher experiencing these various 'pleasures' and 'deprivations' in Chiang Mai. Grossman quite deliberately identifies both 'pleasures' and 'deprivations' in his description of Thailand, two extreme elements that he fits comfortably side by side. This statement seems to signify that inherent in the experience of 'pleasure' within

Thailand is also a degrading effect which reduces the western tourist to a level of 'depravity' in their irresponsible behaviour and, he continues, causes them to "leave[ing] behind the superstructural domestic authority", and "leads them to abandon their American morals and enjoy the debauchery of booze and 'rental' women that are available to tourists in Thailand" (Rithdee, 2005). This statement also implies a certain level of orientalist superiority when contrasting the 'domestic' and 'moral' Western culture with the experience of the 'depraved' and 'debauched' Thailand.

This construction also follows from a long historical representation of Thailand, one that Van Esterik illustrates was created "for the European gaze of the nineteenth century" (Van Esterik, 2000:126), a gaze that is now being replicated in the non-Thai assessment of Thai film that my thesis refutes. Thai historian and academic Thongchai Winichakul states "in the West the place of Siam was predetermined; namely as one among the Others of Western civilisation, although not the barbaric one" (Winichakul, 2000:541). It suited the colonialist arrogance by exhibiting "the beauty of simplicity and elegance of the preindustrial age" (Ibid:541). Early European accounts, such as this from George Curzon M.P. (a Conservative statesman who served as Viceroy of India and Foreign Secretary) in *The Manchester Times* in 1893, portrayed Siam and its people as relatively harmless, decadent and excessive:

The national character is docile, indolent, light-hearted, gay. The Siamese are devoted to the holiday-making and ceremonies and processions which accompany the most important anniversaries or incidents of life, death, and religion, and which cause an infinite amount of money to be squandered and time lost. (Curzon, 1893)

In the early twentieth century, British diplomat Sir George Scott characterised Siam as "a country rich enough to inspire cupidity, weak enough to tempt ambition, and foolish enough to court embroilments" (1930 quoted in Christian, 1941:185), a statement that foreshadows the attitudes and continuing derogatory adjectives that were to infuse both anthropological and popular Western accounts. Even in 1941, the exoticised image of

Siam had already been solidified: John L Christian reported “the Western world has difficulty in thinking of Thailand as anything but a story-book autocracy where there is still a certain amount of beautiful indolence and convenient corruption” (Christian, 1941:185).

The post-colonialist perspective therefore indicates that the derogatory interpretations of Thai film reflect a failure to recognise that the supposed Natural Language of film is “a variable in need of translation” when it is moved across “borders of discourses and cultural logics” (Jackson, 2005:31). When this is not adequately translated the flawed results are what Jackson labels as ‘tensions’ resulting from the failure of ‘Western frameworks’ to map the complexities of Thai culture when they are not sufficiently translated or reconstructed (Ibid:33). The comments highlighted from non-Thai interpretations of Thai cinema demonstrate these ‘tensions’ on a popular level. Disdainful comments that describe Thai cinema as ‘crude’ and ‘unoriginal’ are ones that follow a specific iconography attached to the international representation of Thailand.

This adheres to Gunning’s own criticism of the supposed totalising Natural Language of film in his analysis of the Cinema of Attractions (1991). Gunning believes that the existence of such a concept is the reason for the lack of attention paid to placing individual films within what Hans Robert Jauss calls (when referring to literature) “a historical position and significance in the context of experience” (Jauss, 1982 in Gunning, 1991:5), something that follows Jackson’s observations regarding the lack of ‘translation’ of Thai cultural texts. This supposed progression to the Hollywood standard Natural Language not only dismisses historical instances of alternative film (such as Gunning’s pre-1910 Cinema of Attractions) but also discounts cultural movements predicated upon alternative non-Hollywood aesthetics.

Gunning’s criticism of this totalising term begins to articulate the similar lack of specificity that has been awarded to Thai film and Thai horror. New Thai film is not being assessed as an alternative form predicated upon different aesthetics, but instead is assessed by its

lack of adherence towards a Natural Language, an assessment that simultaneously attributes an automatically inferior status to both the Thai text and consumer. The films are being analysed through their adherence to a global cinematic standard that originates from the Euro-American situation and one that posits itself as a Natural Language of film. This adheres to the post-colonialist argument that underpins my thesis, illustrating how appropriate Gunning's term is as it describes not only the abstract model of horror but also the unequal relations that have resulted in such a situation.

I contend that Thai film is not being placed within its own context, its own 'cultural logics'. The specificity of 'Thai cultural logics' are being sidelined in the comments and attitudes towards Thai film, which cannot accommodate aspects such as Ekachai's 'local accents'. Successful New Thai films do not adhere to the formats, conventions and expectations of the supposed Natural Language of film, yet Thai film is still being placed in a progression towards the Euro-American norm and assessed rather on how it 'mistakenly deviates' from this course. The crude and unsophisticated nature attached to New Thai film is one that adheres to wider Eurocentric and Orientalist discourses that construct Thailand and Thai popular culture as somehow chaotic and inferior. It is clear therefore that Thai film needs greater exploration and analysis in light of its recent growth, entry onto the international scene and these flawed readings that run so counter to the films' success in Thailand and adhere to long established colonialist discourse.

## **The empirical 'Translation' of Horror Theory**

My thesis counteracts such 'tensions' by reinserting 'Thai cultural logics' into an analysis of Thai film. This empirical context defines it as a distinct film form in its own right that has evolved from specific circumstances. It also allows me to 'translate' theoretical models

that have developed from a different historical and cultural situation into the Thai context. This then enables me to assess Thai film's relationship to the abstract Euro-American Natural Language of horror and indicates both the post-war characteristically Thai film form and the hybrid nature of contemporary New Thai productions.

The means to explore Thai film without considering it as an inferior film form that deviates from a superior Euro-American Natural Language, is by analysing it in-depth through tools of inquiry fashioned towards film itself. While many accounts hint at a difference between the form of Thai film and Gunning's supposed Natural Language, they cannot concretely articulate this as they do not deploy the structural and theoretical models that I use. As I indicated earlier, the limited scholarly study of Thai film is one that stops short of deploying such models in analysis. A significant part of my thesis – defining the characteristics of contemporary New Thai horror and assessing these in relation to both a characteristically Thai film form and the global Natural Language of film – cannot be achieved without the deployment of horror film models that can explore and define Thai film as both a distinct form and in relation to the wider Thai context.

However, such an analysis must take place without replicating the flawed representations of Thai culture that Dirks (1992) argued have come to be recognised as genuine. The blanket transference of structural concepts and theoretical models that have originated from the Euro-American context and the Natural Language of horror are in danger of erasing or eclipsing the 'cultural logics' that define Thai film. To take theory blindly from one context to the other would erase the specificity of Thai film and so result in similar flawed orientalist readings to those on a popular level by keeping it within the non-Thai gaze and framework of understanding.

Jackson is well aware of this danger and criticises the recent development of Thai studies, in which critical theory is deployed as a means to analyse Thai culture. In the analysis of Thailand, a nation with which America and the older colonial powers have had so much

close contact and influenced the development of considerably, Jackson states that concepts and theory created within and originating from the Euro-American context have been used liberally as tools of inquiry. Jackson criticizes this deployment as the studies themselves “rarely reflected critically on the foundations of the forms of knowledge they are engaged in producing” (2005:12). As these are foundations formed outside of the Thai context this exploration can instead backfire and result in readings that “perpetuate Euro-Amerocentric analysis” (Ibid:7) due to the fact that this model of interpretation has originated from within the Euro-American perspective. For instance, if Thai history is placed alongside other national histories to allow a comparison through wider theoretical frameworks, then there is a danger, Jackson believes, of applying this theory ‘unreflectively’ as a means of interpretation and so being unable to take into account ‘the specificity of Thai cultural logics’. The lack of this specificity leads to flawed and Eurocentric analysis which result in readings that label Thailand as somehow a site of ‘excess’, ‘paradox’ and ‘contradiction’ (2005:30), none of which, Jackson understands, are actually a feature or phenomenon of Thai culture. The notable lack of theoretical analysis in the limited body of scholarly work exploring Thai cinema, therefore, is due not to a negligent oversight but rather an awareness of the dangers of applying non-Thai theory as a direct tool to explore the Thai context.

The means to ‘translate’ such tools and so distinguish where and how film theory is applicable as a means of defining and distinguishing Thai film is through empirically-based ‘locally grounded enquiry’. Only this can translate theoretical frameworks in order to assess their suitability as tools of inquiry and deploy them accurately within the Thai context. Thus, the crux of this thesis is underpinned by original empirical research. Jackson poses this as a means to avoid the tensions and pitfalls of orientalism when assessing Thai culture within the global context. He states that while Thailand is

sufficiently integrated into global networks to render recourse to notions of pure indigenous culture untenable ... the extent of that integration is an

empirical phenomenon that can only be revealed by locally grounded inquiry (2005:31).

Only through empirical research can an understanding of the distortion of knowledge created through the power imbalances between what Jackson titles as "Western analytical discourses" and "Thai cultural logics" be recognised and repaired (Ibid). The repudiation of Thai cinema's subaltern status as both essentialist culture and poor imitator of Western aesthetics therefore rests upon this 'locally grounded inquiry' that is realised through in-depth research and analysis.

My own approach builds upon this perspective; I remain aware of such difficulties and do not deploy critical frameworks 'unreflectively'. Instead I translate horror film theory models through empirical 'locally grounded enquiry', conducting such research to explore the relationship of the Thai horror film to the structural and theoretical conventions of the Natural Language of horror and assessing the extent it adheres to and deviates from this. This will dispute popular orientalist and Eurocentric interpretations of Thai film by indicating its specific characteristics and the cultural reasons behind them.

Empirical research indicates, for instance, that Tamborini and Weaver's (1996) observation that a separate horror genre was originally created through the Enlightenment, which positioned the supernatural as a frightening violation of 'Natural Law', is not applicable to Thai horror. Contextual research indicates that this division was not as clear cut and the supernatural is still a concrete element in the organisation of rural Thai society rather than a frightening violation. This wider research therefore explains why Thai productions still insert supernatural elements liberally into a variety of genres and are not necessarily concerned with eliciting the emotions of fear and disgust that Noel Carroll associates with the horror genre. An exploration of narrative structure also indicates that Carroll's dominant horror suspense structure is not necessarily present and neither are the cinematography and editing structures that would accompany this. Again, empirical research indicates that both the communal scenario in which Thai films are consumed

and the influence of indigenous media already present have impacted upon texts to create such deviations. Finally, wider research will indicate that such structural deviations can be specifically attached and attributed to the lower-class context, allowing me to theorise that the existence of such characteristics in the contemporary industry functions as a traumatic disruption of bourgeois values by marginalised lower-class Thailand. The empirical research that will form the basis of such analysis involves going back to the post-war era of Thai film in order to locate a film style that is specifically connected to the Thai context and so can indicate such differences.

## **The 16mm era: a characteristically Thai film form**

In addressing the hybridity of the contemporary New Thai industry, I assess the relationship of Thai horror to both the abstract Euro-American Natural Language and also a film style from the post-war era that can be labelled as characteristically Thai. I trace the development of Thai film and Thai horror from this characteristically Thai film style, assessing its formal and thematic conventions and the transformations it has undergone in the latter part of the twentieth century, culminating in the New Thai industry horror films. This illustrates that the New Thai industry is still influenced by this earlier film style. It also indicates the ways in which the contemporary industry continues to remain characteristically Thai within the international context and so legitimately deviates from the Natural Language of film, refuting the disdainful Orientalist attitudes I discussed earlier.

Although it may appear a problematic notion, there is actually a 'characteristically Thai' film style that is recognised by Thai film historians and scholars and can function as a launching pad for defining the relationship of Thai film to the Natural Language of horror. This formed the film style from which New Thai productions take their distinctly Thai



influences that render the contemporary industry so incomprehensible and open to orientalist readings, so forming the baseline from which to begin an analysis of the characteristically Thai film form and its progression into the New Thai industry. This film form continued from around the mid-1950s until the early 1970s, and was almost entirely in 16mm film with non-synchronised sound that was often live-dubbed in cinemas<sup>3</sup>. It functioned within a similar social space as, and with characteristics taken from, traditional indigenous Thai entertainments. Thai film historian and archivist Chalida Uabumrungjit labels this the '16mm era' (2003b:57) and this is the term I will use to refer to both the era and its specific 'characteristically Thai' format.

Thai academic analysts single out this period for its lasting repercussions as the most influential and famous era of Thai film history and the one that has shaped Thai film right up to the contemporary industry. Uabumrungjit (2003b), for instance, dedicates it a specific slot in the history of Thai cinema due to its honing of a distinctive narrative style and appeal to a particular section of Thai society. Likewise in his overview of Thai film history Udomdet refers to this period as "restoration through the 16mm silent film" indicating how crucial it is to the development of Thai film (1990:57). In her PhD thesis from Murdoch University, Thai film academic Patsorn Sungsri labels this the 'Conventional Thai film style' and states that it was largely popular in rural areas and took inspiration from indigenous forms of Thai entertainment which spoke to Thai people in a way that Hollywood could not (Sungsri, 2004:53-57). In another rare academic study of Thai cinema history, former actress-turned-scholar Parichat Phromyothi also refers to this period as 'Classical Thai Cinema'<sup>4</sup> (Phromyothi, 2000). Even after the era drew to a close (a result of specific industrial, economic and technological developments), Phromyothi still recognizes the narrative 'formula' which emerged as being "the prominent characteristic of Thai films" (ibid:25). Indeed all academic writing concerned with Thai cinema history contains lengthy reference to this period and its very specific development and significant influence upon Thai film.

This film form can be defined as characteristically Thai due to its connection to the specific Thai historical context (the 'Thai cultural logics' under which it developed) that determined the form 16mm era Thai film took. Locally grounded enquiry into the development of film in Thailand indicates that the 16mm era was the point at which Thai film first deviated markedly from the overwhelmingly popular Hollywood model and solidified itself as a successful industry predicated upon an alternative style of filmmaking to that of Hollywood. In the following section I will indicate how the development of Thai film led to the creation of such a film form that can be considered characteristically Thai. This will illustrate how I can consider such a style as the bench-mark of Thai film and launch an examination of Thai horror film from this point in history.

In its beginnings, cinema in Thailand followed a similar path in keeping with the history of film worldwide and was not yet distinguishable as a film form and industry. The long and rich history of Thai cinema began in June 1897 with an exhibition taking place in Bangkok less than two years after the famous Lumière brothers Paris showing of 'Moving Picture' images in 1895. As everywhere else in the world, the new 'moving pictures' proved to be successful and before long cinemas had begun to appear, with the first crude buildings set up by Japanese entrepreneurs and then various other companies who established (first in 1919) more permanent buildings (Uabumrungjit, 2001). This new form of entertainment, at first dubbed *Nang Yiipun* 'Japanese Shadows' later changed to *Nang Farang* 'foreign shadows' (a title which continues today) grew quickly due to its immense popularity. In the 1920s cinemas are recorded to have spread outside of Bangkok to outer provincial towns (Wibha 1975, quoted in Hamilton, 2002:288) and by the late 1930s it is estimated that there were around 120 cinemas in Thailand, most to be found in Bangkok (Boonyaketmala, 1992:65). What is considered to be the first Thai production *Nang Sao Sawan/Miss Suwanna of Siam* (Henry MacRae. 1923), actually directed by an American though starring only Thai performers, appeared in 1923, and the first completely indigenous Thai production *Chok Song Chan/Double Luck* (Manit

Wasuwat. 1927) in 1927. More followed (the vast majority of which are now lost) including a number of co-productions between Western filmmakers and the Thai elite that were concerned mostly with state propaganda (Boonyaketmala, 1992:63).<sup>5</sup>

However it was the enormous popularity of foreign films (mostly American), which poured into Siam<sup>6</sup> through Singapore, Hong Kong and direct from the colonial countries themselves, that became significant in forming a characteristically Thai film form. This influx of a sophisticated foreign model that Thai film could not hope to emulate ensured that the exhibition sector received early heavy investment from Thai businesses and entrepreneurs as the key to financial success in Thai cinema. It was therefore able to both support and encourage the surge in indigenous filmmaking that pioneered the characteristically Thai film form during and after the demand for entertainment created by the effects of World War 2.

Thai film historian Boonrak Boonyaketmala, in a little known article that is virtually the only source to examine in detail the early pre-war statistics of Thai film produced in English, displays the *Annual Statement of the Foreign Trade and Navigation of the Kingdom of Thailand* for the years 1938-1940. This reports that in 1939-40 the imported foreign film footage into Thailand totaled 6,895,960 (Boonyaketmala, 1992:68). The *International Motion Picture Almanac*, another original source quoted by Boonyaketmala, notes when reporting on Thailand in the late 1940s that "Pictures from America have 95 percent of the market" (quoted in Boonyaketmala, 1992:67). Indeed the indigenous industry at this time could hardly be called an industry as such: Boonyaketmala's own research indicates that from 1927 to 1945 Thai indigenous productions comprised only sixty-four feature films, a dismal comparison which averaged less than four each year. Therefore, created in 1919, the Siam Cinema Company became, according to Boonyaketmala, "the undisputed czar of film distribution and exhibition in Thailand" (Boonyaketmala, 1992:65), an indication of the rapid spread of this new mass entertainment throughout the (still under-developed) country at such an early period. Theatres therefore became heavily dependent upon the

American productions supplied, furthering the availability and influence of Hollywood at the expense of local production. As in the rest of the world, Hollywood became the dominant model of film for this region and the shadow in which all indigenous filmmaking took place.

During World War Two Thailand endured four years of Japanese occupation. Crucially, the majority of film imports, upon which the industry relied, were halted. The struggling indigenous Thai entertainment enjoyed an upsurge as it had to fill this exhibition space when the supply of non-Thai productions was interrupted by war. Noted Thai archivist and film scholar Dome Sukawong (who founded the Thai film archives and museum) observes that after 1942 with the encroachment of Japanese troops "trade with the allies came to a halt" and so "the cinema business all over the country encountered a shortage of films" (Sukawong, 2001:11) due to the fact that Hollywood provided the vast majority of the films which fed the (very healthy) exhibition industry. New films became scarce, and the lack of Hollywood imports created a gap in the market with cinemas unable to meet the demand for new films and feed the exhibition sector. In order to support the cinema industry and provide new entertainment "the Thai government organized music and dancing to alternate with films. With the shortage of films, stage drama which had flourished alongside films during the silent movie era, returned to cinemas" (Ibid:11). After 1952, when stage performance decreased in the face of renewed filmic competition "several founders of drama troupes turned to producing films" (Phromyothi, 2000: 21). It is at this point that the industry begins to carve itself the beginnings of a characteristically Thai film style that deviates from the Natural Language of the imported Hollywood model. Thanks to the interruption of World War Two a link back to pre-war entertainment was enforced, and a connection to traditional Thai performance entertainment such as Likay theatre and the communal social space it occupied was, to a certain extent, re-established. This connection, which could have been lost due to the previous influx of Hollywood and the growth of the indigenous productions under this foreign model (and

indeed was in other national industries such as Japan, where indigenous elements such as the Benshi or the dressing of male performers as females was phased out very early), was instead solidified, further specifying and uniquely shaping the form of Thai cinema as a characteristically Thai model distinct from the Natural Language of the globally dominant Hollywood model.

The outbreak of World War Two and the specific situation enacted upon Thailand and Thai filmmaking therefore sparked the creation of the 16mm era. This characteristically Thai film form was result of the Hollywood productions that it could not hope to emulate, the healthy exhibition industry they had nurtured and the interruption of World War Two. Instead of the Hollywood model it had been bombarded with, Thai film opted for silent 16mm filmstock with live dubbing, both aspects that further solidified this connection to the specific Thai context. 16mm was the primary filmstock used as the few indigenous Thai production companies that had switched to making 35mm sound productions before the war had been forced to close due to the halted supply of imported filmstock (Sukawong, 2001:12) and the chemical solutions needed to produce film (Udomdet, 1990:57).<sup>7</sup> After the war these few Thai sound studios “were unable to recover” (Sukawong, 2001:12) and were forced to close. These included the Sri Krung Sound film company run by the Wasuwat family, whose new studio and sophisticated equipment was damaged both by the financial crisis brought about by world war II and an extensive flood in 1941 (Udomdet, 1990:57). Crucially however, the smaller film companies that had not been able to afford the technology involved in the switch to sound, and independent producers who had continued to use live dubbers, were able to survive through using the cheap 16mm filmstock available during and immediately following World War Two (Sukawong, 2001:12). 16mm film had been introduced into Thailand by M. C. Sukornwannadit Diskun at the Thai Royal Railway Public Relations Film Division but it was after World War 2 that it became popular due to its low cost and easy processing which did not require the heavy equipment or sound facilities of synchronized 35mm (Udomdet, 1990:57). In 1949 the film

*Supab Burut Suatai/Thai Gentleman Bandit* (M. C. Sukrawandit Ditsakul and Tae Prakartwutisan. 1949) was filmed on 16mm silent filmstock and released to huge success, inspiring other entertainment entrepreneurs and businessmen who had previously been unable to break into the entertainment market due to the expensive facilities needed when processing 35mm, to instead finance cheap 16mm live-dubbed colour productions of popular cinema. Film production therefore grew from 10 per year in the immediate aftermath of World War Two to around 50 in 1956 (Udomdet, 1990:57).

The narrating practice of 'dubbing' is unique to Thai cinema's development, especially in light of its continued use even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in outer provincial areas. The use of sound in cinema from 1927 heralded the death of silent films across the globe and a difficulty soon arose for Thai viewers. Dome Sukawong indicates that

the rise of talkies brought problems to the majority of cinema goers in Siam, because talkies tended to convey meaning through dialogue rather than through images and actions, and most of the audience could not understand any language other than Thai. Within a short while, however, a solution was found, with a Thai translation of the dialogue spoken into a hidden microphone while the film was showing. (Sukawong, 2001:10).

This practice, labelled 'dubbing', is similar to the function of the early Japanese Benshi and became immensely popular. However rather than simply a commentary upon the actions of characters within a story, Thai dubbers brought to life the characters themselves with the practice of dubbing involving the mimicking of up to five or six different character voices by two narrators, one male, one female. Certain skilled dubbers became celebrated in their own right and drew their own crowds, with posters advertising not only the film and its main actors, but also the dubber who was to narrate it. Often the story told bore little or no relation to the original script, and the job of the dubber became one more of entertainment and improvisation than mere translation.

The 16mm era film form, predicated upon an entirely different set of characteristics to the Hollywood Natural Language, was therefore born. The low-cost of production, due to the

cheap filmstock and lack of recorded sound, enabled a record number of films to be churned out en masse. Post-war Thai cinema reached an astounding level of production for such a small and unfunded 'cottage' industry and was to influence Thai film, textually and industrially, for the rest of the century.

This new 16mm industry was so successful that it even continued alongside the reintroduction of Hollywood. The establishment of extremely close-ties with America immediately after World War Two was due to Thailand's close proximity to the communist-influenced countries of Laos and Vietnam. Immediately after World War Two in the 1950s all the major American film companies set up representative offices in Bangkok.<sup>8</sup> They funded 1000 seat cinemas such as The Broadway and the Krung Kasem Theatre, all equipped with air conditioning. The Cathay Cinema also opened in 1958, exclusively screening Taiwan and Hong Kong Chinese productions. The influx of Hollywood films was rapid, and, in 1954, of the principle distribution companies in Thailand, 86.8% were American (Panyarachun, 1954:57). The same year foreign pictures shown, both feature length and short, totaled 1858 while domestic production stood at 127 (a mixture of features and shorts), all of which was in 16mm (Ibid). With its origins as a translation device in the pre-war period, post-war dubbing in film actually became the "the industry standard for Thai film production from 1947 until 1972" (Sukawong, 2001:11). Although Thai authorities were conscious of what they viewed as the 'lack of progress' in Thai films in the use of such dated equipment,<sup>9</sup> the refusal to award filmmakers with any financial assistance continued. While filmmakers expressed their frustration at being unable to progress, authorities merely introduced increasing levels of control in the form of censorship, and a free reign to foreign distribution companies.<sup>10</sup> In 1961 it is noted that "General opinion of Thai producers and exhibitors is that domestic industry is facing crisis" (Madar, 1961c:61), yet despite this dismal announcement (which notably comes from a foreign American perspective), more Thai films were produced than ever.<sup>11</sup> From 1961 to 1976 of the total films shown in Thailand, American ranked first with 32.37%, with Hong

Kong and Taiwan second (21.85%) and Thai productions third at 12.37% (UNESCO 1982:40) a substantial success that indicates the significant foothold of this silent 16mm film industry in Thailand that was so different to the Hollywood model. So while the rest of the world enjoyed synchronized sound and high quality images, Thailand's cinema began to carve its own distinctive and successful characteristically Thai path both stylistically and technologically (Sukawong, 2001:11)<sup>12</sup>.

The distinct conventions of the 16mm era and their connection to the Thai context therefore begin to form a basis from which to define a film form that is characteristically Thai. This then allows me to trace the transformation and development of Thai film from this model into the horror films of the big budget New Thai industry, illustrating how and why they are permeated by this 'characteristically Thai' film form. This historical context will enable me to define it as a film style based upon 'Thai cultural logics' rather than a crude and false imitation of the Natural Language of film.

## **Thesis Structure**

This thesis therefore aims to be a timely investigation into the form and stylistics of the contemporary New Thai industry and the ways in which it differs from non-Thai conventions of film such as the Natural Language of horror. It will illustrate the hybrid nature of the New Thai industry, demonstrating that productions contain elements from both the Natural Language of horror and the earlier 16mm era characteristically Thai model. This will define Thai film as a product of the historical and culturally specific background of its development while also examining its relationship to wider global film discourses. Furthermore, it will illustrate how the 16mm era characteristics that cause the hybrid nature of contemporary Thai film can be interpreted as an expression of and even a traumatic disruption from lower-class Thailand, indicating that the lower classes continue to infuse Thai cultural products despite their marginalised status. This



demonstrates that the nature of Thai film today can be attributed to the divided and conflicted state of Thailand as a nation.

Chapter One begins by solidifying a film style that is historically distinct to Thailand and the Thai context, so enabling a basis from which to begin identifying the differences of Thai film from the Natural Language of horror. It addresses the characteristically Thai film form of the 1960s 16mm era that I have identified as the period in which a distinctly Thai film style was formed. Alongside this it conducts a detailed historical and textual analysis of film in this period so exploring the reasons behind such characteristics and allowing them to be labeled as a distinct product of Thailand and this specific historical context. It deploys film theory models to explore and define the nuances of this distinctive film style, specifically indicating how it differs from the formal conventions and expectations that make up a Natural Language of horror. The chapter also distinguishes how 16mm era horror was a lower class means to respond to and negotiate wider social upheaval, indicating how horror works similarly as a horrific metaphor for wider social anxieties regardless of its formal characteristics. In doing so it connects this film style with a specific social function for a particular group of viewers so that the continued existence of such characteristics in the New Thai industry can be connected back to the lower classes.

Chapter two addresses why Thai film has continued to remain so formally different to the Natural Language of horror after the end of the 16mm era. The chapter takes this film form and its social function and begins to trace its continued existence and development through the development of Thai film in the post-war context and up into the 1990s. Again this illustrates how the 16mm era film form continues to distinguish Thai film from the Natural Language of horror while also investigating how it continues to respond to and negotiate the wider social context for its viewers. While furthering such investigations into the form of Thai film, the chapter also begins to investigate the origins of the disdainful attitudes that this thesis aims to dispute. It illustrates how the 16mm era conventions began to be perceived as an inferior film style to that of Hollywood and are connected to

the entertainment of a tier of society that is deemed as socially inferior. This disputes the attitudes noted previously in my introduction as it demonstrates how they are intricately tied to the social status of viewers and the lauding of American capitalist culture rather than viewing this style as a culturally distinct and adept film form.

The remaining chapters of the thesis examine the hybrid nature of the post-97 New Thai industry. I address the core aims of this thesis as they indicate how the formal influences from the 16mm era continue to permeate contemporary New Thai film and differentiate it from the Natural Language of horror. Chapters Three and Four indicate how Thai film (and horror specifically) in the New Thai industry has now become the property of social elites and promotes ideologically conservative discourses of nationalism and conformity. Chapter Three explores the New Thai Heritage productions and conducts a case study of the successful horror film *Nang Nak* while Chapter Four explores the New Thai films *Zee-Oui* (Nida Sudasna and Buranee Ratchaiboon. 2004) and *Laa-Thaa-Phii/Ghost Game* (Sarawut Wichiansarn. 2006). In all these cases the chapters indicate how these films are hybrid productions that are still permeated by the 16mm era attributes, so accounting for the strange form of Thai film today. Furthermore, I contend that such attributes function as a means to articulate lower-class expression that has been marginalised in this era of blockbuster elite-sponsored films, one that even begins to undercut the ideological message in *Zee-Oui* and *Ghost Game*. This now resurfaces formally to haunt and traumatically disrupt the adherence of such films to the Natural Language of horror.

Chapters Five and Six further explore the interpretation of the 16mm era characteristics in horror films as traumatic expressions of the socially marginalised lower classes. This begins to account for both the prevalence and intermittent occurrence of such attributes in particular films in the New Thai industry, so furthering my investigation into the reasons behind the form of contemporary Thai cinema and thus continuing to rebut the earlier disdainful attitudes.

Chapter Five examines the vengeful ghost films of the New Thai industry, a body of films that does not adhere to the ideology of the Heritage productions but actually critiques the inequality of contemporary Thai society. However, the most successful of these films actually erases the 16mm era characteristics and thus seems to lose the Thainess of this film on the international scene. While bringing Thai film more 'in line' with global horror conventions seems to increase its financial success internationally, it also signals a loss of the hybridity that has come to define the entertainment products of this divided nation in the contemporary age. This indicates that an authentic Thai cinematic identity is to be found in the stylistic practices of the earlier 16mm era which represent the insertion of lower-class Thailand into the equilibrium.

Finally as a means to offset this erasure, Chapter Six investigates the simultaneous resurgence and prevalence in recent years of the 16mm era characteristics and the marginalised lower-class subjectivity they represent. Here I investigate contemporary New Thai films that are not hybrid productions and do not erase such formal attributes but instead fully embrace the 16mm era characteristics and target the lower-class Thai viewer. It then illustrates how the increasing popularity of such films occurs simultaneously with a wider social context of political upheaval in which the Thai lower classes are reasserting their presence in a 'class war' against the usurping of the democratic system by Thai elites, so indicating the source behind this prevalence. Thai film has come full circle therefore to again become the property of the lower classes and a potentially progressive tool for social recognition in this crucial age.

The conclusion draws together the findings of this thesis, specifically indicating that Thai film continues to differ from the Natural Language of horror in a specifically Thai way and that this difference can ultimately be attributed to the unequal and diverse nature of Thai society. It concludes by discussing the further ramifications of this research, including a need for further empirical anthropological work into Thai audiences and an investigation

into the possible links that can be made between the films of non-Western and specifically Southeast Asian nations.

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<sup>1</sup> This term is somewhat misleading however. Chaiworaporn and Knee note that despite the enormous boom in filmmaking, "this is not to claim that there was suddenly a clear-cut "new Thai cinema" movement at that moment" (Chaiworaporn and Knee, 2006:60).

<sup>2</sup> The director also asserts that the international version has "stronger emotional anchors and the dramatic arc of the piece is more solid" (interviewed in Williamson, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> In 1962 *Movie Marketing* magazine reports "Siamese pictures with a few exceptions are all shot in 16mm and colour without sound. This limits earning potential as no export is possible" (Madar, 1962b:49)

<sup>4</sup> Significantly, Phromyothi uses the classical 16mm era as the basis from which to establish a set of narrative characteristics for Thai film in order to mount a comparison with Hollywood and identify specific imported influences.

<sup>5</sup> As so few productions actually survive and even fewer are accessible, a close reading of this early era is impossible and also beyond the scope of this thesis. However, accounts from Thai film historians illustrate some of the very early specific trends of native productions. Thai film scholar May Adadol Ingawanij, in an article that provides another rare and insightful analysis of a neglected period in Thai cinema history, cites Jamroeanlak Thanawangnoi's Thai language history of Thai cinema, which "suggests that the musicals of the interwar years aspired to the techniques and styles of the classical Hollywood musicals" (Ingawanij 2006:148) in particular referring to *Phleng Wan Jai/His Sweet Melody* (Khun Wichitmatra. 1937). This is set in a foreign land and contains many American musical numbers such as the Rumba and the Quick Waltz which were hitherto unfamiliar to Thai viewers. These observations indicate that even in the early pre-war period (before an industry as such had been solidified) it was still specifically the instances of visual excess and stimulation, such as the musical numbers, which were taken from the ever-present Hollywood and absorbed into indigenous productions.

<sup>6</sup> The name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand in 1939.

<sup>7</sup> The first sound studio in Thailand was built by the Sri-Krung Sound Film Company and the first Thai 'talkie' *Long Thang/Going Astray* (Wasuwat Brothers. 1932) had appeared in 1932.

<sup>8</sup> As Sukawong states "among the first companies to arrive [from America] were distributors of Hollywood films who formed a group in Bangkok" (Sukawong, 2001:12). In the 1950s, along with the vast influx of American cultural products, all the major American film companies also set up representative offices in Bangkok. These included Columbia Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn Mayor Inc., Twentieth Century-Fox Inc., Paramount Pictures Inc., United Artists Corporation, Universal Pictures, Warner Brothers Seven Arts Inc., and Walt Disney Production Inc. (UNESCO, 1982:40). An UNESCO report indicates that these were by far the best organized group of foreign film importers in the country, with few equal competitors.

<sup>9</sup> In 1956 concern was raised by Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram when it was noted that "between 60 to 80 million baths flowed out of the country annually in the form of remittances as a result of Thai earnings by foreign motion pictures" (Far East Film News, 1956a:11). Although Phibun expressed a desire to "raise the standard of domestic films" (Far East Film News, 1956b:43) and calls were made to build production studios for the use of domestic filmmakers, a cost estimated at around 20m baht, the Far East Film News describes this as 'far-reaching' (ibid) and little was done to actually aid the indigenous industry.

<sup>10</sup> The finger was also pointed at the monopolization of the market by Hollywood: "foreign pics are also blamed for decline, critics citing unrestricted screening time, though in fact, current Thai production could not fill even 10% quota despite relatively inexpensive cost of producing in 16mm." (Madar, 1961c:61)

<sup>11</sup> The true number will never truly be known as few were ever saved but merely discarded after use.

<sup>12</sup> There is some suggestion that this under development was actually partly caused deliberately by American interests. In the post war period, much interest was shown in South East Asia as a future area of Hollywood distribution. This included the drafting of the first proposed South East Asian Film Festival in 1953. This was based on the need for Hollywood productions - which were becoming increasingly lavish and expensive - to seek overseas revenue and the importance of American domination in this geographical region (which was to intensify dramatically). Although its objectives were stated as being "to contribute to the development of friendly relations among the nations of Southeast Asia" (Rengo Film News Vol. 1, 1953:5) a message from Eric A. Johnston (president of the Motion Picture Association of America) in 1954 reads "Since three out of every four American films do not earn their costs in the American market alone, we must have foreign markets. I am fighting day after day to constantly increase this market and add to revenue return to Hollywood" (Johnston in Far East Film News, 1954:21). An apparently equal offer to distribute Southeast Asian pictures is also made by Johnston in an article entitled "America's free market is open to quality motion pictures from Southeast Asia" (Johnston, 1953:17). However just week later the same paper then includes a warning and virtual guarantee against the possibility of any negative effects to imported Hollywood productions by the participating Southeast Asian countries that "while we heartily concur with the idea of the Federation and its avowed purposes, the film industry in each participating country is still too far from gaining foreign markets to instigate irritations aimed at

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imported pictures" (Ireton, 1953: 7) describing the volume of the Southeast Asian cinematic exchange which it states it aims to foster as being 'wishful thinking'. The article then threatens a removal of financial support -labelled as 'friendly cooperation from overseas'- if this situation were to change and imports were affected. This illustrates very much that while the Southeast Asia Federation and its festival was set up by the MPAA under the guise of cultivating indigenous cinema through offering wider release, American distributors and the MPAA actually had a definite interest in the continued underdevelopment and even possible suppression of this cinema. And throughout this period, a close eye was kept on the native industry, to the extent that ironically American sources can tell us far more about the history of Thai cinema than many incomplete Thai records.

# Chapter One: The post-war 16mm era

In order to advance my contention that contemporary Thai film is not unsophisticated or flawed but has developed from (and is infused by) a very different model of filmmaking, this chapter examines the film form and stylistics of the 1960s 16mm era film form to illustrate how this differs from the supposed Natural Language of horror. This period of film is a direct product of the post-war Thai contextual situation and developed along very different lines to that of the dominant Euro-American model. So that a strong sense of this film form and its relationship to the Natural Language of horror will develop, chapter one assesses the differences and similarities of 16mm era productions, with their frequent insertion of the supernatural ghosts and spirits, to the formal and ideological characteristics of horror as defined by theorists. I argue that the 16mm era distinguishes a model of film that can be considered characteristically Thai and that deviates from the Natural Language of horror. This is one that can also be distinctly attributed to the lower-class rural Thai context.

This examination will therefore define the 16mm era horror film form and its relationship to the Natural Language of horror, enabling a conceptualisation of Thai horror through Thai cultural logics. This will then allow me to identify and analyse these characteristics in the blockbuster internationally-exported contemporary New Thai industry. I can then demonstrate both how the contemporary industry retains characteristics from this era and also that these can be attributed to the lower-class context and are therefore representative of the social inequality that exists within Thailand today.

Firstly I illustrate how the narrative format of the 16mm era productions blends various 'numbers' within a single film and so does not define the supernatural as a violation of 'Natural Law'. I indicate that this is connected to the wider context of lower-class Thailand, one in which the supernatural still functions as a means of social organisation. This blending distinguishes the 16mm era productions from the overall emotional affect by

which horror has come to be defined. Then, I illustrate how the suspense structures that Noel Carroll (1990) labels as the erotetic narrative are also not present and that the productions instead follow a causal structure that can be attributed to influences from more traditional forms of entertainment. This will be coupled with an examination of the 16mm era viewing context, as I argue that the narrative and film style of productions are instead designed to function within a public space of shared pleasure, rather than the isolated voyeuristic scenario of the Natural Language of horror.

Finally I explore the ideological themes and discourses that are addressed in the 16mm era productions and indicate how these relate to horror discourses explored by theorists in spite of such formal differences. I argue that the monstrous women depicted in these productions represent the repression of female autonomy at a time when this was of growing significance and therefore perform a comforting (and reactionary) mediation of such upheaval at a time of social trauma. Again I illustrate how this is attached to and can be attributed to the specific context of lower-class Thailand.

## **The 16mm era Narrative Structure**

To begin this examination, I concentrate upon the narrative structure of the 16mm era, a primary element in distinguishing 16mm era Thai film from a Natural Language of horror. Thai academic Patsorn Sungsi refers to the popular style of the 16mm era as the 'conventional style' (Sungsi, 2004:53) a term she takes from an interview with Thai film researcher Dome Sukawong who considers the 16mm era's defining characteristic to be the blending of many different genre traits to elicit a range of emotional states from the viewer. Sukawong uses the metaphor of Thai food (a staple ingredient in many Thai idioms and allegorical phrases) to describe this, as Sungsi reports from an interview she conducted:

Dome Sukawong explained the conventional style as *Krob Touk Rot* which means "full of flavour". He declares that Thai film is like Thai food, which blends a lot of flavour in one meal. The conventional Thai film blends emotions and emotional states such as melancholy, excitement, arousal and romance. (Sukawong, 2001 cited in Sungsi, 2004:54)

Phromyothi also describes this structure, again inspired by Sukawong's historical research: "One could find love plot, life in crisis, violent/action scenes, nerve-breaking thrills, tragic moments with an addition of sex, glamour, gags, slapstick, and a happy ending" (Sukawong 1990, quoted in Phromyothi, 2000:23).

These many thrills and emotional states which Sukawong refers to as 'flavours' ('*Rot*'), I will refer to as 'numbers'. 'Numbers' are graphic and visceral instances of excess that do not appear to contribute to an overall narrative structure, but rather are stand alone instances of spectacle that produce extreme physical reactions such as disgust, wonder, shock or even comedy. 'Numbers' is a term taken from the musical and musical sequences that Linda Williams (1989 in Freeland, 2000:256) uses in her analysis of pornography to refer to the instances of sexual acts which do not contribute towards a cause and effect linear narrative but nevertheless elicit very strong physical emotions from the viewer as stand alone episodes in their own right. When deploying this term to explore the visceral instances of the contemporary horror film, Cynthia Freeland (2000) defines them as such:

numbers are sequences of heightened spectacle and emotion. They appear to be interruptions of plot-scenes that stop the action and introduce another sort of element, capitalizing on the power of the cinema to produce visual and aural spectacles of beauty or stunning power. (Ibid:256)

This statement is both accurate and appropriate to describe Sukawong's many flavours.

This blending of so many diverse emotional 'numbers' within a single production runs counter to the standard formal conventions that define and distinguish horror as a genre and a supposed Natural Language and begins to differentiate 16mm era horror films from this. The deviation from this Natural Language that can be attributed to Sukawong's



'conventional style' includes the narrative format the films follow, the emotional affects upon the viewer and the cinematography and editing structures that are deployed to depict such 'numbers' and elicit such emotions. All of these aspects follow particular structures and conventions recognised as staple characteristics of the Natural Language of horror by theorists.

## **'Natural Law' in the 16mm era Productions**

For instance Sukawong's narrative style of blended genre 'numbers' begins to distinguish 16mm era films from the way in which the horror genre has come to be understood and defined, so indicating the first major deviation between characteristically Thai horror and the Natural Language of horror. For instance, although plenty of horrific and monstrous elements abound in 16mm era productions, these do not appear to dominate films and are often not even the main source of attraction for the audience. The many diverse 'numbers' ensure that the supernatural and its horrific incarnations is not necessarily the main attribute by which the productions can be defined, problematising the construction of a distinct horror genre through terms and structures taken from the EuroAmerican Natural Language.

This is apparent in the 1959 production *Mae-Nak-Prakanong* (Rangsir Tasanapayak. 1959) which follows the well-known and endlessly remade Thai ghost story of Mae Nak.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the film there are plenty of horrific elements: the horror of the husband Mak when he first sees the rotten corpse of his wife instead of the beautiful woman he thought he had been sleeping next to, the monstrous elongated arm of Nak in an infamous scene where she extends it to reach out and the murders committed by the gruesome corpse-like Nak herself in order to maintain her secret. However alongside this there are also

numerous scenes of comedy, such as the slapstick numbers performed by the fool. Together with these comedic and horrific numbers there are also heavily exaggerated romantic numbers such as the early shy and flirtatious courting and then marriage of Mak and Nak. These diverse 'numbers' are also accompanied by the opening action-packed joyous communal temple celebrations, at which Mak and Nak meet and the unrestrained mass fistfights which ensue from fighting gangs after the celebrations. Finally, the film ends in a tragic separation scene, when Nak and Mak must be parted and Nak climbs sobbing into a pot sealed with sacred cloth to be forever separated from the world of the living. This final scene in particular is drawn out to include the two lovers calling to each other from across the divide, extending the tragic moment into a number that elicits strong sympathetic emotions from the viewer.

This blending immediately differentiates the 16mm era film style from the means by which the horror genre was originally created and defined. It has been argued that modern horror was originally distinguished and created through the Enlightenment's formulation of 'Natural Law' and the 'age of reason'. This introduced a rational and scientific means to explain society, which began "with the assumption that the real world is governed by 'natural law' and we live our lives according to this belief" (Tamborini and Weaver, 1996:3). Horror is therefore created when this 'Natural Law' is violated and "life as we once knew it starts to function according to laws we do not understand and over which we have no control" (Ibid:3). However the 16mm era productions insert supernatural occurrences and attributes alongside other genre traits within a single production, indicating that not only is the distinguishing of horror blurred due to a variety of other genre numbers but the supernatural is not necessarily the result of violating this 'Natural Law'.

In 16mm era productions the ghosts and spirits appear among characters and village life as often merely an addition to, not the subject of, the narrative and can be inserted alongside other genre numbers quite comfortably. Although characters within the films do

express great fear at the actions and existence of malevolent spirits they do not appear to exhibit surprise regarding their actual existence. Time is not spent constructing a 'world' or reality in which the spirits exist and often no attempt is made to explain them as entities. The blending of supernatural 'numbers' comfortably alongside other genre 'numbers' also ensures they are not necessarily the focus of attention or emotional stimulation. There is therefore no violation of 'Natural Law' when they appear in the 16mm era productions and interact with or influence characters or situations, so distinguishing 16mm era Thai productions from the Natural Language and conventions of horror.

Clearly, in opposition to Tamborini and Weaver's account of the horror genre, the supernatural can interject into 16mm era productions quite legitimately and become a part of the blended numbers without violating 'Natural Law' or stretching credibility or even necessitating the creation of a separate and distinct supernatural diegesis. The lack of horror or reaction so often displayed by characters towards this appearance in the 16mm era productions also seems to confirm this. Although the supernatural can and indeed does create horror in texts, it is not as an automatic violation of 'Natural Law' (of which it is a part), but only when spirits are depicted as being deliberately disgusting (as in the rotten corpse of Nak in *Mae-Nak-Prakanong*) or commit malevolent acts (as in Taa-Nii's bloody and violent revenge in the film *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* (Nakarin. 1967)), both aspects that are not necessarily connected to a violation of 'Natural Law' through their supernatural status.

This can be seen in *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii*. The film begins with the spirit Taa-Nii's fall from the sky and her adoption by a childless older village couple. Notably after such an event there appears to be no need to construct a world or existence behind the strange event of a young woman falling from a light in the sky; instead the film launches straight into the story of her escapades within the village. Likewise the film *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* (Pan-Kam. 1969) begins with two bumbling comical characters in a graveyard discussing their fear of ghosts before a phantom suddenly appears and scares them without any explanation or further reference to this ghost, so illustrating the presence and acceptance of this element

within everyday society. This can also be applied to the orphaned snake child of *Nguu-Phii* (Saet-Thaa-Phak-Dee. 1966) and Mae Nak herself, who while being certainly horrific also do not obviously violate any natural codes or laws but simply exist.

Non-malevolent entities are even accepted without any significant fear or surprise: in *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* the hero does not appear to express any fear at the heroine's voice contacting him from beyond the grave, only grief at her new predicament and motivation to help her. In the same film, the sudden appearance of the heroine's dead mother as a ghost in the final showdown scene is also not cause for fear: even when she strangles the evil stepmother in front of everybody this is instead regarded as a moral (even happy) conclusion to the episode. The existence of the spirit itself is not an event that requires an extended reaction and this supernatural number sits right next to and does not interfere with the final marriage of the leading couple Kangwan and Karaket. Indeed the evil stepmother's own daughter Eau (Karaket's stepsister) even falls in love with another male character immediately after witnessing her mother's extraordinary and brutal death.

## **'Natural Law' in the wider Thai context**

As stated earlier, the characteristics which differentiate the 16mm era from the Natural Language of horror are ones that can be attributed to the wider Thai context of social beliefs and prior-existing forms of entertainment. Exploring these wider contextual elements allows me to label the 16mm era as an entertainment form that is both specifically Thai and a product of the lower-class environment. Making such a connection therefore disputes disdainful attitudes that interpret Thai film within a Eurocentric hierarchy and enables me to interpret such characteristics as the resurgence of a marginalised lower-class perspective in my analysis of the contemporary New Thai industry.

For instance this blending of genres can also be recognised in other popular Thai entertainments from which, theorists indicate, the 16mm era took inspiration. Like the 16mm era productions these also do not revolve around the usurpation of 'Natural Law'. In her thesis, Sungsri formulates a link between the 16mm era and the Thai fairytales medium of *chakchak wongwong*. The traditional oral *chakchak wongwong* folktales have been recited and performed for over 300 years and have continued to remain a part of rural Thai society. This entertainment functioned within a similar environment to that of the 16mm era films and was consumed by a similar audience. It likewise displays similar characteristics to the 16mm era film form in its liberal insertion of supernatural elements. As Sungsri illustrates:

*Nitan chakchak wongwong* are full of supernatural events and fantasy; for example the human prince who falls in love with a demon princess in *Prarot Maeree*; golden flowers falling from the heroine's mouth in *Pikuntong*; A woman who gives birth to a conch shell in *Sang Thong* (Sungsri, 2004:79).

Sungsri notes these elements as having been transferred across to film and the many instances of ghosts and spirits in the productions noted so far attest to this.

It is my assertion that the liberal insertion of supernatural elements alongside other genre 'numbers' in Thai entertainment and their acceptance by characters, can be attributed to the position of the supernatural within the specific rural Thai social situation and belief system, one very different to the violation of 'Natural Law' by the post-Enlightenment monsters of Europe and America. The blending of genres in the *chakchak wongwong* and 16mm era productions can be attributed to the concrete and 'natural' status of the supernatural within Thai society and the accepted existence of the supernatural realm alongside the everyday world in the rural Thai context. Rather than the post-enlightenment violations of 'Natural Law', the blending of the supernatural and horrific 'numbers' suggests that 16mm productions have much in common with pre-eighteenth century archaic horror. These fables, fairy tales and myths functioned as a means to

explain and organise the ambiguity of the wider world, in a similar way to that exercised by spirits in rural Thai society. While the change enacted by the eighteenth-century 'Age of Reason' involves "a growing disbelief in things that could not be observed" (Tamborini and Weaver, 1996:6) and a scepticism and rationalism which ensured that the fantastic must now be explained empirically or curbed, this historical division does not appear so clear-cut in Thailand, with the spirit world still continuing to occupy the social position and function that Tamborini and Weaver afford to archaic horror.

Rather than a violation of 'Natural Law', beliefs in the supernatural realm and spirits are instead a very natural and physical part of rural Thai life to the extent that they significantly influence social organisation and personal well-being, even on an official level<sup>2</sup>. This accepted existence originates from a pre-Buddhist indigenous animist discourse that exists alongside and has merged with official Theravada Buddhism. In this belief system the person is constituted as made up of the physical body and the *khwan*. The *Khwan* is literally the essence of the living, a person's soul or even the "symbol of life" (Kitiarsa, 1989:53) and Kitiarsa corresponds this concept to the mind and body duality in 'Western thought' (Ibid). Animistic Beings known as *Phii* (Tanabe, 2002:44) can interfere with and disrupt the dual relationship between these two aspects of the person and cause mental or physical illnesses, most commonly through possession. *Phii* are defined as "invisible supernatural beings" (Kitiarsa, 1989:56) and can be ghosts of the dead, spirits of the living, free-floating spirits or spirits of sacred objects (Suwanlert, 1979). They can be benevolent, malevolent or simply indifferent, and many require offerings in order to pacify them or elicit protection and good fortune. *Phii* can therefore influence society and social organisation to the extent that buildings, businesses and many aspects of human behaviour are conducted in accordance with their existence and preferences. This very concrete presence of *Phii* is one which clearly indicates the existence and influence of a supernatural 'reality' alongside that of the real, notably one that is not perceived as unnatural or has to be constructed as a concept. It simply exists.

This belief system is also particularly prevalent within the rural village environment and notably all the examples from 16mm Thai films take place within or originate from the confines of the rural village which also made up the primary audience for 16mm era productions. Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul notes how Thai elites have historically associated spirits and superstition with the rural village and its occupants, who are referred to as *chaobannok*. The *chaobannock's* physical distance from the location of political and religious authority – the centre of *dhamma* – and existence outside the “umbrella of merit” places them alongside the *Pa* (“the domain beyond normal social and political power” (Winichakul, 2000:537)) which “was inhabited by wild animals and spirits” (Ibid:537). The rural village therefore “was remote from the spiritual centre and adjacent to the *Pa*” (Ibid) situating it alongside the dangerous realm of the *Phii*. This distance from the centre of *dhamma* also lessened the spiritual quality of people, making them more susceptible to the interference of *Phii* and indeed Suwanlert notes that *Phii* possessed hosts are not only village dwelling but “are characteristically of low educational and socioeconomic status” (1976:120). Suwanlert connects these spirit beliefs and possessions to rural areas and even when writing in 2006 when urban spirit cults had long been established, ethnographic studies such as that by Burnard, Naiyapatana and Lloyd still indicate that their participants link such beliefs with those in rural areas (2006: 745).

This connection indicates the extent to which 16mm era productions were influenced by this particular lower-class social group, one very much outside of globalized modernity experienced by urban areas and so which remained distinctly Thai. This rural context then further connects the 16mm era's film style to the surrounding social context, allowing it to be labelled as both 'characteristically Thai' and a lower-class form of entertainment.

## **The 16mm era and the 'erotic narrative'**

This lack of defining a separate horror genre means that the 16mm era excludes many of the formal textual characteristics associated with the Natural Language of horror by theorists. Specifically, productions do not follow the key narrative format or emotional affects that make up the Natural Language of horror, aspects that further distinguish Thai film from this globally dominant model.

This includes the narrative structure of the productions and the emotional affects created through this. In his 1990 study investigating structure in the horror film, Noel Carroll refers to the dominant structure of the horror film as the erotetic narrative. This is a suspense narrative of question and answer fulfilment. Carroll believes that this dominant form permeates horror to such a degree that it is in fact the main method of connection for the vast majority of popular narratives (1990:134). Within the erotetic narrative, Carroll places the engineering of 'suspense' as an important element that this popular narrative uses to create the 'art-horror emotion' that the genre aims to elicit. He defines suspense as "a function of the structure of the narrative question as it is raised by factors earlier in the story" (Ibid:137), meaning that this popular erotetic narrative is one created through the setting up and later answering of questions. The erotetic question-answer format fulfils a practical function: "at the level of narrative effect, the introduction of processes of proof and discovery are ways of securing and holding the audience's attention" (Ibid:128). Tan also agrees with this, stating "suspense is a quality of the stimulus: it is a narrative procedure, the result of which is an increase in interest in the viewer." (1996:101). Carroll then expands upon the crucial creation of suspense and how it is woven into the narrative structure:

in the main, suspense in popular fiction is a) an affective or emotional concomitant of a narrative answering scene or event which b) has two logically opposed outcomes such that c) one is morally correct but unlikely and the other is evil and likely (1990:138).

For Carroll, it is ultimately these 'processes of discovery' that make the erotetic horror narrative pleasurable.



Examples from *Mae-Nak-Prakanong* and *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* indicate that this process of discovery is largely absent as a source of engagement from the ghost and spirit films of the 16mm era. Instead of engaging the viewer through Carroll's proof and discovery structures, it is the aesthetic of attraction that is the primary source of stimulation over that of narrative integration. In both productions this emotional display takes precedence as a source of engagement over that of posing questions as to what the characters will do next or what solution will be constructed for the situation. The diverse 'numbers' do not appear then to actually contribute towards advancing the plot of the film.

For instance, the final ending separation scene of *Mae-Nak-Prakanong* may be a long and emotionally draining episode but it actually communicates very little in terms of advancing the story. The histrionic and drawn-out tragic separation of the two lovers does not contribute towards the construction of a cause and effect linear narrative and creates neither suspense (the delaying of the affect) nor mystery (the obscuring of the cause). The action that restores a final state of equilibrium (Nak climbing into a pot and so signifying her, and Mak's, acceptance of her new status as 'the dead') is secondary in significance to the emotional elongated number (their separation).

Likewise in *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa*, the number in which it is revealed to the male protagonist Kangwan, as he walks around the Taj Mahal in India, that his love interest Karaket has been killed, takes second place as a story event to the spectacle of a sophisticated foreign location and its shiny modernity. Carrying a briefcase, Kangwan rides in a car and wears a suit – the very embodiment of new foreign urban sophistication. When later informed by the ghostly voice of a dead Karaket that she needs his help, he stops walking instantly and calls her name while putting his hands to his face and looking shocked. The Taj Mahal even features in this elongated sequence, ensuring that rather than setting up a situation that disturbs the equilibrium and engages viewer curiosity as to how this will be restored, the scene in fact functions as a number, celebrating the spectacle of India and

emphasising Kangwan's impressive position within it, as well as his romantic devotion to Karaket.

## **Cinematography and Editing in the 16mm era**

The style of filmmaking employed by the 16mm era is also radically different to that associated with the Natural Language of horror and its suspenseful narrative. The Natural Language of horror uses cinematography and editing to create both the suspenseful narrative of question and answer fulfilment and the specific emotional affects it elicits. For instance a familiar structure in the cinematography and editing of classic horror films is that associated with the point of view (POV) shot and its corresponding editing. Through what Brannigan calls the "classic POV shot"<sup>3</sup> (1975:55) the spectator is positioned within a particular character's point of view.

Horror films such as *Jaws* (Spielberg. 1975) or *Halloween* place the camera and spectator in the position of the Killer and/or Monster's point of view and also in the perspective of the unaware or escaping victim in order to raise questions that contribute towards the construction of the suspense narrative. Suspense is created through a 'disjunction in knowledge' between the audience and the character whose POV they are experiencing. According to Neale, this involves 'suspending' "the spectator's knowledge, position, and sense of certainty" (2004:359) as the viewer does not know what the action will be or the motivations behind it or even who or what exactly they are. This raises questions that need answers, ones that combine with the larger overarching suspense narrative.

Neale particularly singles out "marked but unmotivated point of view shots" (Ibid:359) as a feature of classic horror films. This is a subjective tracking point of view shot that follows the gaze of a killer or monster stalking their potential victim. The opening of John

Carpenter's *Halloween*, for example, uses this shot, in which the child killer Michael, who is hitherto unknown to the viewer, murders his promiscuous sister. *Jaws* (in particular the first part of the film in which the shark has not yet been physically revealed to the human characters or viewer) also makes use of this, in which the potential victims are caught in the gaze of and stalked by a slow moving underwater POV shot from the shark. Likewise when the shot originates from the victim's point of view the opposite is true: the viewer shares their position of not knowing when or from where the monster will appear and attack, raising more questions to set off the suspense narrative.

For instance in *Halloween*, Michael's threatening status is marked by the Final Girl Laurie's inability to capture him completely in her gaze throughout the film. Again this is similar to the first half of *Jaws*, when the shark too cannot be seen or captured or prevented from killing by its human victims. The killer/monster cannot be caught in the subjective POV shot of the victim, an aspect which not only indicates their power over the victim at this stage in the narrative but also maintains suspense through continuing the spectator's disjunction in knowledge between the POV of the victim and the aggressor. For instance the viewer already knows from POV shots that the escaped insane murderer Michael has singled out Laurie as a potential victim and has her in his sights long before she does. Similarly in *Jaws*, due to the extended underwater point of view shots, the viewer knows the shark will strike long before the paddling victim or the protagonist hero Chief Brody does. Both Laurie and the swimmers in *Jaws* are largely unaware they are caught in a fatal POV shot, one which they cannot 'look back' at. Suspense and tension is created while the viewer waits for the revealing of this threat, this knowledge, to the victim.

However in keeping with Sukawong's conventional narrative structure and the privileging of the aesthetic of attraction over that of a suspenseful narrative, the cinematography and editing of the 16mm era Thai films does not display the POV shot and the corresponding structural characteristics that are associated with this Natural Language of horror. The 16mm era's concentration upon the aesthetic of attraction over that of an engaging

narrative influences not only the narrative format but is also reflected in the 16mm era style of film making, specifically that involving cinematography and editing.

The film style of the 16mm era productions, in contrast, takes the ethos of a drawn-out 'display' through a series of objectively presented numbers, rather than an isolated internal psychological experience eliciting its affects through narrative structure and POV shots. The cinematography and editing therefore favours a presentational style to display its numbers rather than POV structures to further a suspense narrative. Instead of continuity editing systems such as shot-reverse-shot or the POV shots and structure, the 16mm era films deploy what Tom Gunning would term as independent automate shots (Gunning, 1991:66) that consist of long shots and takes directly in front of the characters that create a perspective similar to that of a stage audience. Actions and interactions of characters are depicted in all-encompassing long shots without cinematography and editing working to highlight their movements or exchange; those speaking emphasise their drama through histrionic gestures within the frame, rather than being assisted by cinematography. This conveys meaning primarily through histrionic performances depicted in independent automate long shots and takes rather than through editing, a completely different set of cinematic conventions to those involved in creating the suspense narrative of the Natural Language of horror and which mark the 16mm era productions as specifically Thai.

This style can be illustrated through a scene from the film *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii*. A scene 26.32 minutes into the film and running for 4.30 minutes depicts four characters in a café buying and eating coffee and noodles. The characters are the overweight female proprietor, and her three customers (two men and a young woman) as well as two extras visible behind. Despite its considerable length, this scene does not contain any POV shots or corresponding structures, there are very few one-person reaction shots and no direct point-of-view shots. Instead there is reliance upon Gunning's 'independent automate shots' in which meaning is conveyed through histrionic performances.

For instance, the scene begins with a frontal long shot containing all the characters. The camera is positioned almost directly in front of the action (figures 1. and 2.) and, although it obeys the 180 degree rule of continuity editing, it largely and overwhelmingly remains in this long shot.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

Instead of emphasising the conversation and participants through medium or medium close-up shot-reverse-shots, the camera continues to encompass the entire scene and

characters largely within a single automate shot. For instance when the character of Taa-Nii leaves the cafe, the camera does not move to follow her progress or dissect it through closer-shots but instead remains in the same static long shot, prompting the audience to follow her path within the shot rather than directing their gaze (figure 3. and 4.).



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

Likewise when a conversation takes place between the proprietor and the male customer on the left of the group (figure 5.) the frame does not shift to emphasise this within the scene even though it is between only these two characters.



Figure 5.

The final ending slapstick number also demonstrates how film style relies upon performance rather than cinematography and editing to depict its 'numbers'. In the altercation over the bill between a customer and the proprietor, one man falls over after being hit on the head with a pan by the proprietor and proceeds to run out, the other is threatened by her with a machete to pay his bill (figure 6).



Figure 6.

This all takes place within a single independent automate shot that is also a particularly long take, in which they continue to argue with particularly expressive and wide gestures. The final independent automate shot of the proprietor threatening the last customer with the machete lasts for over thirty seconds (specifically 37), during which he pleads with her and eventually wriggles out of his sarong to escape her grip and runs offscreen clutching his underpants (figure 7., 8. and 9.).



Figure 7.



Figure 8.





Figure 9.

## A 'Causal' narrative structure

The lack of suspense in 16mm era productions therefore clearly distinguishes this model of film from the Natural Language of horror through both its narrative structure and corresponding film style. Instead of a question and answer structure through which to hold the viewer's attention, the varied emotional 'numbers' fit into a familiar overarching and very broad narrative structure that is recognizable in the vast majority of 16mm era productions. A more appropriate description of the prior-known, attraction-orientated 16mm era film form is that of 'causation', which Carroll positions as an alternative to the erotetic structure.

Despite his very forceful statements and precise method, Carroll does entertain the possibility that there exist exceptions or alternatives to his rule and other structures or forms around which horror can be based. He himself acknowledges some limitations to his analysis, and that alternative forms of narrative which utilise non-erotetic structures to elicit effects from the audience can exist. He defines causation as "The causal entailment of later scenes by earlier scenes" (Carroll, 1990:131) and this seems more appropriate as

a description of the 16mm era's blended 'numbers' within this prior known standard narrative structure. Echoing this, Freeland also recognises that 'numbers' can offer an alternative to that of suspense or mystery structures as a means of eliciting emotional affects from the viewer: "as the numbers take over, narrative and emotions are subordinated to spectacle as a goal in its own right" (2000:262). The varied physical thrills of the emotional 'numbers' in 16mm era films such as *Mae-Nak-Prakanong* and *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* echo this observation: they appear detached from the overarching narrative and instead serve as a series of loosely connected thrills – Sukawong's conventional narrative and the Thai film style. However Carroll argues that in horror it is the erotetic structure that takes prominence and in fact

it is implausible to suggest that scenes follow each other in most popular narratives by a chain of causal entailments... most succeeding narrative scenes are causally under-determined by what precedes them in the story (1990:131).

This then further indicates the difference of 16mm era productions from horror conventions.

The causal narrative of the 16mm era productions follows a prior-known familiar structure, indicating how it is not predicated upon suspense or mystery. The productions centre upon the family and local community: a brave, clever and strong yet also kind and gentle hero arrives into a village and falls in love with a shy or immature village woman. At the same time, there is a disruption to village equilibrium by an outside force which also impacts upon this leading couple and must be subdued before they can eventually be together. This disruption can be caused by bandits, ghosts or other scheming women who want to marry the hero themselves. The story follows the first meeting of the couple, then their courtship and eventual marriage or engagement which is entwined with their defeating of the force which seeks to prevent them from being together and the restoration of harmony and order.

For instance, this overarching causal prior-known structure can be seen in *Jaawm-Khon* (Daen Krisada. 1969), *Nguu-Phii*, *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* and *Phi-Saht-Sen-Haa*. In the cowboy film *Jaawm-Khon* the handsome hero meets the heroine when she tries to shoot him, mistakenly thinking he is one of the ruthless gangsters threatening the village. He then joins in the fight against the gangsters to restore equilibrium and eventually settles down with her in her village. In *Nguu-Phii* the couple meet at the village *songkhram* celebrations and quickly fall in love. However the heroine's stepsister, who is actually a snake-spirit who was orphaned at the beginning of the film, later seduces the hero and lures him to her cave in the forest. The heroine eventually rescues the hero from his trance in the snake-woman's cave and together they defeat her. *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* begins with the spirit Taa-Nii's expulsion from the heavens and adoption by a local couple. She later pursues the hero and attempts to come between him and the heroine. Similarly to *Mae-Nak-Prakanong*, the story follows her trail of destruction before she must be subdued and accept her status as other-worldly. In *Phi-Saht-Sen-Haa* the hero and heroine meet at the local graveyard when she is laying flowers for her dead mother. When their courtship begins, the heroine's stepmother (her father's evil second wife) encroaches upon this equilibrium by killing the heroine in order to have the hero marry her own daughter. Equilibrium is then restored by the hero, who through his superior knowledge is able to journey into the afterlife and bring her back.

In all these films the hero arrives in the family or community at around the same time it has been affected by negative influences (such as bandits or ghosts or evil co-wives) and then after his assisting against this threat, becomes a part of it through his attachment to the heroine. For instance in the ending of *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* the hero Kangwan successfully retrieves the heroine Karaket's spirit from hell and the final scene is their marriage, so completing their happy ending. The evil stepmother is also strangled by Karaket's mother (who appears as a ghost) and the bumbling ignorant greedy comedic maid who helped her is shot.

Attached to this broad and prior-known structure are the various 'numbers', which take precedence as a source of entertainment and engagement over any erotetic process of discovery. The prior-knowledge inherent in such a familiar overarching narrative privileges 'numbers' over that of narrative as a source of stimulation and engagement, so ensuring that there is little ambiguity around the outcome of 'answering scenes'.

## **The Causal Narrative in Indigenous Thai Entertainment**

This prior-known causal structure and emphasis upon 'numbers' is also present in indigenous Thai entertainment existing prior to and alongside the 16mm era. As I illustrated earlier, it is from these entertainments that 16mm era Thai film takes many of the characteristics that distinguish it from the Natural Language of horror and which label it as a product of the surrounding Thai context and therefore as characteristically Thai.

For instance, *Likey* theatre - a popular Thai stage performance of both dance and drama - contains similar stock characters to the 16mm era productions. With their distinctive pre-constructed traits and roles within a story, these recurring and familiar stock character 'types' contribute towards constructing both the prior-known causal structure and the various 'numbers' attached to this. These did not require a specific introduction, rounded personality or point-of-view as they came already imbued with familiar stock traits and conformed to roles already defined (both physically and behaviourally) and which slotted into the overarching narrative. The prior-knowledge embodied within such stock traits therefore favours a causal structure, rather than an erotetic question and answer format which would need to attach a certain amount of surprise and mystery to the characters, their motivations and destiny.

Sungsri's analysis separates out these characters into very specific roles and groups:

The characters of the conventional Thai film style include the main characters *phra-ek* (hero) and *nang-ek* (heroine), the supporting characters, *phra rong* (hero supporting) and *nang rong* (heroine supporting), and the villains *toa kong* (the male villain) and *toa itcha* (the female villain), or *daw youa* (the sex star) and *toa talok* (the comedian) (Sungsri, 2004:55).

These come with specific connotations to which the performance, appearance and narrative trajectory of the character must conform and so can be recognised in 16mm era productions. This can be seen in productions such as *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa*, where the *phra-ek* is instantly recognisable from the opening scene as the handsome, rich and clever Kangwan (played by the familiar and dependable actor Mitr Chaibancha) who engages the shy *nang-ek* in conversation at a local graveyard. His good looks, intelligence and affluence are recognisable through the actor's suit-like costume, his status as a religious student and later his travels abroad. The devotion of the *phra-ek* to the *nang-ek* Karaket (played by Mitr's onscreen partner actress Petchara Chaowarat) is absolute (he even uses his religious knowledge to journey into hell and retrieve her soul) as is his loyalty, which is evident when he must force himself to follow tradition and keep his promise by marrying the *toa itcha* Eau when it is believed that Karaket is dead.

Karaket herself embodies all the characteristics of the *nang-ek*: she is shy, retiring, passive, pure, less well-off and unaccusing, merely accepting her position in life as subservient to the wishes of her father and stepmother. Opposite to this is Eau, the *toa itcha*, who is a spoilt and stubborn girl led by her evil mother (the first wife). Her desperate pursuit of the *phra-ek* is regarded as unfeminine and coarse; she notably lacks the passivity of the *nang-ek*. By the end of the film her evil mother is punished for killing both her stepdaughter Karaket and her co-wife Karaket's mother while Eau (thanks to the fact that she did not commit any actual bad deeds) is allowed to get together with the *phra-rong* and so is redeemed. The final scene of the film is the marriage between the *phra-ek* and *nang-ek*. A *toa talok* also associates with Kangwan when he is in the village, acting as a foil for jokes yet also affecting the plot through providing helpful observations to the *Phra-ek* that come from prior familiarity with the area and knowledge gained through age.

In this example each of these characters conforms to their prior-known roles through their actions and attitudes, all of which follow and contribute to the overarching narrative with few surprises and virtually no actions that would raise or answer questions.

## **The causal structure and the lower-class Thai audience**

The prior-known structure of the 16mm era productions that differentiates this model of film from the suspenseful Natural Language of horror can be attributed to the diverse rural audience to which it had to appeal. Again this indicates how such characteristics are distinct to the lower-class Thai environment, allowing me to identify them as representative of this marginalised subjectivity in the contemporary context.

This is evident through a study of the *chakchak wongwong* folktales. These also display the causal structure and overarching prior-known narrative and, similarly to the 16mm era productions, they are also centred on the family and village community. Significantly, Anthropologist Siraporn Thitathan (1989) attributes the overarching structure and subject matter of the *chakchak wongwong* to the rural Thai audience amongst whom the 16mm era was also popular, indicating that this causal structure and its many 'numbers' is caused by the diverse village audience to whom the stories had to appeal. Existing analysis of the *chakchak wongwong* thus offers an explanation for this 16mm era attribute and why it differs from the Natural Language of horror.

This traditional oral entertainment form follows a similar rough structural outline: a focus upon the community and a good and pure hero with physical and mental prowess caught up in negative forces and a pure heroine with whom he will eventually get together. The complex network of social and family relationships and the strong focus upon family roles in the texts provides multiple access points for the many extended family members and

villagers in the rural context. This is an important reason behind the continued popularity of the *chakchak wongwong* in the Thai village and the resurgence in popularity of the *chakchak wongwong* in rural areas when other folklore entertainments "have all but disappeared in the face of cultural and social change" (Thitathan, 1989:5). For Thitathan it is the variety of family roles and relationships that allows *chakchak wongwong* stories such as the *Sang Thong* to achieve such wide appeal amongst the rural audience, who differ in age, sex and social status<sup>4</sup>. The *Sang Thong* story involves polygamy, the relationship between the wives, the hero, the in-laws and other family members and continues beyond a single generation. These many complex family roles and conflicts ensure that "the characters are ambivalent enough to be interpretable" and so "it is possible to argue for the 'rightness' of both parties to conflict" so enabling different interpretations from different viewers (Thitathan, 1989:12).

This has likewise been passed on to the 16mm era productions which contain a similar diversity of roles and perspectives and were also immensely popular amongst an up-country audience. Just about all the 16mm era productions examined situate their characters and events in relation to the heroine's or (more rarely) the hero's family and similarly to the *chakchak wongwong* place emphasis upon instances of jealousy and conflict that arise from the family situation. Together with this, polygamy is also a practice addressed in some films. The film *Praai-Phitsawat* (Chaluy Sri Rattana. 1968) involves the ghost of the hero (who died in a car crash but is later brought back to the living world) spying upon his parents. He is able to witness the harsh treatment of a servant by his mother and also the discovery that his father possesses a secret second home with a beautiful young woman and another son and daughter. Similarly in *Phi-Saht-Sen-Haa* the heroine is poisoned by her father's evil second wife who has previously killed her mother (the first wife) and now wants her own daughter to marry the hero (who is of course in love with the heroine). In *Giao-Faa* (Sanaan Khraprayoon. 1966) a character experiences a fantasy-like flashback in which he is a king with many wives. *Jao-Mae-Takienthong* (Director unknown. 1966) involves the heroine (who is a slave) becoming one of her

master's mistresses in order to protect her lover. Together with *Nguu-Phii*, *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* and *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* this also involves other women fighting against the heroine for the hero's love. These many diverse characters with their complex relationships and conflicts can provide both different interpretations and entry points into the text as well as emotional 'numbers' for the diverse viewers, indicating that Thai film's difference from the Natural Language of horror is deeply rooted in the Thai cultural logics of its surrounding context.

## The emotional effects of horror

The lack of Carroll's horror suspense narrative therefore distinguishes the 16mm era film form from the Natural Language of standard horror conventions. As I have demonstrated this changes the cinematography and editing in the 16mm era productions as well as the structure of the narrative, and significantly these changes can be attributed to the lower-class Thai context. Another means by which the absence of such a narrative begins to distinguish 16mm era productions from the Natural Language of horror is through the blending of different numbers within a single production. This means that the primary emotional effects by which horror is defined are also often absent.

Noel Carroll identifies 'fear' and 'disgust' as being the main two emotional effects elicited from the viewer by the horror genre, something created through deploying erotetic structures. Carroll describes this as the 'art-horror emotion' and defines it as an "occurent emotional state, like a flash of anger" (1990:24). Although at times the numbers of the 16mm era do create this (for example when Nak suddenly turns into a rotten corpse in *Mae-Nak-Prakanong*), overall the productions are not aimed specifically towards constructing fear or disgust and instead elicit a variety of blended emotional affects.

An example of these blended emotions is in *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa*. The film opens with two comedic fools in a graveyard discussing their fear of ghosts. In comedic fashion, a ghost



then immediately appears and they run away comically. This is then followed by the main couple Kangwan and Karaket, who meet for the first time nearby in the same graveyard when Karaket is placing flowers upon her mother's grave. A shy, chaste yet intense romantic number begins with Karaket telling Kangwan the story of her mother's death. Later in the same film, Karaket's father's evil second wife attempts to kill her by putting a poisoned drink in her room. A frightening number ensues in which her dead mother sends ghouls to protect her. Alongside this, comical 'numbers' are also created through the clumsy and stupid lower-class maid who assists the stepmother. There is also a particularly notable romantic sequence of Kangwan and Karaket on a river boat together. This is an extremely long romantic number that notably serves no narrative purpose whatsoever. A traditional Thai musical *Luk-Tung* soundtrack plays over it and the characters merely smile at one another endearingly while they float along the river together.

I argue that this blending of emotions places the 16mm productions, despite their frequent supernatural episodes, outside notable definitions of 'horror'. Indeed this lack of a single broad emotional response distinguishes the 16mm era from what Ed S. Tan calls 'classic genre descriptions', which, not only in film but also in literature and drama, traditionally take their roots from the kind of emotions they engender in the viewer or reader (1996:3). Tan goes on to illustrate that "One need only think of the dictionary definition of words like *tragedy* and *comedy*, in fact, we all know the meaning of terms like *thriller* and *tear-jerker* without even reaching for a dictionary" (Ibid). This is reflected in the similar origins of horror. Carroll (1990) states that the Latin and French origins of the word 'horror' are steeped in the concept of the emotions it is supposed to elicit through its reference to the 'state' of the viewer, immediately placing 16mm era Thai film outside of this category through its variety of emotional 'numbers' and states. Whereas this generic classification of 'horror' describes a particular internal subjective experience that the viewer takes from the film, the closest Thai designation equivalent is *Nang-Phii*, which translates as ghost or spirit film, a term that rather describes its objective content. This produces an emphasis

that is less upon subjectivity and the viewer's response and more upon the physical content of the film, so indicating how the genre is not defined by the emotions it elicits.

## **'Numbers' and the wider Thai context**

The 16mm era productions therefore differentiate from the Natural Language of horror by placing emphasis upon the objective content of the film as a source of stimulation rather than generating subjective fear and disgust through a suspense narrative. As I have indicated, this can be demonstrated through both the term *Nang-Phii* and the reliance upon a variety of numbers. Such a characteristic can again be attributed to the wider context of Thailand and lower-class society, specifically the diverse audience and specific viewing scenario in which the film functioned. Again this allows me to connect such attributes to the lower-class Thai scenario, a connection that is extremely significant to my examination of their resurgence in the elite-dominated New Thai industry.

For instance the deployment of a variety of stimulating numbers in 16mm era productions is due to the financially precarious position of the 16mm era industry as a lower-class form of entertainment. The films had to reach the widest possible audience but one that was also a starkly diverse and physically and culturally divided population. Such wide-reaching appeal was necessary due to the lack of government support for the film industry, which meant that the 16mm era had to achieve a secure wide appeal in order to be financially viable. Boonyaketmala describes the 16mm era as no more than a 'cottage industry' due to its lack of financial or governmental support (1992). In such a high-risk and fragile unsupported industry, experimentation or artistic creativity was not a viable option and so numbers were relied upon to create wider appeal.

In order for the unfunded and hence financially-insecure 16mm era productions to be a success, they also had to bridge the cultural barriers within Thailand and appeal to a widely differing population with many different traditions. Again, the reliance upon

numbers and the aesthetic of attraction allowed them to do this. Wannu Wibulswasdi Anderson talks of Thailand being an important location for the converging of many different cultures and traditions from across Asia:

Islam, Mahayana Buddhism, Brahmanism, Christianity, and other belief systems of several ethnic and tribal groups have introduced other ideational and cultural traditions, making Thailand a multiethnic and multi-cultural society. (Anderson, 1989: 1)

Anderson then illustrates the numerous cultural traditions that exist:

Just as Indian epic, 'The Ramayana,' and Chinese novel 'The Three Kingdoms,' and the Javanese literary hero, Panji, have become parts of the Thai literary and artistic traditions, so are the folklore and folklife of Thailand enriched by the mosaic of these diverse cultural traditions (Ibid:1).

The idea of Thailand's position as a 'crossroads' emphasizes the very distinct communities and cultural groupings which had been merged together into a single nation. Central, Northern, Northeastern and Southern Thailand all possess their own traditions, histories, food, entertainment and variations upon the Thai language. These stark differences were a result of the various early pre-modern kingdoms in the region and the early movement of peoples across the Southeast Asian peninsula.

These differences were not only ethnic and linguistic divides, however, but were also caused by class and employment distinctions. Writing in 1962 Wilson comments

Thai society is (still) characterized by a gross two-class structure, in which the classes are physically as well as economically separated... The rural agrarian segment is separated geographically from the urban ruling segment. The agrarian segment is, in the main land-owning and survives by a quasi-subsistence economy. The ruling segment is salaried (when its members own property, this is usually urban or sub-urban) and lives on a cash economy. (Wilson, 1962, quoted in UNESCO, 1982:38).

The 16mm era's reliance upon numbers and the aesthetic of attraction can be attributed to the need to appeal to this wide range of viewers and communities that made up the

diverse Thai nation. Seiji Udo, a Japanese man married to a Thai woman and living in Thailand during the 1970s, gives an account of his observations of his wife's family shop in Bangkok's Chinatown which operated as a film wholesaler to supply the showmen who would travel to the outer provinces and show films. His explanation for the variable blended format of Sukawong's conventional narrative is the differing audience the films must be able to appeal to:

from the standpoint of film production, it is necessary to produce films on a low budget that appeal to the general public in both cities and rural villages. As a result, their material is so full of different elements that the overall point becomes unclear. (Udo, 1990:3)

Sungsri also provides a link between the blended format and the wide ranging audience, stating that "The varieties of genres are created to satisfy the demand of different audiences" (Sungsri, 2004:15-16).

Echoing Udo and Sungsri's observations, this wide appeal was achieved through privileging the aesthetic of attraction and deploying a variety of 'numbers'. This enabled viewing pleasure on a basic and dependable visual level and so could engender the productions to a wide-range of audiences. The slapstick comedy, supernatural scares, action-packed fist-fights and overly melodramatic romance sequences are all easily understood and appreciated as standalone instances regardless of background. Linguistic or cultural barriers can be overcome through the use of the many stimulating moments of spectacle blended together and taken from different musical, horror and action genres. It was therefore the diversity of Thailand that shaped the 16mm era, a contextual connection that makes this a lower-class 'characteristically Thai' film form that is distinct from the conventions of the Natural Language of horror.

This hypothesis is reminiscent of Miriam Bratu Hansen's explanation of the differing make-up of America as being one of the reasons behind the wide-reaching global appeal of American cinema<sup>5</sup> (Miriam Bratu Hansen, 2000:340). Apart from the economic, political

and industrial reasons, American cinema was so successful in so many different societies worldwide from such an early age because its format and style had to already be attractive to such a wide ranging variety of indigenous and immigrant communities within the nation itself<sup>6</sup>. Thai films (although certainly in no financial or technical position for export on the level of Hollywood) similarly managed to appeal to a very broad and differing indigenous population within Thailand by utilising particular traits and aspects that could bridge barriers and engender the widest appeal – in this case the aesthetic of attraction. It was this that enabled the 16mm era to be so successful, and this is possibly one reason why its attributes and distinctions have continued to be utilised and are still so noticeable in the contemporary industry.

## **The Thai viewing context**

As is the case with the diverse audience, the lower-class viewing scenario also contributed to developing such 16mm era characteristics and differentiating this model of film from the Natural Language of horror. Again this attaches the 16mm era film style to this particular context in preparation for exploring the reasons behind its existence in the contemporary industry.

Targeting the rural audience involved functioning within a certain type of cinema and viewing context, one that engendered a communal atmosphere of 'shared pleasure' that Gerald Fouquet describes as 'specifically Thai' (2006:53). As stated earlier, the 16mm era achieved most of its appeal outside of major cities in rural villages and outer towns. Significantly, the film viewing scenario within this context shaped and influenced the form and style of the 16mm era films. This was very different to the context in which the Natural Language of horror was viewed and to which a significant body of film (and specifically horror) theory has been shaped. This viewing context that is associated with the Natural Language of horror has spawned an entire body of film theory that, I argue, is not an

appropriate means to explore Thai film due to its (largely unspoken) reliance upon what Miriam Hansen calls the 'classical principle' (1994:136).

Horror in the Euro-American context was originally consumed through the formal conventions of the novel, which encouraged a solitary singular relationship between the reader and text that had to be consumed without distraction or interruption. This also continues in the standard film viewing scenario which also invokes a singular relationship between the viewer and film that Miriam Hansen alludes to as 'institutionally regulated' due to its ability to control the spectator's gaze. This is known as the 'classical principle', which is 'the controlling of film as a fundamental product and commodity' (1994:136)<sup>7</sup>.

Hansen refers to the classical principle as functioning within a 'private space'. The standard scenario of consuming cinema is that of being within this private space under the classical principle. This involves the viewer being isolated within a darkened room and closed off from outside influences. They are compelled to remain silent and enjoy an intense private and psychological relationship with the events unfolding on the screen. To do otherwise results in a diminished viewing experience that can potentially lose important story developments that depend upon such undivided attention.

Significantly, this 'private space' of consumption also shapes the formal characteristics of the texts. The intense singular scenario of the novel and the viewing scenario of the 'classical principle' favours the construction of the subjective cause and effect narrative and the positioning of the viewer as a subjective 'eye' or point-of-view woven into the text rather than an aware communal stage audience. The isolating nature of the classical principle also allows and encourages the viewer to follow subjective suspense narratives that require intense attention and concentration, illustrating how the formal characteristics of the Natural Language of horror are deliberately tailored to this scenario.

However the 'classical principle' is a historically and culturally specific viewing model, not a 'natural' state for watching film. It began to be recognised and explored as an element of

film in the 1970s when Hansen illustrates that film theory broke with earlier theorizing to concentrate not on "textual structure or ontologies of the medium" but instead upon "processes of reception and spectatorship" (1994:134). This eventually solidified into the body of theory known as Screen Theory. The concentration upon this particular scenario solidified a certain model of spectator and viewing practices that soon became dominant. Originating from Laura Mulvey's highly significant 1975 article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Screen Theory concentrated upon the relationship between the text and the spectator and integrated psychoanalysis with feminist film theory to argue that the camera takes upon itself a masculine gaze that positions the viewer as a voyeur, positioning women in film as objects to be looked at. This theoretical branch therefore limited the study of film to a particular scenario that is actually dependent upon a specific cultural and historical viewing context.

Much academic analysis of horror from the 1970s to the millennium all took the Mulvey-esque paradigm of Screen Theory as the basis from which to construct a theoretical framework on the representation of women in general and their treatment in horror in particular. The cinematic viewing scenario as the 'classical principle' becomes an absolutely crucial (and largely unacknowledged) element in such theorisations. Without this the entire schema is rendered invalid, as the voyeur positioning upon which it is predicated depends entirely upon the equating of the camera's gaze with the directly positioned and uninterrupted viewer.

Nonetheless despite this deep contextually-specific relationship, Screen Theory came to dominate film studies to an almost excessive degree<sup>8</sup>. A significant amount of horror film theory in fact stems from the influences of this school and indicates that the positioning of the camera's 'eye' as the voyeuristic gaze of the viewer seems to be automatically assumed without question. Jill Nelmes illustrates well how this scenario has underpinned the working assumptions of film studies and the theorisation of the audience. She states that the analysis and exploration of spectatorship is "primarily concerned with the way the

individual is positioned between projector and screen in a darkened space” (Nelmes, 2010:144) indicating the supposed position of these elements as ‘natural’. Nelmes’ statement that “when the lights go down and the film credits appear we are suddenly alone” (Ibid) indicates the hegemony of this particular scenario and its corresponding film form within film studies that the ‘we’ envisioned by theorists is actually confined to a particular historically and culturally specific viewing scenario.

However the 16mm era’s viewing scenario was starkly different to the relationship and scenario of the dominant classical principle upon which Screen Theory is based. This begins to provide an explanation for its difference to the Natural Language of horror as well as indicating how Screen Theory cannot be deployed to analyse Thai film which takes its form from a very different viewing scenario.

The characteristics of 16mm era Thai film can also be attributed to the specific viewing scenario. This requires an alternative model of consumption, one that can be found in Hansen’s analysis surrounding the emergence of “institutionally less regulated viewing situations” (1994:136). Hansen recognises that the classical principle is fast becoming obsolete with the changes in both venues and viewing ‘space’ (Ibid:135) that can be attributed to wider changes in society and technology that challenge the dominance of this scenario. This change she identifies through the consumption space of the films, a space which concerns the atmosphere and context of reception as well as the social function of the film itself and the viewer’s positioning within it (their level of freedom to walk around or talk for instance). The weakening of the classical principle requires analysis not predicated upon this and other concepts derived from classical Hollywood cinema. Hansen states that these new developments “require very different theories of reception and identification to those predicated on classical Hollywood cinema and the American model of mass culture” (Ibid:137). Writing when the impact of new technology and the growth of non-filmic media and its accompanying academic exploration (such as television studies) was becoming increasingly significant, Hansen explores how the shift from the



isolated 'private space' of the cinema towards a new 'domestic' sphere has impacted upon and changed the interaction between viewers and film (Ibid:135). This 'domestic' sphere transforms the 'private space' of the cinematic scenario (that the Natural Language of horror has adapted to function within) into a 'public space' which engenders alternative textual cues and a film form such as that of the 16mm era.

16mm era Thai productions were designed for and exhibited in a 'public space'. This was a communal scenario typical of the rural upcountry viewing context. This begins to identify a wider contextual source behind its emphasis upon the aesthetic of attraction that can be labelled as 'characteristically Thai' as well as further distinguishing Thai film from the Natural Language of horror. Talking of the period roughly between 1960 and 1990, Gerald Fouquet states that Thai cinemas are divided into 4 categories (2006:52). He begins with 'First class theatres' which are the most similar to familiar mainstream cinemas and were all located in Bangkok<sup>9</sup>. Below this category, he positions 'Second and Third class theatres' which occupy the surrounding provinces of Bangkok and other major cities such as Chiang Mai. Finally he described 'Itinerant cinema', which involves temporary showings by travelling cinemas in the upcountry provincial villages and small towns<sup>10</sup>.

These lower-class and itinerant cinemas of rural and suburban Thailand engendered a viewing scenario very different to that in which the Natural Language of the horror film functioned. In all four of these categories, Fouquet crucially identifies a 'specifically Thai' atmosphere of communal pleasure quite different to the classical principle under which horror was consumed. In this the cinema is a public space of activity and not necessarily the main focus of attention. This is present most strongly in the latter categories, in which Fouquet notes the terrible quality of the showings: reels snapping, catching fire, getting lost, running too slowly or too fast, and stresses how this does not seem to bother the audience, who actually rarely stay seated for long and are instead constantly talking, laughing, eating and socializing. This was a social occasion which engendered a 'characteristically Thai' atmosphere in which a communal shared pleasure amongst the

audience was a crucial goal. The atmosphere is one of informality and communal enjoyment and “resembles more that of a local fete or fair than that of a film projection such as we usually know it” (Fouquet, 2006:54).

The film is not designed to compete against this scenario. Instead this adds to the cinema-going experience, creating *sanuk*. The audience is involved in producing this *sanuk* element, a word most often translated into English as ‘fun’ but which actually covers a range of emotions and feelings, but basically Fouquet suggests, stems from or culminates in ‘shared pleasure’ (2006:57). Juree Vichit-Vadakan’s studies into Thai cinema audiences state that the many interruptions of children or chattering viewers throughout the showing are not a distraction from the events on-screen but instead contribute towards the experience of shared pleasure (Vichit-Vadakan [1977] quoted in Fouquet, 2006:54). The audience actually enjoys the many comments and communal interactions with the film:

A crowded movie house is not a passive viewing of the actions which take place on the screen, but an ‘event’, where causal and also very emotional comments are made; where outbursts of emotions (laughing, crying, cursing, screaming) are given free rein; and where exchanges of opinion are common (Vichit-Vadakan [1977] quoted in Fouquet, 2006:54).

The show is “as much the social event that this performance creates or brings along, and it is therefore about the audience itself” (Fouquet, 2006:57). The audience enjoys such freedom to behave as it wishes and “watch what it wants, when it wants” turning to and from the screen at will. Its actions are an extension of the show, and as a result “in moments in which the audience participates, it does it intensively because it feels directly involved.” (Ibid).

The 16mm era film style therefore adapted to a context that engendered characteristics very different to Euro-American conventions of the Natural Language of horror. Films instead developed characteristics that could both function within and contribute towards an atmosphere of ‘shared pleasure’ crucial to enjoyment in the rural and lower-class Thai

audience. The blended causal narrative structure and its emphasis upon the aesthetic of attraction was designed to function within this less regulated scenario and cultivate its shared pleasure, a context in which erotetic suspense could not succeed. The 16mm era film style is one tuned to elicit audience participation and create the all important *Sanuk* as the frequent and varied use of spectacle 'numbers' and the wide range of emotional affects invoke very physical responses in the audience that connect the experience on a communal level. The action, horror and comedy 'numbers' built around a loose plot with familiar characters and story developments allowed this communal atmosphere to continue. Likewise the prior known story with its stock characters and predictable plots ensures that viewers can turn away from the screen to indulge in other activities (talking, eating) without diminishing the viewing experience. Major events in the narrative are also often stretched over long scenes: in *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* the scene where the heroine is bitten by a snake placed by her evil stepmother is drawn out and elongated to an extent that seems almost pointless and does not engender any suspense or mystery, yet this ensures that it can still be appreciated and absorbed in an environment where the film must function in the midst of a rowdy and distracted audience. An extraordinary length (an element that Seiji Udo criticises) is also a very evident 16mm era characteristic: *Nguu-Phii* (first shown 1966) lasts for 2 hours 16 minutes and *Praai-Phitsawat* for 2 hours 32 minutes. Audience interest is sustained through the varied distractions in the communal situation of shared pleasure. These aspects all engender a communal experience from which to derive 'shared pleasure'.

The oral commentary of the dubber also contributes towards distinguishing this viewing scenario from the classical principle. It allowed a continuation of this shared pleasure and further connects the 16mm era with the indigenous Thai entertainment already present. Fouquet cites live dubbing in the 16mm era as a means through which a bridge between the text and audience is constructed to make the film relevant to the immediate world of the audience<sup>11</sup> (2006:57). By offering up their own informal commentary upon the text and inserting references to popular (or even local) culture (that can also be conducted in the

mother tongue of the local audience [Fouquet, 2006:43]) the dubber can connect the immediate situation with that on the cinema screen and even make it specifically relevant to the context, enabling access to Fouquet's 'shared pleasure' through this participation. As Sukawong understands, the dubbing would sometimes bear little connection to the original story, with dubbers choosing to reference local events or create humorous situations themselves that were not necessarily synchronous with the actual events unfolding on the screen (Sukawong, 2001).<sup>12</sup>

## **The viewing context in indigenous Thai entertainment**

This typically Thai atmosphere of shared pleasure is one that can be traced to other indigenous Thai performance entertainment. This emphasises Thai film's connection to a culturally specific entertainment model that runs counter to the Natural Language of horror.

The specific design of the 16mm era texts to cater for a communal audience reflects the dominance and popularity of communal entertainment in Thailand. Literature was not a popular medium and instead theatre, puppetry and radio, all forms based on communal rather than individual enjoyment, were for various reasons popular much earlier than the novel (which actually spread fairly late in the century) among the general population.<sup>13</sup> With the spread of modern media and entertainment, it was radio in particular, then film and later television, which were the popular modern media throughout the country and which (in the context in which they were consumed) can notably all engender shared pleasure through their communal scenario of consumption.

The formal connections between these various entertainments are evident through the communal social event and objective positioning of the audience. The earlier observations

from Fouquet and Juree Vichit-Vadakan of the communal atmosphere within the rural and lower-class cinemas are ones akin to the festivals and fetes in which traditional indigenous entertainment also functions. Fouquet suggested that the success of early Thai indigenous performance lies in the ability of the performer to respond to the audience and their world, an aspect that further creates the crucial 'shared pleasure', illustrating the importance of this aspect to the success of Thai entertainment. The presence of a single dubber providing voices for so many different characters was also familiar and well established in Thai entertainment, being "similar to the method of narration used in Thai classical masked drama, in which a narrator was used because face masks prevented the actors from speaking for themselves." (Sukawong, 2001:10)

The shadow-puppet play is another medium which operates as a communal event, shares the necessity of a narrator and from which Thai film even takes its Thai language designation: that of *Nang*<sup>14</sup>. Koanantakool also identifies the oral commentary – a possible origin for the dubbing convention in 16mm era films – as absolutely crucial to the success of the Thai Shadow Puppetry entertainment, as it is this improvisation that allows a direct communication between the puppeteer and the audience through dialogue and jokes (Koanantakool, 1989:43). This indicates another connection between other forms of distinctly Thai entertainment and the 16mm era through both the methods used and the common atmosphere engendered. This connection with other Thai entertainment forms further indicates how uniquely and characteristically Thai the 16mm era productions are.

## **A Presentational Film Style**

The cinematography and editing style of the 16mm era is also connected to the communal rural Thai context and the cultivation of shared pleasure within this. I indicated earlier that the lack of suspense structures in the 16mm era distinguish productions from the cinematography and editing structures of the Natural Language of horror. Now I indicate that the cinematography and editing of 16mm era productions follows a presentational

style that reflects the position of the 16mm productions as a communal entertainment form and an objective display. Again this makes the film style characteristically Thai and specifically connects it to this lower-class rural context.

As I have indicated, the isolated and uninterrupted 'institutionally regulated' voyeuristic scenario of the classical principle encourages the viewer to follow a specific point of view (constructed through POV shots and the continuity editing system). This is entwined within a suspense narrative and functions to raise questions that require answers. However Fouquet's typically Thai atmosphere of itinerant cinema with its communal activities of talking, laughing and eating does not create this. Instead the cinematography and editing of the 16mm era film style is appropriate for the aware communal audience in the same way as a vaudeville or stage performance situation, reflecting the status of the film as an objective display rather than a subjective experience.

The 16mm era productions place the viewer in a similar position to that of a communal stage audience whose attention is guided by performance (the exaggerated histrionic gestures of the proprietor and her customers) rather than the roaming 'eye' of a camera edited together through different shots. Within these independent automate shots it is the histrionic movements of the performers that draw the viewer's attention in the same way as with a stage audience: the viewer's 'eye' moves within the shot, rather than being framed by it, again reminiscent of a stage performance or display.

The use of 'independent automate shots' in which the viewer's 'eye' can roam adheres to theatrical conventions in recognising 'the viewer' as a communal group, rather than an isolated individual. Likewise the disjointed editing (while likely the result of technical flaws), disrupts the possibility of constructing a voyeuristic diegetic world through a POV structure and suspenseful narrative, and instead serves to maintain the viewer's awareness of the illusion, similarly to a stage performance.

In the scene from *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* that I analysed earlier for instance, the camera never moves from its frontal position and remains positioned in the viewpoint of a vaudeville or stage audience. It then continues this shot for long takes. Incidences such as the beginning comedy exchanges between the proprietor and the male customers and the final pan-banging sarong-machete incident elicit their affects overwhelmingly through the exaggerated gestures of the performers and their performance. This takes place *within a single shot and take* therefore relating their meaning directly to the viewer, rather than having a series of fractured shots and their relationship to each other constructing it. This gives a jerky and disjointed feel to the film, immediately disrupting the diegetic world for the viewer and so inadvertently reinforcing the artificiality of this as a construction. However none of this appears to disrupt the viewing experience, and instead builds an awareness of this 'display' in the same way as a vaudeville or stage performance, elements that again emphasise the 16mm era's link with indigenous stage performance rather than the Natural Language of horror, so labelling it, once again, as characteristically Thai.

The 16mm era is therefore radically different to the conventions of the Natural Language of horror. It does not define a distinct genre that can be labelled as horror but rather blends many genre traits within a single production. Nor does it follow the narrative conventions by which theorists recognise horror is structured but follows a causal narrative of diverse 'numbers'. It also does not place emphasis upon the primary emotions from which the label of horror is derived. The cinematography and editing is also structured in keeping with a stage performance and does not deploy standard horror mechanisms such as the Point of View shot or position the viewer as a voyeur. Significantly such characteristics can all be connected to the specific lower-class situation through both its wider context and the indigenous entertainment already present.

This begins to formulate a model of the 16mm era film form that can be deployed to identify such characteristics in the contemporary New Thai industry. This can demonstrate

the hybrid nature of contemporary Thai films that are pulled between these two models and so provide an explanation behind the disdainful attitudes towards contemporary Thai horror films from those outside of the audience. It also allows me to connect such characteristics with a traumatic resurgence of the lower-class subjectivity in post-97 New Thai cinema, one that has been marginalised in the contemporary era yet, as these productions indicate, cannot be entirely erased.

## **The themes, discourses and political categorisation of 16mm era Thai film**

Despite these radical formal differences however, there do exist similarities in the wider social themes and discourses that both 16mm era Thai horror films and the Natural Language of horror address. In a similar way to the Natural Language of horror, the discourses of 16mm era productions and the political categorisation of such themes function to negotiate the wider context for viewers. In doing this the productions continue to address the lower-class audience and negotiate the lower-class context. A close examination of the themes and discourses of 16mm era productions therefore begins to illustrate how entwined these productions are with the lower-class experience, not just structurally and formally but also in the topics they address. This analysis then allows me to situate characteristically Thai film as a product of the lower-class environment not only structurally but also thematically. I can then trace its development through the ages in my later chapters, indicating how it shifts to be the property of elites in the New Thai industry which then attempts to marginalise the lower-class perspective. This then allows me to interpret the disruptive structural 16mm era characteristics as a traumatic resurgence of this ignored social group.



# Women as monstrous in 16mm era productions

One common motif that is shared by both the Natural Language of horror and the 16mm era productions involves a continued recurrence of subject matters and discourses that depict the female as monstrous, fearful and having a distinctly unsavoury connection to the supernatural. As an examination of both the Natural Language of horror and the 16mm era indicates, this characteristic can be attributed to the wider patriarchal context and specifically the upheaval endured by lower-class Thai society in the post-war era.

In her analysis of the American horror film for instance, Linda Williams connects the horror monster with the female, stating that rather than male sexuality, figures such as Dracula, Mr Hyde and King Kong actually represent “feared power and potency of a different kind of sexuality (the monster as double for the women)” (Williams, 2002:63). Barbara Creed’s deployment of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection to explore the American horror film takes this even further when it states that horror texts actually originate from and continue a long tradition of “ancient religious and historical notions of abjection” (Creed, 1993:9) (ones that are both globally and historically wide-reaching) that associate the feminine with an impure abject and so create a recurring motif and discourse of the monstrous feminine.

This connection between the supernatural and the female is also present in the 16mm era productions and is evident in just about all texts that engage with the supernatural and the monstrous, indicating this link between the two models of film despite their radical formal differences. In *Nguu-Phii* the terrifying and seductive snake spirit is female, in *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* the sky spirit Taa-Nii is female and in *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* it is the young woman Karaket who is taken into the afterlife and her mother who exists as a spirit and controls

minions. Finally in *Mae-Nak-Prakanong* it is the wife and mother Nak who becomes the terrifying ghost (and rotten disgusting corpse) and refuses to pass along to the afterlife.

In both the Euro-American Natural Language of horror and the Thai 16mm era, this demonization of the active desiring female can be attributed to the imposition on the female of a predetermined social role by the surrounding patriarchal system. There is, it seems, a similarity between these two models of film on an ideological level despite their formal differences. This includes both an association of the female with an undesirable monstrous and archaic abject that violates and disturbs borders and an othering of her when she exhibits characteristics that do not follow patriarchal constructions.

Firstly, Creed and Kristeva's monstrous feminine abject is directly linked to patriarchy, in particular paternal law. Creed states that the horror film reinforces patriarchal ideology through constructing the female as a monstrous 'other' (1993). This argues that in patriarchal societies abjection works to separate the child from the abject mother in order for it to enter the 'symbolic order' represented by the masculine father. The mother is therefore associated with the archaic, demonic and the unclean, and horror is created when these 'borders' are violated and defiled by this female abject refusing to remain detached. Through constructing the female as a monstrous 'other', the horror film (in Creed's view) therefore acts as a supporter of patriarchal ideology.

Likewise a connection between monstrous discourses and a wider context of social repression is formulated by Robin Wood's now famous 'horror as return of surplus repression' concept, first published in his 1979 analysis of the American horror film in *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* which still forms the basis from which a great deal of academic horror analysis is launched (2004). Wood indicates that the characteristics society codes as undesirable are repressed and instead projected onto an 'other' that can be annihilated or made safe. The horror film is an articulation of this 'other' as horror film monsters become a site onto which these undesirable characteristics can be projected "in order that it can be discredited, disowned and if possible annihilated"

(2004:111). In Wood's Marxist inflected American context these pre-determined social roles consist of shaping people into "monogamous, heterosexual, bourgeois, patriarchal capitalists" (Ibid:108) and takes place "in the interests of alienated labour and the patriarchal family" (Ibid:109). In order to protect this desired status, surplus repression is concerned with deviant sexuality, in particular active female sexuality and desire, which presents a danger to patriarchy and the nuclear family ideal that the capitalist system depends upon. These fears connected to women and female sexuality launch suspicions as to the subversive powers of 'loose' women. Subsequently, women that are not passive or physically ideal are demonised and turned into a monstrous other, a status that reflects the patriarchal nature of American society.

## **Monstrous Women in the wider Thai context**

This connection between the feminine and the monstrous is also evident in wider Thai society. This indicates a wider contextual source from which this cinematic discourse originates, one that yet again connects these films to the lower-class Thai context. It also illustrates the similar patriarchal nature of Thailand to Creed and Wood's American context in which female sexuality is tightly controlled and a patriarchal system similarly constructs the female as inferior to the male. This patriarchal and capitalist nature dictates that the female must remain within patriarchal systems of control for the good of society.

Similarly to that noted by Wood and Creed, female sexuality in Thailand is specifically linked with the supernatural as a means of promoting social control over this potentially radical suppressed element. When researching spirit cults and spirit mediums, virtually all scholars seem to note the distinct attachment of this frightening and ancient animist realm to the female sex (as opposed to the official Buddhist order, which is coded as male).

Pattana Kitiarsa even states that “the main difference between Buddhist monks and spirit-mediums is that the mediums are predominantly women.” (Kitiarsa, 1999:2). The notion of supernatural destruction and power is connected specifically with the female as “the power of female sexuality to harm the spiritual potency and physical well-being of men is a feature of cultural beliefs in many parts of Thailand” (Mills, 1995:255). When researching northern Thai spirit cults, Tanabe (2002) notes how it is the patriarchal positioning of women as weak and having an unstable and inferior *khwan* to that of men that allows these lower-class women to interact with various *Phii* and so acquire a certain “power and authority” (Ibid:54) that enables them to become spirit mediums, so forging a distinct connection between the female and the supernatural. This connection also again reinforces my earlier observations that there is no ‘breach’ in the natural order of things in Thai cinema’s use of the supernatural as well as connecting this element to the lower-class Thai context.

## Promoting control over women

The similarity between discourses that associate women with the supernatural in both models of film indicates that despite its formal differences to the Natural Language of horror, the supernatural in the 16mm era becomes a similar expression and dramatization of the repressed elements of lower-class Thai society and the ‘other’. For instance 16mm era productions attach monstrous and supernatural elements to dangerous and uncontrolled females, therefore implying and asserting a patriarchal need to exercise dominance and control over women in a similar way to that noted by Creed and Wood. In keeping with Wood’s thesis, the female in 16mm era productions is similarly demonized and made monstrous when she exhibits characteristics that are undesirable to patriarchal constructions of femininity in Thailand and are repressed in women. These include independent mobility, desire, sexual agency and a position outside of the family. In

particular this concerns the physical mobility of women and their connection to the family and home, both aspects designed to maintain control over women in a patriarchal system.

When positioning the 16mm era heroine within the family and home environment, the patriarchal system emphasized her sexual morality and desirability. However, women positioned outside of the family and home (controlling institutions associated with the positive characteristics of purity and virginity and representing women's subservience to the dominant social order) are monstrous<sup>15</sup>. The connection of women to the family and home also decreases the physical mobility of women and essentially becomes another aspect of patriarchal control.

As physical mobility is adverse to patriarchally-dictated feminine characteristics it is also demonised when represented in women in the 16mm era productions. This further indicates how the productions address lower-class Thai society specifically. For instance Thai anthropologist Amara Pongsapich cites Chai Podhisita (1984 cited in Pongsapich, 1997) when illustrating that "demographic studies have shown that there is no question that matrilocality being the predominant type of post-nuptial residence among most rural population of Thailand." (Pongsapich, 1997:9). This means that after marriage husbands will come to live in the family home of their new wives<sup>16</sup>, confirming and institutionalising the association of the female with the static home and the male with mobility.

Unsurprisingly, 16mm era productions place great emphasis upon the feminine connection with the home and depict the masculine as mobile<sup>17</sup>, portraying this as a happy and desirable status-quo. For example in *Yort-Gaen* (Amnuai Kalatnimi. 1968) the heroine is a tear-away tomboy who first views the hero from the top of a tree. She meets him when he arrives into her environment in a shiny modern car. The Pygmalion-esque story follows that of the hero trying to teach and tame the wayward young woman with whom he eventually falls in love, lessons that primarily seem to involve decreasing her free-spirited mobility by taking her out of the tree and into the home.

However when the 16mm productions depict women as mobile and lacking a family environment, it is as a monstrous, negative and/or threatening force associated with the supernatural and a terrifying gruesome abject. This promotes control of or outright destruction of elements designated undesirable in the female by patriarchal ideology. It suggests that uncontrolled femininity could otherwise become dangerous and destructive to social wellbeing.

This can be seen in the evil snake woman from *Nguu-Phii*, the murdering sky spirit Taa-Nii and possibly the most famous ghost in Thailand *Mae Nak*. All are first harmless when integrated into the family environment (the snake-woman and Taa-Nii are adopted into local families while Nak is a loving wife) but then become powerful, destructive and monstrous and take upon dangerous and/or disgusting supernatural characteristics when mobile outside of this. When Nak dies she exists outside of the family, and becomes a monstrous and powerful abject, evident when her husband runs in fear from her animated corpse. In *Nguu-Phii*, the evil and monstrous femininity of the snake-women is positioned deep in the forest outside of the family and home. Initially harmless when adopted into a local family, the snake-woman's full monstrosity becomes apparent when she exercises sexual desire and agency by bewitching and seducing the hero and imprisoning him in a cave far away from any familial or village influences. Her deviant femininity tempts men when she appears as a beautiful half-naked young woman but she then suddenly changes into a horrific gruesome monster –again a repulsive abject– and kills them. Her ability to exercise such mobility and desire is depicted as destructive and terrifying in its control and manipulation of men. Similarly in *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii* the otherwise potentially threatening uncontrolled Taa-Nii, a spirit who falls from the sky, is rendered immediately harmless when she is adopted into a local family. The full extent of her monstrous capacity becomes apparent when she later finds her adopted parents murdered and she is therefore detached from the family-sphere. It is this destruction of her family surroundings that sets off the narrative train of events in which she wreaks her bloody revenge. Taa-Nii embarks on a monstrous supernatural killing rampage of revenge in

which she mercilessly pursues the men responsible and murders them horribly, chasing them and appearing suddenly in front of them.

This demonisation of such undesirable characteristics in women is further underlined by the depiction of the male hero in the 16mm era productions, being one who is extremely mobile and able to travel widely. Rather than through the archaic supernatural, male characters achieve mobility through modernity and technology while also existing very much outside of the home. Rather than monstrous this independence is evidence of his virility and attractiveness, illustrating the different patriarchal construction of the sexes in Thailand. The hero often arrives into the village environment as an outsider from the city: he can travel both into and outside the community while the heroine most often originates from within it and remains there. In the films *Nguu-Phii*, *Praai-Phitsawat* and *Jaawm-Khon* the hero's first introductory shot depicts him as moving. In *Jaawm-Khon* he rides into the town as a cowboy on a horse, in *Nguu-Phii* he arrives in the village on the back of an ox-cart and in *Praai-Phitsawat* he is driving a car filled with nubile attractive women. In *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* his trip to India becomes the very personification of a jazzy new urban lifestyle, symbolised by his shiny tight suit, sunglasses and briefcase (figure 10 and 11).



Figure 10.



Figure 11.

This travelling is of course unthinkable for the virginal heroine, whose purity would be compromised by such a solo trip. If the heroine must travel, then it appears to be achieved through supernatural means. For instance in *Nang-Prai-Taa-Nii*, Taa-Nii falls from the sky, an ancient supernatural means to enter the village rather than a modern means. In *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* while the hero Kangwan journeys to India using technology, in her village the heroine Karaket uses supernatural means to reach him in her time of need. When she is bitten by a poisonous snake put into her room by her evil stepmother, she appeals to the hero for help as a voice from beyond the grave as he wanders around the streets of India. Rather than modernity it is the supernatural that provides her with the means: she is only able to acquire mobility and autonomy through the supernatural and so becomes monstrous and frightening in the process (a status which the hero must help bring her back from). Hence this naturalises gender ideology in lower-class Thai society.

## The Political Categorisation of 16mm era productions



If, as I have argued, the 16mm era shares such thematic and ideological characteristics with the Natural Language of horror, then an exploration of this portrayal in relation to its wider social context can also essentially enable a critical engagement with the relationship Thai cinema holds to lower-class Thai society and the socially repressed at this point in time. Such an investigation further illustrates both the extent to which this model of film is connected to the lower-class context and also how functions to maintain this context and its patriarchal nature.

Wood refers to this relationship as the 'political categorisation' of horror. Horror films can be politically reactionary or progressive and over time this categorisation can change, something Wood calls the 'evolution' of the horror film. At the time when Wood was writing in 1979 he argued that horror was dominated by a reactionary agenda, giving the example of *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *Halloween* which in their regressive attitudes towards sexuality 'seal' the possibility of 'social revolution' that had been awakened by wider contextual events and instead seek to restore the previous status quo. The model of horror displayed in the 16mm era productions is also a similar reactionary response to anxiety over social developments affecting the traditional construction of gender.

The 16mm era productions not only reinforce patriarchal ideology (men as mobile women as family situated) but do so at a time when these values are being threatened and challenged. The promotion of patriarchal control of the female through such monstrous portrayals exists at a time when gender roles and their corresponding social positions were becoming unstable, particularly in lower-class rural areas. Post-war Thailand was undergoing radical changes that impacted upon social organisation and in particular the construction of gender. Amara Pongsapich notes how during this time Thailand shifted from a largely subsistence economy to that of market capitalism, with the first five year development plan implemented after 1961 (1997:25). Pongsapich notes the changes brought about in family and community settings by industrialization: at first, it was only men who migrated in search of work, while the domestic domain of children and the home

was left to women; however, with the development of a full cash economy, women also had to leave home in search of work to substitute this income (Ibid:26).

The increased mobility of women in society seems to have become a significant issue connected with the encroachment of modernity in rural Thailand. This new ability of the female threatened to undermine masculine prowess and patriarchy, particularly in light of its traditionally inferior designation to the masculine by the religious order. In the light of this new changing situation, the depiction of the mobile female outside of the family sphere as monstrous marks the supernatural in the 16mm era as potentially an extremely reactionary response to social developments that could be progressive in the new opportunities presented to women.

This depiction is also reactionary given the potential for the supernatural to provide a somewhat unofficial means of empowerment for disenfranchised women under the patriarchal system. As Thai anthropologists have previously stated, the connection between the female and the supernatural discourse can be subverted by women to provide a means of empowerment in a staunchly patriarchal society that denies them agency. As a social discourse the supernatural is able to give the feminine a degree of autonomy and empowerment due to the distinct connection forged between the female's weak *Khwan* and the *Phii*. In 1971 Sangun Suwalert documented the *Moh Lum Phii Pha*, a traditional healing method from the Northeast conducted by a special ceremonial shamanistic team. It involved the possession of the leader (the *Kog*) by the benevolent *Phii Pha* sky spirit who must then remove the spirit or ghost that is causing the illness in the client (Suwanlert, Sangun and Vissuthikolsol, Yupha, 1980). Notably, the *Kog* can only be a woman, because it is only the female qualities of being "warm, gentle and empathetic" (Ibid:237) that can engender the folk songs and 'welcome atmosphere' that will reassure and persuade the patient to name the spirit or ghost that is possessing them. The spirit medium can communicate between "the human world and the spirit world or between the living and the dead" (Kitiarsa, 1999:53) and therefore carries a significant

amount of authority in society. Their weaker *Khwan* also allows them to identify, interact and even become voluntarily possessed by the offending spirit, so removing it from the affected patient who has approached them for assistance. Tanabe identifies this as a dialectical process, in which the inferiority of the female under the patriarchal Buddhist order is subverted to become a source of power and authority through the older pre-Buddhist animist beliefs. Although dealing mostly with the transference of this phenomenon in the modern contemporary context, Tanabe still states that “even before the 1970s-80s, this dialectical transformation was a general condition underlying spirit mediumship during the sporadic emergence of semi-professional mediums in village settings” (Tanabe, 2002:54).

Virtually all of the possessed participants in Sangun Suwanlert’s research into spirit possession in the 1970s are also village women, indicating not only their perceived susceptibility to this condition but also how it provides a means of negotiating the difficulties of living under such an extreme patriarchal social organisation. The possession was often preceded by a disruptive or abusive incident and its cure required a degree of attention and respect not previously awarded to the subject. For lower-class Thai women, it appears that the supernatural provided a means not only of empowerment in the position of spirit mediums, but also a degree of social recognition for their inferior and increasingly difficult status. Incidents such as the infamous ‘widow ghost phenomena’ documented and analysed by Mary Bell Mills, provide an illustration of how the supernatural constitutes “an alternative, largely counterhegemonic discourse on modernity” (Mills, 1995:244) within sections of Thai society in which the experience of rapid modernity and rural migration had merely produced a new form of oppression and control. This source of power and legitimating of female authority with its ‘alternative’ discourse to that of the state sanctioned authoritative religion is regarded with disapproval and suspicion by authorities (Kitiarsa, 1999:1).

# **The traumatic function of the 16mm era**

If the association of women and the supernatural in 16mm era film reflects how Thai patriarchy makes natural feminine subordination (as it makes natural the presence of the supernatural realm and its unquiet *Phii*), then the productions also allow a working through of the horrors of female empowerment in an era of rapid social change. Again this connects such films to the lower-class context and indicates how this body of films has a specific social function within lower-class Thai society.

This attributes a specific social function to these productions for lower-class viewers, one that stems from a body of theory known as Trauma studies. From this perspective, Blake argues that horror films in particular, due to their nature as repulsive and disturbing texts that are increasing in both number and interest, offer a mediation of traumatic social events and “bespeak a public will” to understand their corresponding lived experience (2008:4). In particular, this involves “blasting open the continuum of history” (Lowenstein, 2005:16) and depicting that which cannot otherwise be spoken or shown. Although previously this function has been identified in ‘high-culture’ texts, and particularly those relating to the holocaust (that most unspeakable of unspeakables), Blake and Lowenstein extend this to popular culture, positioning horror texts as a means of both articulating such social trauma and offering spectators a means of working through their altered environment. Blake thus offers horror films a specific function within society, one that can be recognised in 16mm era films which, through their monstrous women, offer a consoling mediation of the corresponding ‘unnatural’ social upheaval.

According to such an analysis, 16mm era Thai films mediate the trauma of wider social change in lower-class society by demonising both the new found ability of women in the

modern age and the means by which women deal with this subordination (the dialectical empowerment offered by the supernatural in rural Thailand). This thus offers a consoling reinforcement of patriarchal norms in a traumatic period. In working through trauma such productions present the mobile autonomous feminine as a frightening and negative aspect during a period when this was a newfound necessity within society.

The films can therefore be interpreted as what Blake titles as a 'cultural attempt' to "bind those wounds in the interests of dominant ideologies of identity" (2008:2) 'wounds' being the trauma inflicted upon Thai patriarchy by the wider social upheaval of increased female autonomy and mobility. The evil snake woman, the reanimated corpse of Nak and the murdering sky-spirit Taa-Nii all perform this social function, they are interpretations of cultural beliefs that are mobilised to seal the wound that has been ripped open and must be addressed for the lower-class Thai viewer. This attention then becomes a conservative reaffirmation of gender relations, illustrating that the reactionary classification of 16mm era horror films is deeply entwined with the function of these films as mass entertainment within a marginalised group at a time when the stability of social norms was challenged by uncontrollable and unaccountable outside influences.

16mm era horror is therefore a reactionary and conservative model of film, as it responds to anxiety around social advances and developments that are potentially challenging gender norms with depictions that confirm the inferiority of and so the need for control over the female. However this is essentially reactionary in a specifically Thai way, one that I have indicated deviates from the stylistics and conventions of the Natural Language of horror, including its narrative format, film style and emotional affects. Significantly throughout this, it remains a lower-class film form in that it functions within the lower-class context, responds to it, addresses lower-class viewers and negotiates it for them.

The next chapter will be concerned with the development of Thai film after the 16mm era and up into the post-97 New Thai contemporary industry. It will track the continued existence of the formal characteristics I identified, assessing the extent to which these are

still visible in a context in which the cultural logics that engendered such conventions have progressed in line with Thai social developments and global film influences. Given the changing social context after the 16mm era, it will also investigate the common horror motif of monstrous femininity. Through this it will explore the political relationship of Thai film to the wider social context, so illustrating the ways in which the Thai horror film continues to mediate such discourses for the contemporary viewer and how this viewer was now beginning to change.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the story of Nak who is a village woman who died in childbirth yet refused to leave her still-living husband Mak who she loved too deeply to part from.

<sup>2</sup> Even in the modern urban context many political decisions, urban planning and business mergers are all decided around and in accordance with pleasing and pacifying the spirits.

<sup>3</sup> This is "a shot in which the camera assumes the position of a subject in order to show us what the subject sees" (Brannigan, 1975:55).

<sup>4</sup> Thitathana gives the example of the famous and well-known *Sang Thong* story that tells the story of Prince Sang Thong whose mother was queen Chantrathewe, the first wife of king Prommathat. When her co-wife queen Suwanchampa used black magic to trick the king into believing his first wife was wicked and unfaithful, the pregnant queen was expelled from the kingdom to live with an impoverished old couple outside the city. The story details the many trials and adventures of prince Sang Thong: his being cast out on the sea and shipwrecked, his rescue by the mythical Naga serpent in a golden boat, his adoption by a giantess mother, his discovery of a magic knife, mask and pair of shoes that allows him to fly, his marrying of the wise princess Kanthathewe and eventually his return to his father's kingdom and his mother's defeating of his father's evil second wife (Chadchaidee, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Hansen states that "the hegemonic mechanisms by which Hollywood succeeded in amalgamating a diversity of competing traditions, discourses, and interests on the *domestic* level may have accounted for at least some of the generalized appeal and robustness of Hollywood products *abroad*" (Hansen, 2000:340).

<sup>6</sup> The Fordist model of mass cultural production and the resources behind classical Hollywood cinema then enabled it to achieve global supremacy.

<sup>7</sup> Writing when the impact of new technology and the growth of non-filmic media and its accompanying academic exploration (such as television studies) was becoming increasingly significant, Hansen explores how the shift from the isolated 'private space' of the cinema towards a new 'domestic' sphere has impacted upon and changed the interaction between viewers and film (1994:135). Hansen describes situations such as the public sphere of the living room as "institutionally less regulated viewing situations" (Ibid:136) in which the 'classical principle' (the controlling of film as a fundamental product and commodity) is weakened (Ibid).

<sup>8</sup> Non-Screen theorists such as Noel Carroll lament the domination of Screen Theory, believing that it has eclipsed other lines of theory at the expense of 'scientific accuracy' and 'scholarly endeavour', aspects that Pam Cook (1994) also notes that it neglected in favour of (however radical and enlightening) political pursuits.

<sup>9</sup> They had a large wide cinema screen, were air-conditioned and were where the grand premiers were always held. They housed up to 1000 seats divided into different classes.

<sup>10</sup> These 'mobile movies' labelled *Nang-Re* or travelling cinemas, make the actual number of cinemas and the films they were showing very difficult to research concretely. However archivist Dome Sukawong is able to illustrate some statistics from the 16mm era: "there were between 100-150 cinemas in Bangkok, while outside the capital there were approximately a further 700 cinemas. This figure does not include open-air screens, for which there are no reliable figures, but which are reputed to have numbered several thousand. These cinemas and open-air screens required 500-800 films per year." (Sukawong, 2001:13). This suggests that itinerant travelling cinema was quite possibly one of the main means through which the 16mm era films were exhibited and consumed, making them primarily targeted at the lower-class rural village population.

<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to envision a 'bridge' being built between the audience and the screen in the same way that can exist with a live performance as "the rigidity of the cinematographic medium seems irremediably incompatible with such requirements" (Fouquet, 2006:58) while a live performance takes into account, adapts towards and is able to incorporate the immediate occasion and viewer responses.

<sup>12</sup> The importance of this narration has resulted in a finely honed oral-based art form that adapts to include the present social context in its commentary. Koanantakool states that this un-codified oral tradition that has been able to develop freely is a continuing basic structure of the shadow puppet medium in Thailand and the actual narrator figure therefore becomes crucial to an analysis of the social function and positioning of this medium (Koanantakool, 1989:44).

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<sup>13</sup> The novel was also not a form which spread far beyond a very small educated elite (which was mostly confined to the royal court) until much later in the century and indeed even today still doesn't enjoy widespread popularity outside of urban areas. Any critical and theoretical texts concerned with Thai society were mostly written in English by non-Thai authors, paid little attention to the mass populist habits and only noted that which could be twisted to serve the interests of colonialism and imperialism. This hardly impacted upon society at large or the development of media. Communal entertainment was also not given serious scholarly attention due to being forms of entertainment which appealed to the supposedly uncivilised lower-classes.

<sup>14</sup> This literally refers to the skin or hide upon which the shadows are projected, as Koanantakool states "once the term *nang* is used it can be expected that the visual image will be created by shadows or projections on a screen" (Koanantakool, 1989:35)

<sup>15</sup> Van Fleet gives an indication of how desirable female characteristics are constructed: "Historically, representations of feminine beauty in Thailand have been linked with and subordinate to the institution of Buddhism, in addition to being inextricably bound to beliefs surrounding female roles in the family and sexual purity." (Van Fleet, 1998:55).

<sup>16</sup> This is also the source from which Siraporn Thitathan also identifies other *chakchak wongwong* topics as originating from, for instance the conflict between a man and his father-in-law (as both men must now live under the same roof).

<sup>17</sup> In the rural environment, this belief of gender divisions seems to continue up to the contemporary age. Van Fleet notes the perceived propensity for men to aspire to 'go out' in the evening, expressing their mobility, and for women to remain within their domain of the home. This was stressed as a 'natural difference' that enamored television dramas to women rather than men by Van Fleet's participants. Her participant Tiw states "Men like to go out with their friends to drink and smoke. Women stay at home" and "Women are soft and sensitive and like to follow stories more than men" contrasted with "Men are impatient, they like fast action" (Van Fleet, 1998:72). The subject matter of the 16mm era with its 'conventional' Thai narrative is so varied and convoluted, that both of these 'natural' groups are catered for. This begins to connect the subject matter of the 16mm productions specifically with the upcountry viewer and which engenders a viewing context which becomes significant as to the form of the text (which I will examine later).

# **Chapter Two: Beyond the 16mm era**

Chapter Two examines Thai film after the 16mm era and up until the birth of the New Thai industry in the 1990s. It indicates how the 16mm era characteristics that I identified in Chapter One continued to influence Thai film up into the contemporary industry, so allowing me to demonstrate the hybrid nature of contemporary productions in my later chapters. I illustrate how Thai film changed stylistically to incorporate elements from the dominant Hollywood model to which it was exposed, yet also how it ultimately retains many of the 16mm era characteristics that continued to permeate Thai filmmaking and cause it to deviate from the natural language of horror. Within this analysis I track how productions still respond to the lower-class context and (as in the 16mm era) continue to negotiate the upheaval enacted upon this. This allows me to indicate the later switch that occurred in Thai filmmaking when the New Thai industry began to target more affluent urban viewers. Such close analysis therefore continues to advance my argument that Thai film is not unsophisticated or crude but instead deviates from the natural language of horror in a characteristically Thai way and remains permeated by its lower-class origins.

## **The Development of Disdainful attitudes towards Thai film**

In this examination of Thai film since the 16mm era, I first explore the disdainful attitudes that were directed at these productions. Such an examination indicates how the lower-class perspective was regarded with disdain within both Thai and non-Thai society and how the 16mm era productions were designated as inferior due to this connection, despite



their impressive success. This illustrates the reasons behind why Thai filmmakers began to move away from the 16mm era model in the post-war era and reject those characteristics that I have indicated are associated with the lower-class viewer and context. This is also preparation for my later chapters which explore how the contemporary industry becomes a reactionary model of film that marginalises the lower-class perspective. This rejection later culminates in the elitist nature of the New Thai industry and its position as one of Althusser's (1977) Ideological State Apparatuses that I referred to in my introduction. Such an examination also further clarifies the origins of and reasons behind the low regard for Thai film today that partly motivated this thesis.

Despite the impressive development of such specific characteristics and its success as an unfunded industry, 16mm era Thai film and its lower-class rural spectator became unfairly designated as an inferior and unsophisticated model of film and one opposed to the modernity and 'progress' represented by Hollywood. As indicated in my introduction, derogatory non-Thai comments towards Thai popular entertainment originate from a nineteenth-century colonialist discourse and stem from the adoption of what Winichakul labels 'Western ways' by Thai elites throughout the twentieth century (Winichakul, 2000). This was a practice designed to raise Thailand up to the level of Euro-American countries and foster a stronger sense of nationhood. It resulted in a tradition of disdain towards lower-class Thai culture by Thai elites in favour of Euro-American modernity, one developed in order to both maintain control over the indigenous Thai population and conduct relations with colonialist European powers. This begins to indicate why Thai film began to move away from this perspective and its film style in the post-war era and adopt a more 'hybrid' nature.

For instance, the adoption of and preference for Euro-American models of behaviour and dress has been a documented phenomenon since the colonialist era, when the adoption and conversion of Thailand to 'civilisation' (or *siwilai* in Thai) was the concern of King Mongkut and Thai elites. The attainment of this vague and unspecified term became

entwined with the adoption of 'Western ways', so much so that Thai scholar and historian Winichakul states "a famous intellectual at the turn of the century commented that the changing norm of men to wear shirts marked the departure of Siam from being barbarian to becoming "*siwilai*" like the Europeans" (Winichakul, 2000:530). Likewise the 12 Cultural Mandates issued from 1939 up to 1942 were part of a 1930s government effort to promote a nationalism based upon the defining of culture, one that would 'civilise' the Thai population through proscribing everything from what to wear and eat, to even encouraging husbands to kiss their wives on the cheek when leaving for work. Van Esterik notes that during the Second World War "women were encouraged to dress in European style to remind the Japanese and the Europeans that Thai were like Westerners" (2000:103).

Significantly, these actions were all part of authorities' attempt to model Thailand upon international concepts of nationhood while grappling with the "regional and minority cultures" (Reynolds, 2002:5) it was encountering within the state<sup>1</sup>. Rather than constructing nationalism as a reaction to a 'colonial threat', therefore, Winichakul interprets the attempt by Thai elites to incorporate this 'western' *siwilai* into everyday life as a means by which to retain dominance within its geographical region and keep up with the new European world powers, as it came loaded with ideas of progress and development (2000:529). However, as I will illustrate, this came at the expense of indigenous and lower-class culture (such as the 16mm era in later years), that was designated as inferior and backwards.

This remodelling of Thailand along foreign models of nationalism inevitably designated existing cultural practices as inferior and this is specifically aimed at those from the rural lower classes. Indeed the level of Siam's *siwilai* was significantly comprehensible to its elites by "a geographical discourse that placed Siam in relation to 'the Others' from both within Siam and without to "Europe"" (Winichakul, 2000:534). Significantly these 'others' from 'within' were the undesirable rural village people from outside of the cities, known as *chaobannok*, who mostly worked on the land and would have made up a significant part of

the 16mm era's audience. Winichakul notes specifically that in accounts "one of the major characteristics of *chaobannok* was the stereotype of the uneducated and backward folk" (Ibid:536). He continues, "the *chaobannok* were the loyal backwards subjects. The gazers were the educated elite in the city, the people and space of *siwilai*" (Ibid:536). These were placed "in the backward space, in the domain of simplicity, superstition, ignorance and uneducatedness, that is, less *siwilai*" (Ibid:536). Their distance from the city -the perceived centre of *siwilai*- was also a factor, as the 'spacial hierarchy' already existing in Thailand classified people and places as lacking in spirituality the further away they were from the 'enlightened space' (the source of *dhamma* and other power), instead placing them in the domain of wild animals and untamed spirits. In contrast to this, discourses of Europe and its *siwilai* referred "to a distant land that was the imagined model for progress and desirable changes" (Ibid:538) indicating how Thai cultural products are judged in the shadow of a foreign model regarded as inherently superior.

It is possible to see how such attitudes thrive in the negative response of Thai film critics to the formal practices of 16mm era film. The continued existence of this hierarchical discrimination towards the *chaobannok* is evident in the attitudes towards Thai cinema from Thai elites, who appear to dismiss the 16mm era productions as unsophisticated and crude due largely to the fact that they are aimed at a specific marginalised audience of the rural poor. Those outside of the 16mm era's mass target audience distanced themselves from productions associated with the 'backwards' upcountry and lower classes. On the one hand existed the sophisticated urban 'high-culture' associated with the 'progress and development' of Thongchai's 'Others without' (the Natural Language of imported global film) and this was opposed to the inferior backward and uneducated entertainment of the barbaric 'Others within' (the 16mm era film form of the *chaobannok*). The 16mm era texts with their emotionally stimulating 'numbers' and conventional Thai narratives were allocated a B-movie status aligned with the stereotyped lower-class uneducated rural viewer of the provincial masses and their crude mobile picture houses. This disdain

consequently led to the almost exclusive targeting of the rural provincial audience by popular Thai productions, so continuing both the model of film suited to this audience and the negative stereotypes associated with it. This is a division which, as I will indicate in the final chapter, has also continued into the contemporary industry and has become much more pronounced as society becomes more polarised.

## **Disdainful Accounts of Thai Film and its Audience**

It was therefore both the elitist hierarchy of Thailand and the championing of 'western ways' that led to the formation of derogatory attitudes towards the lower classes and their entertainment. This consists of disdain towards the impoverished, uneducated and (supposedly) unsophisticated lower-class provincial audience who, as I have indicated, made up a significant majority of 16mm era viewers. Again this indicates why New Thai film would reject such an audience and its preferences in order to become a viable and successful industry on the global scene.

Such attitudes are evident in statements such as this, which was recorded by journalist Bernard Trink in 1968 and is quoted by Boonyaketmala: "“Thai motion pictures,” according to a university student in Bangkok, “are directed at, and seen by, the people upcountry, the old women in Bangkok, and servants on their day off” (Trink 1968a quoted in Boonyaketmala 1992:82). While the audience assessment may be demographically accurate, the derogatory nature of the quote gives an indication of the criteria through which the film form of the 16mm era was judged: through its appeal to a viewer labelled as both unsophisticated and undesirable. Those at the bottom of the social hierarchy such as the poor, the aged, rural provincial people or those who work in the service industry are

suggested to be uneducated, unintelligent and impoverished and their popular entertainment products likewise embody these characteristics.

In another rare early article on Thai film Ian Buruma also notes that “many members of the urban middle-class profess indifference to the point of contempt for Thai films” (1983:53) indicating how solidified in Thai society these derogatory elitist attitudes are that they still continued to be present in 1983. Buruma describes Thai cinema with a similar disdain to that of Thai elites, stating that “most Thai melodramas, starring the same tired idols and directed by company hacks, are not worth serious attention” (Ibid:53). This continues when he quotes filmmaker Vichit Kunawut talking of how difficult it is to reach wide appeal in Thailand and satisfy different audiences, to which Buruma adds: “This is a dilemma that Thai, and indeed all Asian film-makers with artistic aspirations, have to face: how to bridge the gap between an educated elite and the vast audience up-country. Indeed it is questionable whether this is possible at all.” (Ibid:53). The very title of Buruma’s article *Thailand’s Film-makers Sink in a Morass of Money vs Artistry* is also indicative of the division between commercial success and high art that is constructed through the connotations of the elite educated audience and the unsophisticated *chaobannok*. Likewise Buruma distinguishes two factors as causes of what he terms the continuing ‘mediocrity’ of Thai cinema; these being the habitual use of the same ‘exhausted’ stars and narrative formulas. These are both aspects associated with the film style and appeal of the 16mm era, illustrating how this popular and durable aesthetic is considered to be low quality outside of (and possibly because of) its target audience by both Thai elites and non-Thai comments.

It is clear from these examples that both foreign critics and those drawn from the elite affluent Euro-Americanised, educated social milieu in Thailand therefore distanced themselves from what they viewed as crude and backwards productions (both in terms of film quality and format) of the 16mm era. Both cite their appeal as pure entertainment and their repetitive visceral thrills as evidence of low quality. This begins to cement what

Chaiworaporn labels as the 'two-tiered' division of lower-class and upper-class audiences and productions. This division foregrounds the rejection and marginalisation of the 16mm era film style and places it in opposition to sophisticated intellectual and non-Thai productions. As Sungsi indicates, Thai film was "divided into two genres: social problem films, *nang sakorn sungkhom* and conventional Thai films *nang nam nao*" (Sungsri, 2004:234). The *nam nao* term was first applied to a genre of popular literature<sup>2</sup> that consists of "escapist stories of melodrama, comedy and action" (Ibid:234) that the 16mm era took story ideas from. These 'escapist stories' emphasise the aesthetic of attraction and a generic hybridity of stimulating 'numbers', both attributes of the 16mm era film style. However far from celebrating such essentially Thai characteristics it is notable that 'nam nao' means dirty or stagnant water, implying a low level of imagination and sophistication and confirming the stereotype of the 16mm era film form being crudely inferior.

Such a fundamental misunderstanding of Thai film aesthetics and the lower-class audience's preferences was not, however, confined to film critics, indicating the widespread nature of such conceptions. A 1982 UNESCO Transnational Communication and Culture Industries report also passes judgement upon Thai film. It marks as one of the many 'basic problems' facing Thai film "the unprofessional approach to film-making and a desire to become rich quickly among the producers" (UNESCO, 1982:41). The description of this 'unprofessional approach' appears to lament the position of filmmakers as business entrepreneurs instead of artists that are part of (and possibly struggling against) a clear-cut industry, as if uniquely in a commercial medium they were wrongly placing the pursuit of profits above that of 'art'. The report concludes that "faced with so many basic difficulties, the Thai film industry has very little prospect of expanding in a socially meaningful way" (Ibid:41). It does not define what this 'socially meaningful way' actually is but it would appear to be one that does not place the pursuit of profit as the primary goal of filmmaking. This is a clearly absurd and palpably paternalistic attitude that fails to note not only that the vast majority of films worldwide are made purely in pursuit of

profits, but also that this status can be correlated to the Thai government's lack of support for the industry not the personal preferences of Thai filmmakers.

The framework of interpretation from non-Thai viewpoints *outside* the country and that of upper-classes *within* can therefore be aligned, as both illustrate a marginalisation of the popular lower-class Thai spectator and their entertainment preferences. The view of Thailand's provincial population as uncivilised, uneducated and simplistic rural folk is one shared by both Thai elites and non-Thai viewpoints in this designation of Thai film as trashy 'uneducated' entertainment. Similar to internal elites, these label its stylistics as low in quality due to both the lower-class audience that enjoyed them and their difference to supposedly superior and inherently foreign aesthetics. Thai elite views echo the Euro-American colonialist gaze that constructs Thailand as somehow inferior, as both conveniently occlude the specific logics that have shaped popular cultural products in Thailand. They neglect to take into account the context that has shaped the Thai film industry, specifically the audience preferences and the situation of Thai filmmaking itself, and instead designate it as inferior against a putatively superior Natural Language of film. As Buruma's article indicated, Thai film was beginning to be noted by those outside of Thai society, who were gazing into the country and scrutinizing its cultural products, and these accounts also displayed disdainful attitudes towards Thai film. Buruma and UNESCO's picture of an industry struggling between high art and crass popular commercial productions with its filmmakers torn by their personal desire for the former and obligations of financial success through the latter, attaches condescending connotations to the 'vast audience upcountry' that is very similar to those within Thailand towards the 'old women' and 'servants' comment noted by Trink's commentator. Both viewpoints also debase elements of 16mm era film style that are nevertheless successful in their appeal to a lower-class Thai viewer, failing to recognise that the lack of experimentation in productions that results in the high level of similarity between texts

noted earlier has also led to a style that is uniquely tailored towards a marginalised population that is itself ignored by elites.

## **Ratana Pestonji and Disdainful Attitudes**

This discrimination is also exposed by an examination of attitudes towards Ratana Pestonji, an artistic filmmaker active during the 16mm era and up until 1970. Pestonji is regarded today as the grandfather of Thai film and was the recipient of a life time achievement award by the Bangkok International Film Festival in 2004. His films emphasise how the previous disdainful attitudes from Thai upper-classes are based upon denigrating and marginalising popular and lower-class Thai culture. This is evident because his productions, despite being highly regarded by elites and the intelligentsia as 'serious art', still adhere in many ways to the 16mm era style of filmmaking due to his desire to cultivate wide appeal within the nation.

The significance of Pestonji to the development of Thai cinema cannot be underestimated: his productions and actions in the industry illustrate an alternative direction for Thai film alongside the 16mm era conventions, one that is a fascinating and rare early example of Thai art film in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chalida Uabumrungjit describes Pestonji as playing an absolutely crucial role in the history and development of Thai cinema, despite his having made very few actual films in his lifetime (Uabumrungjit, 2003a). His 1938 short film *Tang* won the fifth Scottish Amateur Film Festival, the very first international award for a Thai film and one that he collected from Alfred Hitchcock. Pestonji was responsible for setting up the first post-war film company and was the first to work in 35mm with synchronized sound. His film *Santi Wina* (Pestonji, 1954) was awarded the Golden Harvest Award at the first Southeast Asian film festival in 1954. After the



success of *Santi Wina* he went on to make *Rong Raem Narok/Country Hotel* (Ratana Pestonji, 1957), a black comedy with several well-known Thai actors playing very self-referential parts. Although in black and white, Uabumrungjit considers *Country Hotel* to be an extremely advanced film for this period (Uabumrungjit, 2003a) and speculates that Pestonji's choice to shoot in black and white may have been an attempt to maintain personal control over his film, which if in colour would have had to be developed outside of the country. *Prae Dam/Black Silk* (Ratana Pestonji, 1961) followed in 1961 and this 'crime drama' is considered his finest work<sup>3</sup>.

Pestonji attempted to improve Thai film through pushing for governmental support and technically modernising the medium through, among other actions, founding one of the few 35mm production companies after the war. He is particularly admired as instead of the mass-produced low budget 16mm era films, he attempted to improve Thai cinema and compete artistically on the international stage. At great financial cost to himself he succeeded in part, with at least two of his films shown at festivals abroad. *Prae Dam/Black Silk* was submitted and shown at the 1961 Berlin Film Festival, the first Thai film to do so, and Pestonji made his last film *Namtaam Mai Waan/Sugar is not Sweet* (Ratana Pestonji, 1965) in 1965.

Pestonji's attempts to cultivate both international and national appeal at such an early stage illustrate a distinct blending of international filmic influence and the 16mm era stylistics that I labelled as characteristically Thai (a blending that is actually similar to that visible in the New Thai industry). This gives further indication of the widespread dominance and popularity of the 16mm era in the post-war era, as even in the work of a filmmaker who is set apart from the 16mm era, this film style is still present and is an integral part of Thai filmmaking.

For instance Pestonji himself was very conscious of the dominant stylistics of Thai film, as Uabumrungjit states "He intended to make a popular film by including songs, dances and

sex, but in fact it became a kind of satire on the popular film at the time, which always included songs, comedy and sex appeal" (2001:137). His famous production *Prae Dam/Black Silk* follows Sukawong's conventional narrative structure that was prevalent in the 16mm era productions. It blends many visually stimulating 'numbers' from a variety of genres into a single production, so privileging the 'aesthetic of attraction'. Although *Black Silk* appears dark, ruthless and tragic with its story of murder, lost love and psychological torment, it also includes a surprising selection of music and dance numbers along with fight sequences, all of which are depicted in an array of bright primary colours. For instance, despite its tragic story, which involves a gangster trying to stand up to his boss and be with the woman he loves, the film also alternates scenes of music and dance amongst this. Uabumrungjit labels these as 'elements of entertainment' that exist alongside the unconventional elements of the film that set it apart from the 16mm era productions (such as the urban street scenes of 1960s Bangkok and the fact that it is shown on 35mm film with synchronised sound)<sup>4</sup>. These various 'entertainment' elements of "songs, comedy and sex appeal" (Uabumrungjit, 2001:137) are similar to the emotionally stimulating 'numbers' of the 16mm era conventional narrative. Likewise, although Pestonji's use of unknown actors was also pioneering at a time when star images were a major draw, the performers appear to have retained the histrionic performances and typage associated with the 16mm era productions.

The presence of the 16mm era film style within the productions of such a prestigious filmmaker therefore emphasises not only how profound and pronounced this was within Thai society but also how the wider derogatory attitudes towards this film form were concerned not with the lack of 'quality' or 'art' in the 16mm era but rather the targeting of the lower-class Thai point of view and the inferior *chaobannok*. Despite the similarities between Pestonji's productions and the 16mm era, critics continue to praise Pestonji's films partly due to their supposed difference to the crude 16mm era. This exposes such comments as based less upon merit and more upon the audience's lower social position.

Contemporary Thai film critic Kong Rithdee, who writes film reviews of Thai productions for English and Thai language Bangkok newspapers, lauds Pestonji's dedication and passion for filmmaking as this, Rithdee believes, made his films very different to the mass produced repetitive 16mm era and its profit-motivated entrepreneurs which had acquired a reputation as being "rowdy entertainment for the masses, a gaudy distraction" (Rithdee, 2008). Instead Pestonji's productions qualify as "serious art" due to his technical innovations and most importantly his belief that film could be more than mere entertainment.

This section has therefore indicated that both Thai elite and non-Thai viewpoints neglect the empirical cultural logics of Thai film and instead assess it in a way that appears to follow the colonialist era's construction of the centrality of the Western experience and the simultaneous marginalising of the lower-class perspective. This positions Thai cinema as an immature 'other' that deviates incorrectly from and has yet to progress to Gunning's supposed Natural Language of global Hollywood and this renders it a non-reality in the global conventions of film. Hollywood continues to function as a cinematic *norm* and the Natural Language of film while the non-Western Third World Thai film form is an inferior *non-reality* that is aspiring to this and crudely imitating it. The lower-class Thai experience, being so far removed from the centre of civilisation, is regarded as a 'non-reality' by Euro-American and urban Thai elites, one lacking and aspiring towards attaining the sophistication of 'the real' as represented in Europe. In other words the 'Thai cultural logics' are not being either recognised or investigated and this gives rise to a fundamental misunderstanding of Thai film even amongst Thai commentators.

Such analysis further connects the 16mm era and its film style with the Thai lower classes. However this designation illustrates not only how the 16mm era characteristics can be specifically connected to this audience and context but also how they are placed in direct opposition to the modernity of Hollywood and the Natural Language of horror. This therefore supports my contention that the contemporary New Thai industry has shifted

radically in its targeted audience and marginalised the lower-class perspective to such an extent that the hybrid nature of New Thai horror productions becomes a traumatic resurgence of this subjectivity within Thai society.

## ***Tone*: the incorporation of American popular culture**

The film style identified in the 16mm era productions was therefore positioned as an inferior form of cinema that is marginalised and repressed in the adoption of 'western ways' due to its associated with the lower-class Thai perspective. This becomes especially evident in the 1970s production *Tone* (Piak Poster. 1970). *Tone* demonstrates the first direct incorporation into Thai film of the modern American popular culture that was transforming Thailand, its young people and its social norms and indicates how this began to transform Thai cinema and reject the 16mm era film form and its lower-class provincial audience.

*Tone* deserves recognition as a significant milestone in its own right in the development of Thai film. Chalida Uabumrungjit singles out the success of the films *Monrak Luktung* (Rangsi Thatsana Payak. 1970) and *Tone* as contributing towards standardizing the use of 35mm filmstock with synchronised sound in Thailand. Both were extremely successful and lie at the transitional point in which Thai film begins to develop from the 16mm era 'cottage industry' into something much bigger. It was the success of *Tone* that Thai film historians Anchalee Chaiworaporn (2001) and Chalida Uabumrungjit (2001) note as being the crucial turning point that forged a new direction for Thai cinema after 1970.

An exploration of *Tone* illustrates that this film is a radically different response to Thai society in the 1960s and 1970s, indicating a shift in Thai film's relationship to its surrounding context since the 16mm era. Rather than merely a blanket transference of the

16mm era characteristics into 35mm filmstock, *Tone* marked a dramatic turning point in the development of Thai film by incorporating and responding to elements of American culture that had impacted upon Thailand in the post-war era, indicating the adaptation of Thai film to the changing social environment.

However, in this incorporation, *Tone* ostensibly repudiates any kind of cultural recognition of or adherence to the lower-class rural Thai perspective or situation and instead embraces the freedoms offered by American capitalism, both formally and ideologically, that flooded into Thailand in the post-war era. In doing so it places the village context and the Thai film form as diametrically opposed to the freedoms and excitement offered by this new foreign discourse of modernity. This therefore rejects and ignores the means by which lower-class viewers negotiate their context of social upheaval in favour of a celebratory depiction of this discourse and way of life that also ignores the lower-class exploitation in which it thrives.

A case study of *Tone* illustrates that certain characteristics of the 16mm era were being usurped by the new and attractive American cultural influences that were bombarding Thailand at this time. Such influence shifted the thematic, ideological and formal parameters of Thai film away from the 16mm era. Thai film began to reject the village scenario and 16mm era film style in favour of American cultural conventions, indicating that inherent within the championing of elite-sponsored American capitalism was a rejection of the 'inferior' rural lower-class Thai film style and point-of-view. Crucially however, this film style is still evident in *Tone*. This indicates that the preferences of the lower-class spectator still 'haunt' Thai film and cannot be entirely erased, suggesting a source behind the incomprehensible and hybrid nature of the New Thai industry.

The film follows the story of *Tone*, who is a young orphaned temple boy from a village who is in love with the richer village girl Kularb, but cannot afford to go and study in Bangkok. After he saves the visiting city boy Aod from a group of bullies, however, he is

invited to stay with Aod while he studies in Bangkok. There he meets Aod's sister Dang who is a sexy and sassy young woman always going out with men. When she gets herself in trouble with some gangsters, Tone saves her and she begins to fall in love with him. Meanwhile Aod has fallen in love with Kularb, who has also moved to the city to study, and this causes much heartache for Tone. Finally, Aod and Tone must save Dang and Kularb from the gangsters, and Dang and Tone finally fall in love.

## The 'American era' in Thailand

Rather than reaffirming old-fashioned Thai village values of the 16mm era, *Tone* very deliberately engages with a new and radically foreign discourse of Americanism imported into Thailand after World War Two, indicating how Thai film was changing with the contextual environment. This incorporation of popular American culture can be attributed to American influence in Thailand during the post-World War Two era, indicating how Thai film continued to respond to the changing social environment and lived experience of Thai citizens.

Besides business revenue, a major motivation behind the American interest in Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia was combating the spread of communism. After World War Two, Thailand had sided strongly with South Vietnam and America as it feared outside aggression from China and Hanoi. Thailand was also ideal as a 'base' for America due to its close proximity to the communist-influenced countries of Laos and Vietnam. The propinquity of Thai and American government interests led to their continued close cooperation against the communist threat in Southeast Asia, and indeed Thai government actions within Thailand reveal this as a common goal<sup>5</sup>. Richard A. Ruth even labels the 1960s as the 'American era' due to the vast influx of American culture (Ruth, 2011). The United States financially supported the deployment of Thai troops in its war against communist forces and tens of thousands of US military were stationed throughout the

country<sup>6</sup>. This stationing of around 45,000 American troops in Thailand transformed Thai society and in particular did so for rural people (Ruth 2011:31). *Tone's* depiction was a result of this strong American presence in the nation, garnered by Thailand's uninhibited cooperation with the American military throughout the Vietnam War.

Records from this era indicate that this agenda was so significant that film was even used as a means of combating communism, further demonstrating the importance of Thailand and Southeast Asia to American interests. In October 1953, the *Rengo Film News* magazine (an early post-war publication reporting on Hollywood interests in Asia) carries an article entitled 'I Went to the Movies with 1,000 Communists' which warns of the showing of 'anti-American' 'Marxian Ideology' films brought to Japan from China. Likewise, the 1953 Southeast Asian Film Federation was also closely followed by American sources in efforts to maintain control over the region. Concern about the communist threat occupies a great deal of the English language reporting around the Southeast Asian Federation and festival set up. Concerns are raised about communist influences in Japan and Indonesia, with a concentration upon how this surfaces in film. The emphasis upon maintaining American influence through ideology ties this government project very much together with Hollywood business interests regarding overseas revenue. Significantly, the Hollywood blacklist itself was at its height during the 1950s and indeed the Waldorf statement (issued in 1947) was issued by Eric A. Johnston who was president of the Motion Picture Association of America. His presence at the time when Southeast Asian film policy was being drafted therefore underlines dramatically the importance of American influence in this region to combat the spread of communism, in which cinema was vital tool.

The extent of American influence upon Thailand during this period is also evident through the mass influx of Hollywood during the post-war era and its affect upon the development of the Thai film industry. This indicates the dramatic changes Thai society was undergoing at this time, changes that affected the Thai film style and productions such as *Tone*. The

establishment of extremely close-ties with America immediately after World War Two resulted in an influx of American cultural and economic influence and “among the first companies to arrive [from America] were distributors of Hollywood films who formed a group in Bangkok” (Sukawong, 2001:12). This led to the building and improvement of urban cinemas in which to show these films, so “New, larger cinemas, with 1000 seats sprang up” (Ibid). These included ‘The Broadway’ on New Road in Bangkok and the Krung Kasem Theatre, all equipped with air conditioning, and the Cathay Cinema, which opened in 1958 exclusively screening Taiwan and Hong Kong Chinese productions. As I indicated in my introduction the influx of Hollywood films was rapid, and by 1954 of the principle distribution companies in Thailand, 86.8% were American (Panyarachun, 1954:57). The same year foreign pictures shown, both feature length and short, totalled 1858 while domestic production stood at 127 (a mixture of features and shorts), all of which was in 16mm (Ibid). Estimated box office revenue on domestic product was a mere 10m Tcs., while Foreign product stood at 60m (Ibid).

That such a vast import of American culture was affecting and transforming Thai society is also evident through the increased concern that Thai authorities displayed towards elements that could possibly challenge and disrupt the existing social order. A 1962 American report on Asian film distribution remarked that “Prime Minister Thanarat Sarit has ordered the banning of all films showing the latest dance craze, the twist, feeling portrayal of dance would undermine teenagers’ morals.” (Madar, 1962b:49) and one intrepid reporter also observed

With country still under martial law govt. is taking further steps to clamp down on entertainment and films are being more closely watched. Night club featuring a western strip show was raided by police and entertainer asked to change act. (Madar, 1961a:72)

The reporter then lists a number of banned Hollywood productions. Despite this, American interests were unhindered, and the magazine illustrates the uninhibited free reign of



American interests within the country with the further remark that "Thailand stands out as a lush green island surrounded by stormy seas" (Madar, 1961b:49), indicating that this cooperation, fuelled largely by the communist red-scare in Southeast Asia, was giving American pictures free reign at the expense of impeding Thai cinematic development.<sup>7</sup>

Along with this influence upon the Thai film industry, American money also contributed to rural development in building roads, machinery and other infrastructure that Ruth states transformed both the "physical landscape and social and economic systems" of rural Thailand in the 1950s and 60s along with its people (Ruth 2011:5). This changed the relationship between rural and urban Thailand forever as it made the transition between the two spheres much easier. The need for workers in urban areas also resulted in a flood of migrant workers into cities so constructing an "exchange between two formerly antithetical geographical cultures" (Ibid:6). This not only altered the make-up of urban Bangkok (previously an almost exclusive haunt for richer citizens) but impacted upon rural areas. The improved infrastructure and movement of workers to and from urban areas introduced new possibilities into rural and lower-class consciousness for the first time, ones that were intricately linked to the American influence that had caused them. As Ruth states:

The newly mobile brought back the ambitions, ideas and perspectives of the capital city. These men and women became a migratory population whose outlook was simultaneously rural and urban, traditional and modern, settled and restless (Ibid).

Modern and consumerist American culture came to represent new and radical developments, and in particular this was taken up by Thai youth culture. *Tone* becomes a youth movie for the young, a fantasy, a wish-fulfilment of a fully Americanised Thailand and as such is saturated with the ideology of global corporate capitalism that represents a freedom from the conformist village environment depicted in the 16mm era productions.

# The Film Style of *Tone*

In this engagement with American culture the film style of *Tone* is deliberately Americanised and altered. Anchalee Chaiworaporn describes it as a turning point for Thai film in terms of 'visual style' (cinematography, editing, music and *mise-en-scène*) and narrative (2001). As Uabumrungjit illustrates:

This film introduced a new look to Thai film, with sophisticated art direction, camera angles and pop music. It brought the young people – who thought Thai film was old fashioned – back into the cinemas. It was a film that nobody expected to be a hit and yet it changed the way of thinking in Thai filmmaking. (Uabumrungjit, 2001:138)

The film deviates significantly from the structural and thematic conventions of the 16mm era. There are far more shots within a scene and takes are much shorter, conversations are broken down into shot-reverse-shot sequences and high and low angles are often used. This is also coupled with a new urban and Americanised *mise-en-scène* as the film rejects the familiar setting and *mise-en-scène* of the Thai village (as seen in *Monrak Luktung* and the 16mm era) and instead changes its location to the city of Bangkok. For instance in Aod's birthday party sequence in Bangkok, revellers are filmed dancing in psychedelic 1960s flares and short mini-dresses with hair that is styled to match. Rather than the static long shots of the 16mm era the camera moves amongst them, uses canted angles and zooms in and out to focus upon the moving bodies in their tight, bright outfits and long, bare legs. The musicians play rock n' roll music on electric guitars, saxophones and drums, rather than the traditional Thai instruments and *luktung* music of *Monrak Luktung* and the 16mm era. The party is also awash with Pepsi umbrellas that surround the dancing characters, again locating these new and radical elements of *mise-en-scène* as one firmly within the context of American corporate capitalism's global ambitions.

Along with this radical *mise-en-scène* and film style, the narrative and characters of *Tone* are also starkly different to the 16mm era conventions. While the horror films of the 16mm era responded to increased mobility of the female by demonising such aspects, *Tone* instead presents this new Americanised culture of flares and mini skirts, Pepsi logos and rock n' roll music as attractive and liberating to both men and women. Instead of a reactionary relationship to potentially radical social elements such as uncontrolled femininity, the depictions in *Tone* hold quite a radical relationship to dominant social codes.

For instance *Tone's* portrayal does not adhere to the patriarchal and hierarchical status quo of a stereotypical fixed rural environment and the pre-determined conventions of traditional male and female character types. The characters and themes of *Tone* instead challenge such gender constructions. This is most evident in its depiction of women, one so radical that it "rewrote the way of representing Thai women" (Chaiworaporn, 2001:142). This is largely experienced through the perspective of *Tone* himself, the country boy who comes to Bangkok from a rural country environment and falls in love with Dang, the sassy street-wise sister of his friend Aod, who with her modern clothes and sharp tongue appears almost his polar opposite.

Dang exercises a far greater degree of autonomy than female characters in the 16mm era, controlling her own movement, dress and talking back to male characters like her brother and *Tone*. She is first introduced in a shot that depicts only her hand putting on a rock n' roll record, then the camera moves slowly up her body as she dances, revealing her skimpy clothes – bright coloured flares and cropped top – and her bare midriff. As *Tone* stands transfixed by her, she scolds him and then asks him to do up the zip on her top, something that *Tone* is shocked by. Throughout the film Dang is also extremely mobile; she climbs in and out of cars with men and drinks in bars. On their first date she also takes *Tone* to a bowling alley, indicating her familiarity with popular American culture, a modern, urban and foreign activity completely apart from the traditional village of the

16mm era. Posters of The Beatles and Petula Clark from the musical *Finian's Rainbow* (Francis Ford Coppola. 1968) (an illustration of the popularity of musicals within Thailand at this time) also cover Dang's bedroom wall, further associating this new and radical depiction of femininity with a non-Thai model of popular culture. Her fraternisation with 'bad' gangsters is also depicted and she is later kidnapped by them, not once but twice. This is completely the opposite to the shy, traditionally dressed *Nang-ek* of the 16mm era, the conventions of which would have demanded, of course, that such a character be rejected and punished. Yet Dang's lifestyle throughout the film is here presented as fun, exciting and desirable; she fits into neither the innocent angelic *Nang-ek* or the bad *toa-itcha* role. This plot is one that Chaiworaporn describes as "anti-formulaic" (Chaiworaporn, 2001:142) as although Dang certainly has to be saved by Tone from the gangsters she becomes involved with, she still ends up with him in the end, a development that Chaiworaporn labels as 'groundbreaking' for a Thai film plot.

## **The 'traditional' *Monrak Luktung***

The radical new direction that *Tone* carved for Thai film can also be illustrated through a brief examination of *Monrak Luktung*. As a successful film that was produced at the same time as *Tone*, this film indicates how strongly *Tone* rejected the previous conventions of the 16mm era. As illustrated early, *Monrak Luktung* was another production that lay at the transition of Thai film from the 16mm era into a much bigger 35mm industry. Almost all Thai film historians single out *Monrak Luktung* as a significant factor in the end of the 16mm era as its astounding success proved that 35mm synchronised film was viable as an investment, indicating how it performed a pivotal role in this transition and its technological advances. Unlike *Tone*, however, this production easily adheres to the framework of the 16mm era, even though it was made on different film stock with a much higher quality picture.

The film retains the 16mm era film form while also branching out into 35mm film. Its remarkable success indicates the continued relevance of the 16mm era film style to Thai filmmaking despite the progression of Thai film technologically and the new direction of *Tone*. The film ran for six months and earned thirteen million baht (Sungsri, 2004:134), a record for a Thai film, illustrating not only the durability and permanence of such aesthetics but that the lower-class viewers for whom the 16mm era catered for did not disappear.

*Monrak luktung* does not deviate from the film style or ideological thrust of the 16mm era. For instance, through its prior-known causal narrative, character types and musical numbers, the production displays an emphasis upon the aesthetic of attraction as a source of stimulation over that of narrative. It also blends a variety of stimulating genre numbers: there are instances of slapstick comedy blended with action in which country musicians fight each other with exaggerated comedy punches. There are also romance numbers, specifically the opening scene in which the shy heroine is romanced by the kind and humble hero. However Uabumrungjit locates its success largely in the use of popular musical numbers, of which the production boasts no less than fifteen; indeed, it was inspired by *The Sound of Music*, which had performed extremely well in Thailand (Uabumrungjit, 2001:138)<sup>9</sup>.

These deployed the popular traditional country music *Luktung* enjoyed by the rural lower classes, and they involve characters singing to tracks that declare their love and situation. Sungsri states that in Thai films *Luktung* "is sung by provincial singers to tell the story of provincial people" (Sungsri, 2004:74) so the use of and strong reliance upon this country music indicates *Monrak Luktung's* specific appeal to this same rural, lower-class and provincial audience of the 16mm era (indeed *luktung* sequences are also present in 16mm era films such as *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa*).

The production was shown within the same viewing context of the 16mm era audience, and indeed the film style of *Monrak Luktung* continues to reflect the film's construction as a conscious display to a communal audience. The rural country people are accordingly positioned in front of a largely static frontal camera in independent autonomic shots while they perform in a group together with traditional Thai instruments. Performers and groups of performers, such as the band of musicians (figure 12 and 13), are depicted in long shots and there are many ensemble shots of the whole cast (figure 14). Likewise the singers merely walk in and out of shots so illustrating that the cinematography and editing expresses continuity between scenes rather than using the continuity editing system to construct a voyeuristic spectator.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.

The story is also very similar to the themes of the 16mm era productions. It involves a poor man falling in love with a richer woman, and their struggle to end up together in the midst of a web of family relations and obligations. Again these familiar themes indicate a lack of Carroll's suspense structures and this is also supported by the familiar traditional characters such as the leading couple and the comic relief that, as in the 16mm era productions, fulfil prior-known narrative actions and conventions. *Monrak Luktung* even starred the famous duo Mitr Chaibancha and Petchara Chaowarat (in one of their very last films before his death), both of whom adhere very strongly to the good and chaste *Phrae-Ek* and *Nang-Ek* characters as they always depicted such types in the vast number of productions they starred in. Set largely in a provincial village, *Monrak Luktung* also plays upon 16mm era social and cultural formations. This includes an emphasis upon family conflict and older traditional entertainment such as the *chakchak wongwong*. Such discourses are clearly still relevant to the extended rural family as audience, indicating that despite this advancement in film technology little has changed in the lived experience and environment of rural Thailand and hence in the kinds of film and film style amenable to that group.

# The wider radical context of *Tone*

In contrast to *Monrak Luktung's* direct addressing of the lower-class spectator and context, *Tone* self-consciously rejected the 16mm era film style. This rejection was born out of the new and modern consumer culture that was transforming Thailand and arguably creating opportunities and lifestyles for Thai citizens that had previously been denied by the hierarchical divisions in the country. Although *Tone* may represent a wholehearted embrace of American cultural imperialism and the ideology of global capitalism alongside a rejecting of the lower-class viewpoint and film form, ironically its success can be attributed to a progressive political discourse within Thai youth.

The radical modern aesthetic and cinematography of *Tone* together with its *risqué* story pulled politicized and rebellious Thai youth into the cinema in droves, reflecting the changes enacted upon Thai society at this time and the transformations in the viewer's own lives. *Tone's* success was related to "the influence of Western youth counterculture in Thailand generally" (Chaiworaporn, 2001:142) as the film mediates young Thai citizens desire and ambition for this foreign lifestyle, positioning American culture as a new and modern form of expression counter to that of rural poverty, conformity and social control<sup>9</sup>.

The 1960s saw an increased questioning of and opposition to the military rule and political oppression endured by Thailand since 1948. Certainly there was growing dissatisfaction with the authoritarian and repressive regime of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat<sup>10</sup> during the 1960s and it was into this that the freedom and opposition represented by the infrastructure and consumerism of American popular culture fed. Associated with self-expression and opposition, this became a radical alternative 'counterculture' for hungry youths eager for the urban modernity so opposed to the tradition of rural life and their parents' generation.



Despite that fact that it was largely a result of American and Thai collaboration against leftist discourse that the Thai government was eager to suppress both internally and externally, this imported discourse from America nevertheless provided a vehicle for radical and rebellious Thai youth. *Tone* targeted younger Thai film goers by incorporating American popular culture into Thai cinema, performing a mediation of these new and modern elements at a time when they fed into a politically radical discourse. The film presents this discourse as an attractive alternative to rural traditional culture and the old-fashioned morals that the youth of Thailand were attempting to throw off. American popular culture with its 'rock n' roll' music and 'mini-skirts' symbolised this radical departure from the previous patriarchal status quo. The experiences of the main character, who migrates to the city and eventually mediates his own position in this new and attractive urban Americanised Bangkok, are exciting, attractive and dangerous.

## **Other Thai productions in opposition to *Tone***

*Tone's* radical stance is further underlined by its thematic difference to other popular films made in the 1970s. These demonstrate a strong nationalist rhetoric in which a proto-communist 'other' is demonised. The villain in another 1970s 35mm film *Insee Thong* (Mitr Chaibanacha .1970), for instance, is arch hypnotist and trickster Bakin who is trying to take over Thailand and must be defeated by the superhero Golden Eagle. Together with his 'red bamboo' gang this appears to be a very thinly veiled reference to communist insurgents and Vietnamese communist revolutionary leader Ho Chi Min himself (to whom Bakin bears a strong resemblance). The 1977 production *Haek-kaai-narok-dian-bian-foo* (Choomphorn Tepitak. 1977) also continues this theme, depicting Thai soldiers being badly treated and imprisoned in a Vietnamese work camp.

This is in line with the strong anti-communist state rhetoric promoted by the government who sought to counter the encroachment of communism in Southeast Asia after World War Two by positioning it as a dangerous external 'other' in direct opposition to a nationalistically concerned and vehemently promoted 'Thainess' (Winichakul, 1994:170). Based on House Un-American Activities Committee legislation that since the 1940s had repudiated communism as essentially anti-American, the Thai anticommunist act of 1952 emphasised that "communism is un-Thai in its ideas and as a way of life" (Ibid:6). In the talks surrounding the first Southeast Asian film festival in 1953 for instance, concerns around the spread of communist influences in the new Film Federation are raised by Thai delegates, including motions to amend the constitution to exclude productions that could possibly raise any form of political debate or questions. Clearly, the propinquity of Thai and American government interests had led not only to their continued close cooperation against the communist threat in Southeast Asia whereby Thai government actions reveal this as a common goal but it had resulted in a subtle Americanisation of Thai political discourse. Crucially *Tone* does not appear to engage with this discourse overtly; it is far more embedded in an ideology of freedom. It does not use difference to demonise an 'other' as an internal or external threat as other productions were doing. This therefore emphasises the new and different ideological position taken by this mainstream Thai film towards the changing social environment of its viewers: one that nevertheless still differentiates itself from the lower-class perspective and entertainments.

## **The 'Social Problem' era**

Instead of the traditional discourse of the 16mm era, *Tone* is further distinguished from this lower-class model by the fact that it paved the way for the birth of a small number of 'social problem' films that continued throughout the 1970s. This illustrates both how radical this production was that it led to this brief alternative movement and how Thai cinema continued to respond to the wider social upheaval of the post-war era. The

hopeful and innocent enthusiasm of *Tone* for new ways of living was not shared by a government that sought greater control over its citizens than free market capitalism allowed and the social resistance against this directly resulted in the social problem film.

*Tone* fed into what Chaiworaporn labels as the 1970s 'culture of dissent', of which the 'social problem' films were a significant part (2001:143). Indeed, the 1970s turned into a period of dramatic political and social turmoil in Thailand. A growing dissatisfaction with the military rule Thailand had endured since the end of the war and a push in favour of democracy culminated in huge demonstrations. The discontent brewing from Thailand's military rule eventually culminated in the October 1973 revolution, in which the ruling Junta was forced to step down after firing upon a mass student demonstration. A brief period of democratic rule ensued under which Thai artists enjoyed freedom and creativity. This was crushed in the bloody coup of 1976, however, in which around a hundred demonstrating students were brutally murdered and many more injured when both police and anti-communist vigilantes of the Red Gaur organisation stormed the gates of Thammasat University and brutally lynched, beat, raped and burned a peaceful group of 4000 students and workers staging a sit in. Military rule again ensued and anti-leftist rhetoric swept the country.

The release of a handful of 'social problem' films was a direct product of directors from this socially conscious era, who were able to capitalise on the success of *Tone*, both in terms of its more technically competent film style and unconventional storylines. These productions are noted by film historians for their socially conscious themes: they deal with issues in Thai society such as poverty, corruption, prostitution and inequality. Chaiworaporn (2001) singles out films such as *Khao Chue Kam* (Chatrichalerm Yukol. 1973) and *Talad Phromajaree* (Sakka jarujinda. 1973), both very socially critical films about struggling lower classes and corruption of authorities, as being directly influenced by the style of *Tone* in this way. They appealed to the young, educated and politically aware urban viewers, continuing *Tone*'s audience shift from the traditional audience of the

16mm era to modern urban youth. Indeed Chaiworaporn notes how in the 1970s, for about the first time in Thai film history, Thai productions appealed to intellectuals, an indication of the changing state of film in Thailand. This cycle indicates both how Thai film continued to respond to its social environment and the enormous influence *Tone* had upon this response that it was even a means of social protest.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, however, these politically progressive social problem films denied lower-class agency as, similar to *Tone*, they moved away from the Thai film style, indicating that while leftist intellectuals embraced them as representing a marginalised Thai point of view they also rejected this specific lower-class Thai culture.

## **The 16mm era characteristics in *Tone***

However, despite these radical ideological and stylistic changes, *Tone* still displays the conventions of the 16mm era film style and still adheres to this film form. The fact that such influences from the lower-class *chaobannok* audience are still present illustrates how this audience and its preferences continue to influence Thai filmmaking and betrays the origins of post-war Thai film as the lower-class entertainment that Thai elites so detested. Despite the influences transforming *Tone*, the conventions nurtured in the 16mm era did not vanish, indicating that while Thai film changed in its political response to wider social upheaval, it continued to respond in this distinctly Thai way. The identification of the characteristically Thai framework within a production seen as so revolutionary in its impact upon the Thai film industry also indicates how prominent and popular these nuances continued to be in Thailand. It illustrates that while viewing situations had changed, audiences had changed and Thailand itself had changed, this film style had a continued relevance to Thai viewers and an ability to adapt to new and changing circumstances.

For instance, *Tone* places great emphasis upon musical numbers and the aesthetic of attraction as a source of stimulation over that of narrative. The many musical numbers,

with characters singing and dancing throughout, are largely separate from narrative events and function as spectacles in their own right, especially given their incorporation of contemporary American influenced 'rock and roll' tracks. Along with this music, the modern 1960s costumes and hairstyles also function as spectacles, with the camera deliberately singling out dancers who have no contribution to the narrative. Although these sequences may be very different in terms of the music used, they still function as 'numbers' and still deploy the aesthetic of attraction over that of narrative integration. The narrative itself also follows the familiar prior-known story of a couple who will get together at the end, in particular a love story involving a shy boy and outgoing girl – one very similar to 16mm era productions.

One particular sequence includes a montage of images of Tone and Dang spending time together, a sequence that certainly does not raise questions as to the eventual outcome of this relationship, so discounting suspense or mystery as a source of stimulation. To add to this conventional story structure, many of the characters are also recognisable types (despite the unconventional depiction of Dang). Tone himself is a pure-hearted *Phra-ek* who is a diligent student, takes food for the temple monks and fights to save Dang. Alongside this, the village comedian Seng is present as the *toa talok* and cracks jokes as a sidekick to the hero. Similar to the 16mm era comedians Seng looks funny (being very skinny with a strangely shaped head and few teeth) and provides some guidance to the hero throughout, in exactly the same way as in the 16mm era production *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa*. His performance style is also suitably histrionic, indicating that even this modern youth-orientated Thai film adheres in many ways to a theatrical display rather than purely a voyeuristic and verisimilitudinous experience. Indeed the handsome hero, the beautiful heroine, the odd-looking comedian and the seedy villains all still adhere to the physical construction of these character types, so still defining them largely by their appearance however much their costumes may have changed.

The film also blends many genres, mostly notably the ending action number of a fight on a moving vehicle, the crime shoot-out number with the gangsters in the end, the musical numbers and of course the romantic numbers between Tone and Dang. Likewise, although the cinematography has certainly advanced, there is still a great use of independent autonomous long shots, especially when depicting the musical performers and fight sequences.

The 16mm era framework therefore did not vanish but instead adapted to suit the contextual situation, changing its music, *mise-en-scène* and characters into a more modern style. A close examination of *Tone* indicates that this significant film is still influenced by the 16mm era characteristics and the preferences of the lower-class viewer and context. The 16mm era film style therefore continues to permeate Thai filmmaking, indicating the origins of the hybrid nature of New Thai productions.

## The B-grade Productions

Despite the success of *Tone* and the social problem films, another model of Thai film continued to thrive in lower-class and rural picture houses. This continues separate from the urban productions and modernity of *Tone* and the Social Problem films, and was an informal independent sector of what Chaiworaporn titles as “B-grade productions” (Chaiworaporn 2001:156). This was the result of major developments that occurred in the Thai film industry that significantly altered the production of film in Thailand. In 1977 the tax on imported foreign productions was increased, resulting in somewhat of a boycott by foreign distributors. The lack of foreign imports resulted in what Chaiworaporn labels the post-1976 ‘boom period’ of Thai cinema, when up to 160 productions were made annually and resulted in the emergence of a great many new filmmakers (Ibid). Crucially, this opportunity allowed a greater level of organisation in the industry, with several influential production companies founded. In a model echoing that of vertical integration in the U.S.

these not only made films but also controlled their own distribution and even cinemas (Dome Sukawong, 2001:14). As with the American system of big studio dominance, this inevitably caused the small independent producers from the 16mm era to disappear (ibid). This boom was to end in the early 1980s, when, with the return of Hollywood productions and increased availability of video rental "more than 700 cinemas and 1000 open-air screens disappeared." (ibid).

The B-grade productions of the 1970s further demonstrate how Thai film continues to follow the 16mm era film style to a significant extent and so deviates from the Natural Language of horror. Again this indicates a source behind the hybrid nature of the contemporary New Thai industry and yet again connects this specifically to the Thai lower classes. An examination of the B-grade productions illustrates how despite *Tone's* substantial rejection of the 16mm era film style and its audience's preferences in favour of the adoption of American capitalist ideology and film style, the lower-class perspective and film style of the 16mm era continued to exist and was catered for by this informal industry. These productions indicate how the 16mm era characteristics continued in the form of an informal industry which adhered to the 16mm era film style and directly targeted lower-class provincial Thai viewers who had been both neglected and exploited in the post-war push towards economic prosperity.

For instance this adherence to the 16mm era and its lower-class context is evident in an examination of the audience and cinemas of the B-grade productions. The films targeted the mass lower-class provincial audience that was largely excluded from the celebration of urban modernity depicted in *Tone*. They were still shown in Fouquet's second and third class suburban and provincial cinemas as well as the mobile itinerant theatres, all of which continued to engender the informal exhibition context and the shared pleasure atmosphere in which the 16mm era functioned. By way of illustration May Adadol Ingawanij also speaks of how even so long after the demise of the 16mm era, filmmakers understood "the prevailing wisdom that Thai films needed to cater to the nationwide

provincial market" (Ingawanij, 2006:152) indicating that this continued to be a primary audience from World War Two right up into the late 1980s. Chaiworaporn also indicates that the B-movie productions were screened in the "second-class suburban or provincial cinemas" (Chaiworaporn, 2001:156) that the 16mm era had formerly catered for. Even as late as 1992 *Asian Advertising and Marketing Magazine* mentions the 'outdoor movies' and 'mobile movies' that tour the provinces outside Bangkok and in which companies are able to place commercials, giving the example of the Nestle Company that "achieves brand awareness upcountry by buying commercial time in outdoor movies." (Hamid, 1992:40-42)<sup>12</sup>. These 'outdoor' and 'mobile' films are the primary scenario in which the informal atmosphere of shared pleasure existed, illustrating how the film form tailored to this context thrived and was continued in the B-grade productions.

A textual examination of *Baan Phii Pop* (Srisawat. 1989) illustrates the targeting of the rural audience by the B-grade productions and how adverse these films are to the celebration of urban modernity depicted in *Tone*. This is the production that Chaiworaporn uses as synecdochal of the B-grade audience and industry as it is "a film so popular that thirteen subsequent sequels have been made, all with the same actors and characters, and specifically targeted at rural audiences" (2001:156). This popular film series was released from 1989 until 1994, around the time that the urban cinemas came into existence as a truly significant viewing scenario. It is a film, moreover, that for all the previous youth and social angles of *Tone* and the Social Problem films, demonstrates the continued primacy of horror in Thai filmmaking. As with the 16mm era, it is important to stress that no in depth formal analysis of this series has been conducted by critics, despite its clear significance in the history and development of Thai cinema, a significance underlined by the original's many sequels and its 2008 remake starring the same lead actress Nattanee Sitthisaman.

## ***Baan Phii Pop***



A close reading of *Baan Phii Pop* illustrates how the subject matter and setting of the provincial B-movies is very different to the urban Americanised *mise-en-scène* and setting of *Tone*. Instead the films are set largely in outer villages and towns. This echoes the situation of the lower-class audience for whom this urban capitalist dream was not viable and further illustrates how the B-grade productions targeted this marginalised spectator in a similar way to the 16mm era. In all productions studied, the setting is overwhelmingly rural and provincial even if it is not relegated completely within one particular village.

*Baan Phii Pop* focuses almost exclusively upon rural village life and the lower classes within it and there are many events within the narrative that are unique to and specifically connected to this environment. For instance the village *mise-en-scène* of wooden houses features prominently, and the structures of the dwellings – high up off the ground on stilts with slats for walls – help assist in constructing ‘numbers’, with people leaping in and out when scared by the ghost. The traditional walls of wooden slats also help create an eerie chiaroscuro effect, casting shadows across the setting. Perhaps most prominently, the forest outside the village is still a crucial setting in which much of the narrative takes place and the frequent use of long shots highlights the importance of situating the characters within this. We also see the main female character Pra Preung bathing in a river wearing a sarong and the comedic buffoons spying on her. This is very similar to the female character Taa-Nii in the 16mm production *Nang-Phra-Taa-Nii* in a scene that depicts a man spying upon her while she is bathing wearing a sarong. That this very similar scene should exist in two films that are decades apart illustrates the productions targeting of the rural lower-class audience rather than the ‘modernity’ of American capitalism and economic development transforming urban Thailand: bathing in the river is an everyday activity undertaken by village inhabitants, and women wear a sarong to conceal their modesty, a situation ripe for voyeurs to exploit and so a staple source of slapstick comedy (indeed in both of these films decades apart it is used as a source of comedy).

The narrative of *Baan Phii Pop* is also completely the opposite to *Tone*, which depicts a shy village boy travelling to the city and experiencing the wonders of modernity. Instead, this B-grade production depicts an educated urban doctor coming into a rural village environment and falling for a shy good-hearted village girl. This is entwined within the story of a rural provincial village whose inhabitants are terrorised by a Phii Pop ghost, a malevolent spirit that can possess a person and force them to come out at night to eat raw animal and human entrails. The film begins with a grandmother who is possessed and attacks people around the village. This old woman is nursed and helped by a good and pure young woman called Pra-Preung. A group of doctors visiting from the city is then attacked and chased at night by the Phii Pop, and Pra-Preung saves them. The head doctor Dr. Ret is immediately attracted to Pra-Preung, but when the village send a shaman to exorcise the grandmother he stops them, thinking that the woman is merely old and sick. Later in the night the Shaman is killed by the Phii-Pop. The village headman's daughter Kradeung is also attracted to Dr Ret and jealous of Pra-Preung. Throughout this a group of three badly dressed buffoons/fools are also frightened by the Phii-Pop grandmother and crack jokes continuously.

This storyline and its themes are reminiscent of the 16mm era productions and echo the rural lower-class situation, demonstrating the continued existence of this audience and context even during the period of economic growth and the embracing of modernity depicted in *Tone*. The film indicates how little has changed in the everyday reality of the viewers consuming the texts: people still bathe in sarongs in the river, still build their own wooden houses, and still live alongside dense untamed jungle. Dr. Ret is very similar to the handsome hero characters in the 16mm era productions: he arrives into the village as an educated outsider from Bangkok and becomes romantically interested in the shy village girl Pra Preung. The figure of the handsome outsider hero character arriving to romance the shy village girl illustrates that Bangkok and modern urban life is one that is

still far beyond the reality of most rural inhabitants, and is only accessible through this fantasy figure coming to 'rescue' the lower-class woman.

It is also significant that it is the urban Bangkokian outsider who attempts to stop the shaman's exorcism and finds the existence of the Phii Pop very difficult to understand. Dr. Ret unwittingly and ignorantly interferes in village life, preventing the shaman (known in Thai as *mor-Phii* – literally 'spirit doctor') from violently exorcising the Pop ghost from the old grandmother. This indicates how adverse and alien the rural and urban contexts are to each other and that for rural viewers their environment is still situated alongside the wild and untamed domain of the spirits, one constructed in opposition to the modernity of the educated doctors. Likewise the uncanny forest in which the Pop ghost flies through the air and chases the doctors also acts as an antithesis to the modern domain of Bangkok and Dr Ret. However the village's actions are also in fact the true and correct way to deal with this situation; Dr Ret's viewpoint is flawed and his misunderstanding causes both the later killing of the shaman by the Phii Pop and the continued existence of this threat in the village. It is also the rural village girl Pra Preung who must rescue the supposedly educated and 'superior' doctors from the ghost. This championing of the village way of life as the correct means of dealing with a very legitimate threat further indicates how it is designed to appeal distinctly to this marginalised rural audience and ultimately advocates their point of view.

## **The themes, discourses and political categorisation of the B-grade Productions**

Likewise, instead of embracing the 'progress' and revolutionary potential of the ostensible freedoms of American capitalism (as depicted in *Tone*), many discourses of the B-grade productions also articulate the corresponding social upheaval and exploitation of lower-class rural Thailand that followed this post-war development. The B-grade productions continue to address the wider concerns of lower-class Thai society and reject the modernity of American capitalism depicted in *Tone*. Specifically the productions articulate the traumatic experiences of this marginalised audience, indicating the continued centrality of the lower-class perspective to Thai filmmaking and adding weight to my interpretation of their traumatic influence upon the contemporary industry. In particular, the exploitation of lower-class Thailand during the post-war era is articulated in the horror films of the B-grade productions.

This articulation of and connection to the lower-class experience during the 'American era' can be seen in the fact that a number of horror films from the late 1970s to 1980s possess a very different relationship to wider cultural concerns than that of the reactionary position of the 16mm era. Productions that target the lower-class audience have now shifted in keeping with the wider social context in order to continue to mediate such changes.

## **The Righteous Monstrous Feminine**

For instance, while such productions still retain a thematic link between women and the supernatural, the depiction of these women has now evolved, responding and shifting in keeping with the wider Thai context.<sup>13</sup> This new depiction involves portraying tragic 'fallen' women. Such women take legitimate revenge upon the men who abused them in life, rather than simply serving their own bloodthirsty interests or lusts. Repeatedly in the B-grade productions, women who have been ill-treated victims of patriarchal abuse return with vengeance after their deaths to inflict violence upon those who mistreated them.

This means that rather than a conservative and reactionary discourse that punishes women for possessing such a means of autonomy, many B-grade productions instead depict ghostly women as vengeful and righteous in what now appears to be a progressive response to the exploitation of women and the lower classes throughout the post-war economic boom. While the 16mm era productions demonise the feminine through their supernatural connection (depicting them as screeching ghosts, rotten corpses and bloodied repulsive monsters) and fear this power attributed to them in a kind of patriarchal warning against uncontrolled femininity, many of the later B-grade productions seem to attribute not only more sympathy to the women's plight, but view their actions as justifiable in the face of their exploitation by unjust men.

This occurs in productions such as *Phii-Sam-Oy* (Nai-Gaay. 1990) made in 1990 (a title that translates roughly as 'Sympathy Ghost'), that tells the story of a young *sam-lor* driver Nat-Ti who lives separately with two young women: Ja-rit-yaa and after that Jit-Taa. Upon discovering this betrayal Ja-rit-yaa commits suicide, her spirit then returning and acting violently, killing many shamans who attempt to remove her. Similarly *Phuu-Ti-Sa-Ney-Haa* (Supasith. 1987) tells the story of a young woman returning as a ghost to take revenge upon the three men who killed her<sup>14</sup>. Many of these productions also involve characters moving from rural to urban areas to try and make better lives for themselves and their families, moves which inevitably lead them into prostitution and tragedy, indicating how these lower-class women are not only victims but also subject to a traumatic process of cultural dislocation and isolation. This illustrates how, as in the Natural Language of horror, Thai horror continues to change in line with wider social developments and upheavals.

This narrative of female vengeance through supernatural means is by no means new. Carol Clover for instance regards the rape revenge narrative as a classic and staple plot in modern American horror films (Clover, 1993:115) and together with other theorists regards this recurring motif as a traumatic mediation of an exploitive, abusive and

ultimately unaccountable wider social context. Blake also argues that the ghostly Japanese *onryou* figure became prominent as a cinematic discourse in the 1960s as a means of demanding retribution for previous historical crimes against Japan in general and Japanese women specifically that remain unpunished (Blake, 2008:44). These repulsive, undead female corpses “return from the dead to demand retribution for the hitherto concealed wounds inflicted on the nation for hitherto unpunished historical crimes” (Ibid:44) and become in the process the ‘political unconscious’ of the ‘cultural life of the nation’ (Ibid). As a figure, the vengeful female *onryou* thus served in Japan to undermine the masculine and militaristic *Bushido* code, a purpose also echoed in the 1998 film *Ringu*, when Blake argues that Sadako, the undead and vengeful victim of male aggression, becomes “that which will not be eradicated by US colonialism in Japan or the Japanese refusal to acknowledge the sins of its own past” (Ibid:54). Transplanted to America in Gore Verbinski’s 2002 remake *The Ring*, the punishing *onryou* figure also undercuts the validity of the conformist capitalist ideology of American national identity and their supposedly superior cultural status (Ibid:63).

## **The exploitation of women in post-war**

### **Thailand**

In much the same vein, the vengeful *Phii* of the B-grade productions can also be seen as an encoded representation of an exploitive and unaccountable surrounding context, specifically the abuse of lower-class women during the 1970s and 80s. The glossy consumerist American culture and the modernisation in the post-war era that was so radical in *Tone* may have brought positive affects in terms of improved roads, communications, cinemas and job possibilities but it also had many negative effects upon the lived environment of the Thai lower classes and specifically lower-class Thai women.

It is this that the vengeful ghosts of the B-grade films articulate and this indicates how Thai cinema continues to remain deeply embedded in the lower-class experience.

Inspired by the shining examples of nearby Singapore and Hong Kong, throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s Thailand had “plunged headlong into a postmodernist global economy” (Hamilton, 1994: 142) as it followed “an export-orientated (“neo-liberal”) growth model promoted by the World Bank” (Bell, 1997:56). Modernity, business and economic investment was promoted by Thai elites as a positive step forward and a form of growth for the nation. Rapid economic growth occurred throughout Southeast Asia during this period, with Thailand’s being the highest of all. Specifically this involved a high level of non-Thai Euro-American investment, partly, as Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker have argued, because “foreign investors liked Thailand’s combination of relative political stability and relatively cheap labour” (Phongpaichit and Baker, 1998:312).

Thailand thus followed a growth model promoted by the World Bank (and based upon a Western system) that actually “intensified regional, class and gender biases in the society” (Bell, 1997:56). Through such exploitation the Thai economy was able to grow substantially, particularly between 1985 and 1995, but despite such economic prosperity little changed for the ordinary lower-class Thai citizen. Little of the newly created wealth actually filtered down to the ‘cheap labour’ that generated it, and Thailand became one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of wealth distribution. This enormous social change also reorganised the ways in which families and villages were structured, leaving many rural families heavily dependent upon the sons and daughters who had been sent to work in factories and cities. The discrepancy between upper and lower-class living standards grew. While cities such as Bangkok grew enormously and spectacularly, with air-conditioned cinemas in luxury shopping centres showing Hollywood blockbusters, life in the outer provinces and the villages within them changed little: rice farming continued to be the main source of income and the mobile *Nang-Re* touring cinemas continued to cater for a communal form of viewing appropriate to village life.

A key part of this rapid push towards modernisation was the abuse and mistreatment of Thai women. The economist Peter Bell even goes as far as to state that "Thailand's economic miracle has been built largely on the backs of women" (Bell, 1997:55). The 1980s produced what Bell terms as "the feminisation of production", a process of rapid economic growth and one that rested ultimately "upon the patriarchal subordination of women in factories, commercial sex work, and unpaid agricultural and household labour" (Ibid:56). Throughout the late twentieth century and particularly the early 1990s the push towards modernisation (in this case a fast-track model of Western style capitalism) resulted directly in women being exploited along with the rural poor and ethnic minorities, who benefited the least from this so-called 'miracle' and also suffered the most as a result of its downfall in the 1997 economic crisis<sup>15</sup>.

The vengeful women emerging in the B-grade productions were clearly a response to such harsh treatment, indicating how Thai horror continued to respond to the wider social context and the lived experience of these specific lower-class viewers. As noted by Wood (2004) in his exploration of various American horror cycles, the 'political categorization' of Thai horror films has now 'evolved', adopting a very different view of this new but still avowedly patriarchal social context and ideology. Rather than working through patriarchal horrors about female empowerment and liberation at a time of instability (as did the 16mm era films) the B-grade productions engage with the trauma of exploitation and voice encoded demands for social justice in the face of an unjust system that specifically mistreats women. Horror is once more the genre through which this traumatic upheaval can be acknowledged, as the female *Phii* avenge themselves, in effect, on the negative aspects of the impact of capitalist forces upon rural provincial Thailand during the economic growth of the 1970s, 1980s and early 90s and specifically the injustice and exploitation of female workers during the 1980s economic boom. They represent, I would argue, the unacknowledged and unrepresented trauma inherent in such mistreatment.



The deployment of the supernatural within Thai cinema had therefore begun to change and now became a vehicle for anger at the lack of social rewards and the continual denial of lower-class marginalised groups who were forced outside of the sphere of urban affluence they had worked to create. In a similar way to that noted in the 16mm era productions, the supernatural is being used as a source of empowerment by lower-class women; however it is no longer used to demonise women but is now actually being treated as legitimate and righteous. In the 16mm era, traditional family values were being reaffirmed through demonising independently mobile and actively desiring women who then functioned as a vehicle through which these repressed desires and behaviours could be deposited and destroyed in order to keep alienated labour and the patriarchal family safe (Wood). However the vengeful demonic female figures of the B-grade productions now appear to function as a warning to society that there are dangerous consequences to this mistreatment and abuse: Thongchai's barbarian 'others from within' are no longer irrational and the patriarchal family is now a corrupt institution associated with oppression and unjust treatment. Rather than a means to promote patriarchal structures of control at a time when the construction of gender roles is changing within society, this suggests more a need for just treatment of this exploited and vulnerable sex.

## **The Progressive Supernatural in the Wider Thai context**

This plethora of productions containing vengeful female spirits who (in common with the earlier 16mm era female spirits) maintain a destructive and dangerous amount of power, can also be attributed to the movement beyond the provincial villages of the female-run spirit cults and their stereotyped superstitious *chaobannok*. Yet again the fact that the B-

grade productions respond to such aspects illustrates the deep connection between Thai productions and the lower-class context.

In this period female spirit cults were becoming an established and legitimate means of negotiating the wider context and experience for disillusioned and marginalised female urban workers. Clearly the supernatural was continuing to be used culturally as means of assimilating the traumatic experiences of social stratification and rapid modernisation into “an established framework of understanding” (Levi and Rothberg, 2003:189) and this function is reflected in Thai films. Animist traditions were still prevalent within Thailand in this period and even in the 1990s the up-country village continued to be placed in close proximity to the outer edges of karma. However with the movement of many citizens from rural to urban areas in search of employment the supernatural changed from a discourse associated with a backwards and superstitious rural viewer to a legitimate means of addressing, incorporating and possibly commenting upon the social experience of urban and rural Thais.

For instance Mary Beth Mills (1995) documents and analyses an outbreak of ‘hysteria’ in a Northeastern village in 1990 around a spate of supposed attacks by “maurading” and “sexually voracious” widow ghosts who were reported to be attacking sleeping men. This she interprets in part as a traumatic mediation of the villagers’ awareness of their own exclusion from new and modern comforts enjoyed by urban and upper classes, indicating how the supernatural still functions as a vehicle for wider social disillusionment. Likewise Paritta Kitiarsa (1999) documents the popularity of spirit cults amongst modern urban Thai people over that of the official Buddhist temple order. This continues despite opposition and suspicion from the dominant state and Buddhist order towards these female leaders, who are outside of state control but nevertheless invited to participate in and comment upon society due to their importance and high standing to ordinary people (libid:2)<sup>16</sup>. While Paritta gives the familiar reason behind the domination of popular and supernatural social elements by women as one connected to the exclusion of the feminine from state

and Buddhist discourses due to their inferior status, the dissatisfaction of ordinary Thais with the dominant order also certainly increased their popularity. This unofficial order had begun to appeal to the stressed and overworked urban population, for whom the dominant order and its exploitative economy no longer held answers. The B-grade productions echoed this shift and in adopting such discourses continued to negotiate this traumatic context for the lower-class viewer.

## **The 16mm era Characteristics in *Baan Phii Pop***

This lower-class point of view is not only articulated through themes and discourses. Alongside the attention paid to abused lower-class Thai women in the new political stance of the films, the B-grade productions also continue to depict their stories and characters through the film style of the 16mm era. Although the political categorisation of the response may have shifted, the B-grade horror productions retain the formal framework pioneered in the post-war era. Again this begins to illustrate how the contemporary New Thai industry continues to be influenced by these elements. While such lower-class stylistics were notably suppressed in *Tone* and virtually erased from the Social Problem films, the B-grade productions embrace this film style as an alternative form of representation and mediation for the neglected and marginalised lower-class audience, indicating their rejection of this exploitive foreign culture formally as well as thematically.

In retaining this film style, productions become a formal expression of the lower-class frustration and dissatisfaction with the American capitalism celebrated in *Tone* as they continue to reject the Natural Language of film as it is defined by Euro-American (and most notably Hollywood) productions. They return to this 16mm era film style as a means of articulating the lower-class exploitation their viewers were experiencing and in doing so

reject the celebratory embracing of capitalist prosperity that their vengeful female characters were protesting against.

Indeed, apart from advances in film quality and a slightly wider audience, there is very little formal means to distinguish between the 16mm era productions and the B-grade productions of the 1980s and 1990s. The connection is evident in formal aesthetics such as the conventional narrative structure, the privileging of the 'aesthetic of attraction', the blending of emotional 'numbers' and the corresponding presentational film style as well as in the informal environment of communal shared pleasure, all of which, as we have seen, engendered a specific film style very different to that of the Natural Language of horror.

The retention of this film form is particularly significant given the increased technical ability of Thai film and the lessening of the financial risk involved in making films. New equipment was now much more readily available and filmmaking was no longer a 'cottage industry' that had to guarantee instant returns (due to the demand during the previously mentioned Hollywood boycott). Smaller and more mobile cameras and 35mm synchronised sound meant that Thai film was able to experiment more and no longer had to exclusively stick to the rigid formula and established theatrical conventions of the 16mm era and prior-existing indigenous media. It is significant therefore that the 16mm era conventions continue to survive, indicating how this film style is still relevant to the lower-class Thai viewer as a form of representation and one that stands in opposition to the growing influence of exploitive foreign modernity in the form of increasingly sophisticated Hollywood productions. A close reading of *Baan Phii Pop* illustrates how this lower-class film style was still present in this significant production and how it becomes particularly evident in horror due to the continued deviation of Thai horror from the Natural Language of conventions explored in the previous chapter.

For instance *Baan Phii Pop* indicates that the supernatural still does not appear to be violating 'Natural Law' in the way that was a crucial part of forming the Natural Language

of horror and the horror genre. This illustrates that the film employs the specific Thai cultural logics from rural lower-class Thailand, ones that reflect the beliefs in and position of the supernatural in society from this social group and therefore rejects the Natural Language of horror in favour of this marginalised viewer.

The film treats the supernatural as a frightening yet natural element in society, one that occurs automatically and elicits little dispute or protest from characters. For instance, despite the character's horror and fear at the Phii Pop ghost, their accepted existence of her is evident throughout. In the opening scene of *Baan Phii Pop* a woman gives birth and a man is immediately told to hide the umbilical cord lest a Pop ogre find it and eat it, so it is hardly a major disruption to the natural order when exactly this happens. The ghost is also not used to establish a dilemma or mystery that will drive the narrative, indicating the continued lack of mystique attributed to the supernatural. Visually the Pop ghost is fully revealed in the pre-title opening scene and so there is no process of discovery by either the viewer or the characters. When the man who is instructed to hide the newborn's umbilical cord is discovered murdered the next day the cause is immediately apparent, indicating that the presence of the *Phii Pop* is almost accepted as an element of village life. There is little investigation and even less attempt to explain the presence of the ghost in the village: the old woman is simply targeted and then revealed to be a host for the Pop ghost.

This rejection of the 'sophisticated' Natural Language of horror in favour of employing the lower-class 16mm era film style is also evident in *Baan Phii Pop*'s prior-known overarching narrative structure. This does not construct Carroll's suspenseful question and answer format associated with the Natural Language of horror but instead, similar to the 16mm era, the film follows a familiar prior-known structure and the characters are yet again 'types' to which the performers conform through their physical appearance and behaviour. The narrative depicts a handsome male outsider Dr Ret, with all the signifiers of modernity and urban life, arriving into a rural upcountry village and falling for the

beautiful traditional poor and chaste maiden Pra Preung. He is also pursued by the less-pure conniving and sexually voracious headman's daughter. Alongside this love triangle is the ghost story of the Phii Pop's possession of the old grandmother and her gory exploits of killing, chasing and eating entrails.

The story follows the educated urban doctors fleeing the Pop ghost while the beautiful and intelligent Pra-Preung devotes her time to selflessly caring for the old grandmother and rescues the doctors. These can be matched to characters from Thai traditional performance, so indicating the continuation of this distinctly Thai trait in Thai film. The *Baan Phii Pop* characters are defined purely by their physical attributes and outward exaggerated behaviour – the beautiful good-hearted heroine Pra-Preung (the *nang-ek*), the handsome outsider love-interest doctor Ret (the *Phra-ek*), the jealous scheming 'other woman' Kra-Deung (the *toa-itcha*), the wild-haired absurdly mis-matched clothed comedic buffoons (the *Toa-talok*), the drunken father, the cavalry villagers running around chasing the ghost and the flying screeching ghost herself (the Phii Pop possessed host). There is no inner psychological depth to these characters: the film is not driven by their personal desires and motivations or questions constructed by them. They instead fulfil roles that construct the pre-determined causal narrative. For instance Pra-preung and Dr. Ret must eventually fall in love despite Kra-Deung's scheming to keep them apart. Kra-Deung herself must be punished and indeed the film eventually depicts her as the next possessed person by the Phii Pop ghost.

Instead of a suspenseful narrative, this prior-known structure therefore places emphasis upon the aesthetic of attraction as a source of stimulation, a staple element of the 16mm era film style that the B-grade productions continue in their addressing and representation of the lower-class perspective. Many of the B-grade productions still utilise visceral genres that employ the 'aesthetic of attraction' as a primary source of stimulation. Observing the Thai films available to rent in the late 1980s, Hamilton mentions an abundance of "gangster films, melodramas and ghost stories" (1993:529) and that "there was a strong

preference, particularly in provincial areas, for Thai movies, closely followed by Chinese costume-history dramas (usually made in Singapore), and Hong Kong gangster movies.” (Ibid:523). Chaiworaporn also indicates of the second class suburban/provincial cinemas: “most movies shown in these venues fall into four genres: ghost stories, slapstick, drama and action, and soft porn” (2001:156). For instance films such as *Jolokay-Phii-Sing* (Rit-Ti-Narong. 1993) (which is about a crocodile monster) and *Phii-Saat-Meng-Mum-Sao* (Wan Chana. 1990) (about a spider monster) largely employ the aesthetic of attraction through numbers connected to their central monsters. This emphasis upon genres that employ numbers as a means of emotional engagement rather than narrative integration also indicates how these films still address the communal audience of the lower-class cinema houses and cultivate shared pleasure through this audience. This emphasis upon the aesthetic of attraction can also be seen in *Baan Phii Pop*. Emotional numbers create moments of heightened emotional stimulation through graphic display. These do not necessarily contribute towards creating dilemmas or situations that propel the film narratively and at times are even disconnected from the actual story.

Such a variety of numbers also blends a variety of emotions, so continuing to reject the Euro-American Natural Language of horror by neglecting to concentrate upon producing ‘fear’ and ‘disgust’. For instance slapstick comedy is created by the antics of the group of buffoons. These feature prominently throughout the film despite contributing very little to the overarching narrative. They tend to surface after the narrative event in scenes that most often involve them reacting outlandishly to the situation; for instance, just after Pra Preung visits the old grandmother they appear out of the background foliage to comment upon the possibility that she is possessed. Likewise horror numbers are cultivated in the close-ups of the Phii Pop’s face licking her lips while she searches for victims, the visual effects of her glowing eyes (figure 15.), her slaughtered victims (Figure 16.), the gory moments of her eating entrails and her flying across the screen when chasing the doctors in the forest.



Figure 15.



Figure 16.

Alongside horror and comedy, romance and melodrama also pepper the narrative, especially in the interactions between the Bangkok doctor Ret and the village girl Pra Preung. A sequence in which they enjoy a boat trip together along the river accompanied by non-diegetic soothing music functions as a romantic number that again contributes little to the story as a whole and outside of these conventions would seem a somewhat surprising addition to a horror film. There are even tinges of soft pornography and eroticism when Pra Preung is bathing and being spied upon by the fools. All of the



exploits such as the buffoonery of the fools, the comedic histrionic encounters between the villagers and the ghost, the disgust from the eating of entrails and the fear elicited by the Pop ghost chasing characters across the screen act as a series of numbers. The overarching loose narrative comes second as a source of engagement to the aesthetic of attraction and blends a variety of emotions within a single production. This indicates Thai film's adherence to the lower-class filmic preferences and rejection of the Americanised modernity represented in the complex characters and story of *Tone*.

Again similar to the 16mm era, *Baan Phii Pop* still conveys meaning and elicits emotional effects through *mise-en-scène* and a histrionic performance style. This is privileged over that of editing and cinematography. For example, *Baan Phii Pop* deploys a presentational style very similar to that recognised in the 16mm era productions, deploying Gunning's 'independent automate shots' through which to depict these emotional horror and comedy numbers. Within these shots stimulation is largely elicited through performance and this performance style consists of an exaggerated series of histrionic gestures, best illustrated through the slapstick comedy of the band of buffoons, the grotesque Phii Pop herself and the extreme hyperbolic portrayals of fear from those reacting to her.

For instance, the Phii Pop possessed grandmother who sneaks up, jumps and even flies down upon her victims, is rarely depicted in a subjective shot (through the gaze of another character). When Dr Ret and his sidekick are being chased around the forest by the flying Pop there is only a split second of a close up subjective shot when she pounces. Everything else is in long shot. During the chase sequence the camera barely moves; the shot is instead all based around a histrionic performance. This indicates the continued positioning of the audience as a communal group, exactly the opposite to the hidden voyeur of Euro-American cinema that *Tone* was beginning to introduce. *Baan Phii pop* was instead designed specifically for the lower-class cinemas rather than the urban multiplexes as (similar to the 16mm era) it follows the ethos of an objective display similar to a theatrical scenario and opposed to the voyeuristic point of view shots associated with

the natural language of horror and its subjective nature. The 'numbers' of *Baan Phii Pop* therefore reject this urban modernised film style as they are not constructed and depicted through shots edited together but rather within Gunning's independent automate long shots, indicating their championing of the marginalised rural lower-class viewer.

This style of filmmaking can be illustrated through close examination of a scene twelve minutes into the film, one that indicates the rejection of the voyeur positioning of the viewer associated with Hollywood and American modernity. This is a sequence in which the group of three buffoons are spying upon the young woman Pra Preung who has been visiting the grandmother who is suspected of being possessed by the Pop ghost. The fools discuss this supposed possession and are then scared away by the grandmother herself. The scene deploys independent automate long shots that place emphasis upon performance as a means to draw the viewer's attention rather than guiding their perspective through editing, indicating the production's stylistic adherence to the lower-class Thai film style over that of the urban and modernised Natural Language of horror.

The opening shot is a long shot in which the two women walk across and out of the frame. As they do so, the three fools appear from out of the foliage without any shot change, indicating that they have been hiding and spying upon the women (figure 17.).



Figure 17.

The fools then continue to be depicted in an autonomous long group shot, instead of through a sequence of shots edited together (figure 18.). Stimulation within the shot therefore relies upon their crazy appearance, behaviour and exaggerated physical movements – supported by comedic music and sound effects – to create the comedy number, rather than editing.



Figure 18.

Then in a medium group shot from the right, the old grandmother walks into shot (figure 19.).



Figure 19.

She is not depicted in a subjective point-of-view shot and so the aware audience is objectively watching the shock and surprise of the fools rather than subjectively experiencing it. When the old grandmother appears, the fools' reaction to her presence is shown in this objective medium long shot that contains all performers and they respond to her presence through wild histrionic gestures and cries of fear (figure 20.) indicating that even in moments that depend upon constructing surprises and shocks for the characters there are very few subjective or point of view shots to enable the viewer to experience this perspective. Instead, long shots that encompass both their reaction and the cause itself are used.



Figure 21.

However the purpose of this subjective shot appears to be to show the grandmother's performance in detail to rather understated comedic gesture of her hand waving.



Figure 20.

Only after this full revealing of the grandmother within the scene has occurred is a very brief medium close up shot of her then given (figure 21).



Figure 21.

However the purpose of this subjective shot appears to be to show the grandmother's performance in detail (a rather understated comedic gesture of her hand waving them

away) rather than to mimic a line of sight in order to allow the viewer to subjectively experience the perspective of shock and surprise from the buffoons. The film then goes back to the group shot, and after another quick shot-reverse-shot goes back to the group shot again in which the buffoons run away into the background and then out of the shot (figure 22.).



Figure 22.

Significantly when the fools run out of the shot, there are no cuts of multiple shots to depict their passage into the foliage. Similar to a stage performance they simply make their exit by running to the far deep space of the frame, their wild gesticulating performance making them easy to follow within this independent automate long shot (figures 23. and 24.).

Figure 24

The close analysis therefore indicates that this film still follows the same as characterizing and marks the film style associated with the Natural Language of home video. This position is further emphasized by the fact that *Base Film Pop* is made of language, the technical proficiency of the Natural Language of home video.



Figure 23.



Figure 24.

This close analysis therefore indicates that Thai film still follows the 16mm era characteristics and rejects the film style associated with the Natural Language of horror. What is more, this rejection is further emphasised by the fact that *Baan Phii Pop* is capable of emulating the technical proficiency of the Natural Language of horror while the

earlier 16mm era productions were not. This indicates that its rejection of Hollywood and Americanised urban modernity is a conscious decision, rather than a necessity brought about by the lack of technology or a need to adhere to indigenous entertainment forms already present (both of which -as I have illustrated- played a part in shaping the 16mm era). The B-grade productions are more technologically inventive than the 16mm era as filmmaking was now more technological capable and so could be more inventive in its use of cinematography. In *Baan Phii Pop*, for instance, the camera is far more mobile than in 16mm era productions and can follow actors by panning across the scene to record their movements. There are also more camera set-ups within a scene<sup>17</sup>. The fact that the film does contain *some* subjective shots also indicates that this means of representation *can* be used, indicating that the filmmaker instead deliberately chooses a presentational style similar to that of the 16mm era productions. Also, although there is a crude continuity structure of shot-reverse-shot in the scene from *Baan Phii Pop* (with the opening long shot serving as a crude establishing shot) this scene still contains an overwhelming amount of group shots and objective shots, indicating its adherence to this Thai style of filmmaking.

All of these observations therefore indicate that the 16mm era film style is now a specific preference of Thai filmmakers targeting a Thai audience and for this reason remains a strong influence upon Thai filmmaking. It indicates a rejection of the Natural Language of horror in favour of a lower-class perspective, again supporting my contention that the New Thai industry remains permeated by the 16mm characteristics and their lower-class origins.

## The Teen Cycle

This rejection of the dominant Natural Language of film and the championing of the lower-class point of view by the B-grade productions is further illustrated through the teen cycle. One of the major effects from the success of *Tone* had been the creation and recognition



of a new urban youth audience and this was capitalised upon in the mid-1980s in a cycle of productions that Ingawaniij refers to as the 'Thai teen movie cycle' (Ingawaniij, 2006). This is a series of Thai films that targeted urban teens and deployed an Americanised *mise-en-scène* in much the same way as *Tone* had over a decade before. The teen cycle is the last major stage of evolution before the creation of the New Thai industry. This short but highly significant era indicates how the 16mm era film style continues to permeate productions despite the rejection of the lower-class provincial viewer by this cycle of films. Ironically the Teen cycle also remains marginalised and dismissed due to its targeting of an 'unsophisticated' Teen viewer and incorporation of the Thai film style. Its historical proximity to and significance in the birth of the New Thai industry also furthers my contention that New Thai productions are permeated by such lower-class characteristics.

May Adadol Ingawaniij charts this cycle from 1985 until its demise alongside the rise of the contemporary film industry in the late 1990s (2006). It came about through the founding of Tai Entertainment Production Company in 1985 that, for the first time, recognised the merits of directly targeting exclusively urban teenage audiences and the potential of this market. Its creator Visute Poolvorak was attached by family to the exhibition industry and so was able to access the urban market for this filmmaking business venture. The success of their first pioneering production *Suam-Noi-Noikalon-Mak-Noi* (*Wataleela* and *Jitnukul*, 1985) pointed to the existence of a stable Bangkokian-based teen audience for filmmakers and distributors (Ingawaniij, 2006) who subsequently began to target this profitable niche audience rather than the upcountry public in general (Chaiworaporn 2001:154). The first run urban market proved much more profitable than the outer provinces and suburbs and so after recognising the potential of this specific spectator group "Tai entertainment revolutionised theatre standards, moving from old stand-alone cinemas and run-down mini-theatres, to the deluxe culture of multiplexes cinemas located in shopping complexes" (Chaiworaporn, 2001:154) and the urban cinemas in which the contemporary industry was to thrive were born.

The teen cycle's targeting of urban teenagers illustrates how opposed the B-grade productions were to the directions Thai film was taking in the urban context, thus further emphasising its rejection of this scenario and filmmaking style in favour of the lower-class audience. Crucially, these two models of film were occurring concurrently: the teen cycle ran from the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s, exactly the time framework within which the famous *Baan Phii Pop* production and its thirteen sequels were produced. Urban situated Thai film continued to exist separately from the lower-class rural scenario, rejecting this by deploying very different themes and *mise-en-scène* to that in the B-grade productions.

Instead of the rural situation evident in *Baan Phii Pop*, the teen productions responded to the lived environment and experiences of the 1980s urban teenagers. For instance Chaiworaporn defines the teen era productions through the presence of three main attributes, these are "teen or classroom drama, comedy and romance" (2001:155) and they appear to mostly follow a group of teenagers in Bangkok who are friends or housemates. For instance, the *Boonchoo* series which ran from 1988 until 1995 (with a remake made in 2008) follows a rural boy moving to study in Bangkok. It depicts his interactions with his comedic circle of friends, his preparing for university exams, his university life and eventually starting his working life. This was an unprecedented success, to the extent that it was eventually remade in the contemporary industry. Similar to *Boonchoo*, the narrative of *Chalui* (Adirek. 1988) and *Suam-Noi-Noikalon-Mak-Noi* follows "graduates, (mostly) young men, setting out to find their true vocations in the real world" (Ingawaniij, 2006:153). These want-to-be rockstar characters are "less driven by the compulsion to leave Bangkok behind and find work upcountry as doctors or teachers, than by their shared dream of rock stardom" (Ibid:153). This emphasis the teen cycle places upon such a young and urban group of characters reflects the lived environment of their primary audience, illustrating how Thai film continues to represent and negotiate the wider contextual environment of its specific viewers, but one that rejects the lower-class

perspective and exploitation articulated through the vengeful women and film style of the B-grade productions.

Instead of rural themes and discourses, the productions of the teen cycle place great emphasis upon the wider socio-cultural environment of urban Bangkokian teenagers, in this case one of Hollywood films and American music videos. These viewers were arguably the first generation in Thailand to grow up alongside the continued presence of the American popular culture seen as so foreign, exciting and modern in *Tone*. Thailand in the 1980s was entering the most prosperous final stage of over three decades of economic growth that had utterly transformed the country and increased access to global texts, products and commodities. The teen audience was mainly under seventeen and it was these urban-situated children of the 1960s who were born into and so defined themselves by such a system.

Therefore, in contrast to the championing of rural village life and the victims of modernity depicted in the B-grade productions, the teen cycle incorporates American pop culture references and music videos, recognising the distinct connection between the urban teens and a wider global vernacular of film and pop music. Ingawaniij attributes the fast paced and frantic nonsensical nature of the teen films to the final insertion of Thailand into a global "aesthetic economy" of which "the urban young, born from the 1960s onwards... came to be at the vanguard of its global image flow" (2006:155). She identifies the teen cycle largely through its allusion and parodying of "an array of global filmic and pop cultural references" (Ibid:153) interspersed into this narrative of teenage life. She notes how films such as *Chalui* and *Rong-Ta-Lap-Phlap* (Prachya Pinkaew. 1992) revel in their display as a copy and parody of teenage icons such as Michael Jackson, Marty McFly and a range of American genre film references. Later films such as *Loke thang bai hai nai khon diaw/Romantic Blues* (Rashane Limtrakul. 1995) also place greater emphasis upon the incorporations of the music video and pop-star performers, becoming a vehicle geared to "maximise the consumption of the multimedia pop-film product" (Ingawaniij, 2006:161).

For Ingawanij the teen films are most distinguishable through their 'stylistic borrowing' and 'intertextual allusion' that distinctly relies upon a 'knowingness' of its specific viewers to 'get' "an international array of generic pop cultural references" (Ibid:155). This 'knowingness' can speak only to them as a specific group and therefore singles out their lived experiences specifically. Through such pop-culture references, music videos, young stars and their friendships and aspirations the films of the teen cycle respond directly to the experiences of urban teen youth in the 1960s, who had grown up alongside the importing and integrating of this aesthetic and possessed a greater connection to it than any other demographic or social grouping, an experience represented by itself to itself.

## **16mm era Characteristics in the Teen era**

It is therefore highly significant that despite its significant change in audiences and venues the teen productions display many of the stylistics of the 16mm era and the B-grade productions, indicating that even when immersed completely in the *mise-en-scène* of American capitalism and popular culture Thai film is still imbued by its post-war origins in this lower-class film form. The films cannot completely cast off the lower-class viewer and their preferences even when targeting a seemingly completely removed urban youth viewer, demonstrating the continued relevance of this audience and these characteristics to Thai filmmaking.

For instance the stock characters are still largely based upon physical appearance and recognisable star images, though in this case those of pop stars rather than the physical prowess of the *Phra-ek* and the beauty of the *Nang-ek*. Instead many of the adolescent characters were played by recognisable teen pop stars. Describing the appeal of the 1986 teen film *Phuan/Friends* (Apitchaat Pothipiroj. 1986), Boonyaketmala states "Its

commercial appeal is obvious enough: the teen theme, three attractive young women and the fact that actor Rayway is also a pop singer. (The movie began its Bangkok run, naturally, during the school holidays.)" (Boonyaketmala, 1986b). This is reminiscent of the 16mm era characters who came already endowed with pre-constructed traits and narrative trajectories that could fit into a causal narrative and negate the need for a suspenseful structure.

Crucially, Ingawanij also observes that the loose love story narratives the films follow become somewhat secondary as a source of pleasure to that of the visual stimulation from the pop music aesthetics and star appeal. Instead the parodies, songs and comedic moments become a series of 'numbers' that "serve as a generic frame supporting the real attraction of the music video intervals" (2006:159). This is reminiscent of the characteristically Thai film form's emphasis upon the aesthetic of attraction over that of narrative based integration and development as a source of engagement. Ingawanij even uses Wyatt's term 'high-concept' to describe the teen productions, a description that places emphasis upon visual motifs over that of narrative, so reinforcing and entwining their appeal with that of visual spectacle and the aesthetic of attraction (Ibid). The blending of visually and emotionally stimulating 'numbers' from a variety of genres within the same text is also evident and can be seen in Ingawanij's varied description of the 1995 production *Loke thang bai hai nai khon diaw/Romantic Blues*. She describes its "combination of visual gloss, teen stars, pop stars, and the hybridization of teen romance with the shootout aesthetic of the Hong Kong gangster movie" (Ibid:158), indicating the teen productions also adhere somewhat to this 16mm era model. Again the continued permeation of the productions by such stylistic attributes demonstrated that Thai film remains affected by the lower-class underside it had supposedly begun to move away from.

Notably, the teen cycle was also subject to the patrician dismissal previously levelled at films of the 16mm era. This is a paternalistic dismissal of productions that were

nevertheless successful within a particular group of viewers. Despite its significance in the development of Thai film, the teen era remains critically marginalised and has been largely dismissed by both Thai and non-Thai historians and academics as a “culturally impoverished period in Thai film history” (Ingawanij, 2006:1), illustrating that the practice of viewing Thai film and the characteristically Thai film form as an inferior model of cinema by those outside of its targeted audience continued. Once again this dismissal is based upon constructing Thai films as crude productions that appeal to an unsophisticated marginalised audience, indicating how the derogatory attitudes targeting Thai film viewers and the stylistic attributes of the Thai film form continue to be based upon comparing this to a supposed superior Euro-American model of film.

For instance, writing in 1986, Boonyaketmala states dramatically of director Banchong Kosalwat, that “the vulgarity of Thai popular cinema... sickened his spirit” (1986a) when he returned to Thailand in the 1980s after studying filmmaking in American universities during the 1970s. Boonyaketmala also describes Banchong Kosalwat as “an ambitious film artist relatively unspoiled by the lures of commercialism” (Ibid) suggesting that it is this commercial success that would cheapen and destroy film as high art in Thailand. Only May Adadol Ingawanij has analysed this period and its productions in any real depth, and significantly her examination suggests that their dismissal by elites results not from their commercial success but rather from what she titles their ‘imitative’ quality (2006)<sup>18</sup>. This, she argues, is the real reason for the low standing of teen era productions<sup>19</sup>: in the same way as the 16mm era productions had for provincial viewers, they selected numbers and stylistics from a global vernacular that were most relevant to the young teen Thai audience, rather than discourses favoured by elites. They appropriated the teen popular culture that was regarded as a trashy global “vernacular of pop culture” (Ibid) rather than a specifically ‘authentic’ Thai discourse and depicted this through the Thai film form. Therefore despite this incorporation of a ‘global’ vernacular, the teen productions remain characteristically Thai and demonstrate a stylistic adherence to the 16mm era film form,

making them distinctly Thai products despite their perception as 'imitative' products. These condescending attitudes are therefore much more concerned with the targeting and preferences of this particular audience, one that is marginalised within society, and the productions seem to be dismissed upon this basis.

In this chapter I have illustrated that Thai film after the 16mm era shifted from targeting purely the lower-class audience and reinforcing their context to incorporating and negotiating the changes experienced by Thailand in the post-war era. Productions such as *Tone* embraced this supposedly modern and sophisticated foreign culture during the 'American era'. Other films such as the B-grade productions continued to address the lower-class viewer and function within this lower-class scenario, one that was very much apart from the economic and capitalist growth experienced by Thailand. In particular the lower-class perspective is articulated through the B-grade horror films of the 1970s, which function as an articulation of repressed lower-class and female exploitation during the economic boom. The teen cycle meanwhile targeted the new urban Thai teenager and incorporated the environment and experiences of the 1980s and this newly recognised consumer group.

Significantly, throughout all of these different developments and stages, the characteristics of the 16mm era film style continued to remain prominent and imbue Thai films, indicating the significance of the lower-class perspective to Thai filmmaking. This continued despite its inferior status, which was a result of the paternalistic marginalising of lower-class viewers and their entertainment by Thai elites. The continuation of this film style illustrates how significant this audience and its preferences continued to be in Thai entertainment and begins to indicate not only a source behind the form of the New Thai contemporary productions but also that this can be attributed to the marginalised lower classes.

The next chapter addresses Thai horror in the contemporary industry. It illustrates how film has now become the property of Thai elites and promotes a reactionary discourse of social control rather than negotiating the wider social context for different social groups. It explores the ways in which these lower-class characteristics that I have identified continue to imbue productions in this blockbuster industry and how (due to my previous examination in chapters one and two) these can then be interpreted as a traumatic expression of lower-class Thailand. This transforms New Thai film into a hybrid film form that contains elements from the 16mm era while aspiring to emulate the foreign and sophisticated Natural Language of horror. Additionally, it also assesses the reception of Thai horror on the international stage, indicating how the prominence of such distinctly Thai discourses begins to both popularise and problematise Thai horror for non-Thai viewers and cause the derogatory interpretations identified in my introduction.

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<sup>1</sup> However as Penny Van Esterik states: "Ironically, this official version of Thai culture was based on Western models and created by the suppression of a number of local traditions, most notably, the Lao of the northeast and Lanna of the north, both of which had distinctive scripts, literature and artistic traditions that were all but destroyed in the efforts to build a Thai national identity" (Van Esterik 2000:96).

<sup>2</sup> In the late 60s and 70s, Thai literature was divided into serious social commentary works composed by the educated intelligentsia and escapist mainstream novels serialized in popular magazines.

<sup>3</sup> This tells the story of a gangster who fakes his death in order to avoid paying a debt, the gangster's henchman is in love with a widow who is in mourning and only wears black. The film details the loyalties that the henchman is torn between – his boss and his love – and his neglect and abuse of the widow, who eventually turns to Buddhism and becomes a nun.

<sup>4</sup> Uabumrungjit labels *Black Silk* as "the film that pulled Thai film up to an international level in terms of both photography technique and substance" (2003a:45). This is due to its location shooting and first ever use of Cinemascope to make widescreen possible.

<sup>5</sup> Actions such as forming the Queen's Cobra regiment of Thai volunteer soldiers to fight in Vietnam.

<sup>6</sup> While this aspect was resented by ordinary Thai people, Thailand's participation in the fight against communism was widely revered with its troops depicted as brave idealised heroes (Ruth, 2011:3).

<sup>7</sup> As I have previously illustrated, this instead turned to the outer provincial audience.

<sup>8</sup> This illustrates how Thai directors translated and transplanted the visually and emotionally stimulating 'numbers' from popular Hollywood productions into a Thai framework (in this context the actual musical numbers).

<sup>9</sup> Rather than concentrating upon the apprehension and disapproval from within Thailand towards the uninhibited cooperation with US forces and the influx of such a large amount of American soldiers into Thailand.

<sup>10</sup> Sarit came to power in 1959 through a rigged election and then a military coup. He ruled until his death in 1963 and was both immensely wealthy and extremely corrupt, banning any dissent. After his death, power transferred to his generals and the repressive undemocratic regime continued until 1973 when an uprising forced democracy to be restored.

<sup>11</sup> Significantly, and similarly to Pestonji's body of films, the relatively small 'social problem' movement was also noted by the intelligentsia for its contrast to characteristically Thai popular 'entertainment' productions, therefore keeping alive the two-tiered audience in Thailand and contributing towards the cultivation of a disdainful attitude towards the lower class characteristically Thai films.

<sup>12</sup> As regards the popularity of the vast number of 'open-air screens', the magazine also gives an indication of their importance to the cinema and advertising business when stating that "The medium has proven to be an effective tool in product distribution and promotions in rural areas." (Hamid, 1992:42). The notability of this audience and its viewing method to multinational companies as a means of advertising indicates both how



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widespread and how significant a presence it was towards communicating with the outer provinces. It is significant that this is the most noted method for reaching the outer audience, the article mentions many methods of advertising, but this is the only one linked specifically to the 'upcountry'.

<sup>13</sup> The connection between the supernatural and the feminine still exists in these later productions, indicating that for all the progressive gender discourse they now represent, the feminine is still considered spiritually weak and incomplete and deemed susceptible to supernatural influences in line with a patriarchal Thai system. The production *Baan-Phii-Pop* for instance invokes a connection not only between the old grandmother who is possessed by the Pop ghost but also the heroine's Pra-Preung's ability to save the urban dwelling hero Dr Ret from the ghost and the bad-girl Kra-Deung's later possession.

<sup>14</sup> These revenge narratives are not exclusively limited to female characters however: *Phii-Taa-Bo* in 1981, is centred around the ghost of a man whose eyes have been removed by a corrupt doctor, trying to steal them back from beyond the grave. Again similar to other horror films from this time, the film implies both the corruption of officials and the importance of respecting the dead and the spirit world.

<sup>15</sup> This later effect will be explored in the next chapter's analysis of the post-97 New Thai industry.

<sup>16</sup> The power of this subaltern status inevitably attracts a negative portrayal: "In Thailand, the urban spirit-medium cult is portrayed as an "outlawed religion" by official authorities and the Sangha order. It is also labeled as an anti-Buddhist cult, a black magic movement. Or even a criminal gang under a religious cover." (Kitiarsa, 1989:1).

<sup>17</sup> Notably however there is virtually no tracking, indicating that the movement of the actual camera apparatus was still beyond the technical capabilities of the filmmaker's equipment, or was perhaps too difficult in such an environment.

<sup>18</sup> As a historical examination of Thai cinema has shown, rather than a shallow attempt at plagiarism this 'imitation' aspect is actually a long standing element of Thai film due to its development under such a heavy Hollywood presence in the nation. The incorporation of cowboys and other identifiably Hollywood traits into the 16mm era productions gave them a hybridity made up from both indigenous Thai entertainment and global Hollywood influences inserted into a film form appropriate to the cultural and viewing context. Ingawanij's examination also illustrates how the incorporation of such instances is much more a re-imagining of intertextual references into a specific context suiting the young urban Thai audience, not a simple exercise of copy and paste due to lack of imagination.

<sup>19</sup> This is particularly true in light of the 1997 economic crisis which 'delegitimized' this cycle completely in the shadow of the nationalistic Heritage productions that followed.

# **Chapter Three: *Nang Nak* and the New Thai Heritage Productions**

Having defined the lower-class 16mm era film style and illustrated how it continued to permeate Thai film up into the 1990s, I can now begin an examination of the contemporary New Thai industry. This begins to address the central concerns of the thesis: that the contemporary films of the New Thai industry are not crude or unsophisticated but remain influenced by a characteristically Thai film style. This causes New Thai films to differ from the formal characteristics of the Natural Language of horror that I previously outlined and this difference can ultimately be attributed to the continued stylistic influence from the earlier 16mm era model of film that catered for the lower classes. In the contemporary era this former audience is now marginalised by an elitist blockbuster industry, yet the existence of such characteristics illustrates a continued influence that can be attributed to the existence of this abused and exploited tier of Thai society.

As a means to address such a contention I first illustrate how horror in the New Thai industry has shifted in socio-cultural function and moved further away from the 16mm era films and its lower-class rural audience. Thai film is no longer a lower-class entertainment form that negotiates the wider traumatic context of exploitation (as it was in the B grade productions and the 16mm era). It now fulfils the role of one of Althusser's (1977) Ideological State Apparatuses as a reactionary form that promotes social conformity and minimises any blame that may be attributed to Thai elites for the 1997 economic crisis. Rather than a means to articulate and negotiate the trauma of lower-class exploitation, therefore, horror is now deployed as a means to construct a unifying nationalistic image of Thailand that can promote social conformity during a period of instability. As a means to

illustrate this, I examine the significant and groundbreaking horror film *Nang Nak* within the New Thai movement. I explore how as evinced by *Nang Nak*, New Thai horror negotiates and responds to the traumatic wider context of 1990s social upheaval through evoking nostalgia for a previous age. This is a prominent discourse within the New Thai industry and its string of 'Heritage' productions, a model of film which, according to Andrew Higson, constructs an idyllic but inaccurate distortion of the past in order to retreat from the turmoil of the present.

Through close analysis of *Nang Nak*, I then demonstrate that New Thai horror is now a hybrid film form that still retains characteristics from the earlier lower-class 16mm era film style despite its new elitist position. This lower-class presence therefore continues to influence New Thai horror, betraying its origins as an entertainment of the poor and undercutting the attempt to marginalise the lower-class perspective by disrupting its reception upon the international horror scene. This indicates how contemporary Thai film is ultimately a hybrid film form, one that can be attributed to the unequal and divided nature of Thai society.

## **New Thai Cinema and the Heritage Productions**

The film through which I will conduct an analysis of the contemporary New Thai industry is *Nang Nak*. This was one of the first films in a movement of what Ingawanij (2006) refers to as 'Heritage films', which began with the success of the 1950s-set gangster tale *2499 Antapan Krong Muang/Daeng Birley and the Young Gangsters* (Nonzee Nimibutr. 1997). This positioned itself as both an action number and a nostalgic diversion into living memory through its depiction of teenagers in the 1950s and a real-life young gangster who was killed at the time (Ingawanij, 2006). The success of *Daeng Birley* indicated that

nostalgia had a particular cultural resonance at this moment. After *Daeng Birley* New Thai Cinema continued to construct depictions that placed emphasis upon nostalgia for an idyllic previous era and the representation of an authentic Thai-ness within this (Chaiworaporn 2002, Ingawanij 2006, Seveon 2006<sup>1</sup>). An examination of this movement and specific film indicates how Thai film is now attempting to erase the lower-class perspective and so has shifted to become a reactionary tool of state propaganda. However, such close analysis also indicates how characteristics from the earlier 16mm era are stylistically retained. Rather than functioning as an expression of and a means through which to negotiate the lower-class experience, these now operate to uphold the nationalist agenda of Thai elites in the contemporary era. These ghosts of the cinematic past however, also function as lower-class disruptions that return to thwart this elitist agenda and disrupt its attempt to recreate the Natural Language of horror.

The new reactionary agenda of Thai film can be illustrated through an examination of the term 'heritage' when it has been applied to film. In his examination of English Heritage films, Andrew Higson defines Heritage as

a selective preoccupation with the past, it is what a particular individual or group takes from the past in order to define itself in the present, to give it an identity. It is what 'we' are happy to regard as 'our' heritage, enabling us to explain who we are by reference to the past. (2003:50).

Rather than a critical examination or political analysis of the past, Heritage is an inaccurate distortion and restructuring of historical actuality to suit the present point in time. The deployment of Heritage discourses in film is interpreted as a cinematic response to social upheaval as it is able to promote a unifying and nationalistic construction of the nation. As Higson states:

When heritage culture is mobilised on a national scale ('our shared national heritage'), it is in this spatio-temporal grid that 'the nation' emerges as a unique, organic, meaningful community (Ibid).

This construction can be seen in British Heritage films and culture of the 1980s and 1990s. British Heritage culture and its corresponding productions were a response to the decline in British economic stability, global influence and mass unemployment during the Thatcherite 1980s. The retreat into and fascination with the historical past, the idyllic rural and the 'simpler times' operated as "a form of retreat from the present, providing satisfactions which the present does not provide or compensations for what it lacks" (Hill, 1999:74).

Theorists such as Higson and Hill link the traumatic context of uncertainty and anxiety to such a response as it offers compensation for the destabilisation of society, one to be found in the sense of 'identity' and 'belonging' that the heritage industry and its corresponding ideology offers. This 'retreat from the present' therefore becomes a decidedly reactionary move as this "nostalgic and escapist flight" (Higson, 2003:51) ignores and does not address the causes behind the corresponding social upheaval.

## **'Localism' and the wider context of Economic Collapse**

Similar to Higson's British context, this reactionary construction of a nationalistic 'identity' and a retreat from the present was particularly relevant to the Thai nation in the late 1990s and was promoted by Thai elites, indicating the reactionary ideology of which New Thai cinema was a part. In July 1997, Thailand's four decades of unprecedented post-war growth, and the boom experienced specifically between 1987 and 1997, collapsed in what has come to be known as the Asian Financial Crisis. When jittery foreign investors began to pull money out of the country, the resulting effects triggered a devastating economic crisis, in which companies and personal fortunes disappeared overnight, children were pulled from university, unemployment soared and half-built sky-scrapers stood

abandoned. The Thai stock market dropped by as much as 75%, shattering the consumers' materialistic dream as "Thailand became entrapped in its own desire to look like a fully developed country" (Corera, 1997). The promises of freedom and prosperity through economic growth and capitalist expansion that were earlier championed in *Tone* had now come crashing down. The push towards modernisation, rapid economic growth, and the adoption of the neo-liberal models designed to transform Thailand into the next Hong Kong or Singapore had fallen through, and so had the brimming confidence in this future prosperity, in particular that of 'national pride' (Hewison, 1999:8).

Again, as seen in Thatcherite Britain's promotion of British culture and Heritage during a period of social upheaval, Thai elites responded to this context of devastating economic collapse by promoting nostalgia for a purer and simpler time, one encapsulated within the image of the pre-modern impoverished hardworking and sacrificing peasant. A new nationalistic discourse was taken up based upon the concept of 'Localism', a belief in self-reliance already in existence amongst those isolated from the economic boom (mostly impoverished rural rice farmers) (Phonpaichit 2001:162).

It is this ideology that is deployed in *Nang Nak* and the New Thai Heritage productions, indicating Thai film's new status as a tool of elite propaganda rather than (as in previous years) a means for marginalised groups to negotiate their own changing environment. Localism functioned as a means to deflect attention from the elites and their business interests that had ultimately caused such devastation and also fostered a degree of nationalistic social control over a disillusioned and suffering population. After the crisis of 1997 it was no longer profitable for the state to define Thailand and Thai-ness in terms of a global consciousness of progression and modernisation. Localism instead stressed the values of community, locality, self-reliance and indigenous culture, all of which were to be found in the model of the rural village and the hard-working peasant. This movement 'back-to-basics' involved a retreat inwards to traditional Thai values when the global scheme had seemed to fail. As Hewison states: "Globalisation, consumerism and

westernisation are identified as the new colonialism. All threaten Thai values" (Hewison, 1999:11).

Discourses instead began to focus on Thai society internally, representing Thai culture through the creation of internal myths and traditions, specifically that of the agricultural sector which was "seen as providing the cultural foundations of Thai society" (Ibid). As the previous ideological drive towards modernisation and a consumerist lifestyle was no longer socially, culturally or economically appropriate, an emphasis upon community and self-sufficiency took its place, one envisioned through an idyllic rural scenario. This 'back to basics' return placed an emphasis upon rural simplicity, the family unit and the hardworking peasant, all of which can be located in a pre-modern historical setting before contact with European imperialism of the nineteenth century and so before the forces that had caused this contemporary social and economic devastation. The hardworking rural peasant became the ultimate symbol of individual freedom and integrity championed against the depersonalised ruthless policies of international economics and globalisation;

The suggestion is that a self sufficient nation does not need the outside world and may choose its links rather than be forced into international markets and trade. Self sufficiency also builds self-reliance, for it constructs strong communities with the confidence to resist external pressures (Hewison, 1999:9).

This philosophy was applied to the nation as a whole, as Hewison understands, "solutions to the country's economic problems were to be found in a return to community based agriculture" (Ibid). King Bhumibol himself legitimated this new ideology at an official level in his Birthday Speech of December 1997, affirming: "we need to move backwards in order to move forwards" (Phongpaichit 2001:161). So in order to construct its 'imagined community' (Higson, 2000:64) Thailand had turned inwards, and in particular towards an idyllic version of the self-sufficient rural poor.

However despite its supposed championing of the neglected rural poor and their unfair treatment under the previous capitalist expansion, Kevin Hewison (1999) criticises the

Localist response as a profoundly conservative and reactionary discourse that does not tackle the unfair and growing gap between rich and poor in Thailand. While Hewison notes its opposition towards the damaging neo-liberal policies that had caused such disaster from those who advocated this discourse of self-sufficiency (who at first included NGOs, Buddhist monks, “workers opposing privatisation” and Hewison himself), it is ultimately, he understands, a conservative discourse that “does not provide the robust alternative analysis required of a critique of neo-liberal globalisation” (1999:11). Instead he regards it as “negative, reactionary, and a dangerous mix of populism and nationalism” (Ibid). This is because it idealises the rural scenario while simultaneously ignoring and denying the exploitive nature of such conservative and patriarchal hierarchies. It also feeds into a profoundly right-wing discourse of “nationalism and chauvinism” (Ibid:12), so neglecting to challenge existing hierarchical systems of exploitation that have been partly responsible for the crisis in the first place.

## **The reactionary agenda of New Thai**

### **Heritage films**

The New Thai Heritage productions specifically adhere to this reactionary localist discourse by restructuring the past to promote a nationalistic vision of conformity and identity at a time of social crisis, indicating, I would argue, the status of New Thai films and horror specifically as an elite-sponsored form of social control. In the New Thai industry Thai film now functions as part of Althusser’s (1977) Ideological State Apparatus that reproduces and conveys the values of the state. As the texts are informed by this localist ideology they have now become a means by which to transmit a model of conformity to Thai viewers that assists in upholding the system of inequality that is responsible for the economic collapse in the first place. This constructs the viewer as a



subject through this ideology of nationalism, one that manipulates people into passively accepting the status quo.

This ideological manipulation and conformity can be recognised in the *mise-en-scène* and themes of the New Thai Heritage films. Many productions consist of traditional stories or reference true people and events interspersed with intertextual references specific to Thai culture, history and people as a means to reinforce an identity based upon nationalism. Each also takes place in a setting that is able to foreground landscape, settings, costumes and props of historical Thailand, presenting an idyllic vision of the nation and the unique traits of Thainess. Along with *Nang Nak*, films such as *Bang Rajan* (Thanit Jitnukul. 2000), *Khang Lang Phap/Behind the Painting* (Cherd Songsri. 2001), *Hom Rong/The Overture* (Ittisontorn Vichailak. 2004), *Jan Dara* (Nonzee Nimibutr. 2001), *Fan Chan/ My Girl* (Vittha Gojiew et al. 2003) and of course the highest grossing film in Thai history *Suriyothai*, all fall into this category. These productions depict a very broad range of Thai history from key historical battles (*Bang Rajan*) and legendary figures (*Suriyothai*) to a remake of the classic 1930s love story *Behind the Painting* and *Fan Chan*'s simple coming-of-age tale set in rural 1970s Thailand.

*Suriyothai* places an emphasis upon (perceived) historical verisimilitude and the authenticity of Thainess through the portrayal of luscious, aristocratic settings and figures. Indeed due to its royal connections, shooting was permitted in official historical locations which would otherwise have been extremely difficult to access. The tale of the sixteenth-century queen who sacrifices herself in battle to save her husband and country was the grandest and costliest Thai film ever made and continues to be regarded as the highest grossing Thai film of all time<sup>2</sup>. Research conducted by Knee and Chaiworaporn even illustrates how the visual presentation of this fantasy life history (which has been taken up as a part of Thai culture so strongly yet which little empirical evidence actually exists to support) was a significant factor in the film's appeal for many viewers (Chaiworaporn and Knee, 2006).

Likewise films such as *Fan Chan* offer a comforting picture of belonging and identity in the construction of an idyllic rural 1970s childhood enjoyed by Jeab who is the young son of the local barber. This small family-run business and its friendly low-key competition with another village barber shop are worlds away from the ruthless capitalism of the 1980s boom. The friendship between the son and daughter of the opposing barbers feeds into the construction of a shared experience of growing up in 1970s rural Thailand, as does the deployment of small-town village life with its children on bicycles riding through gentle country roads and deserted rice-paddies.

As in *Suriyothai*, *Bang Rajan* also recreates a shared historical experience, one achieved through the use of historical myths and characters and the display of the corresponding *mise-en-scène*. The film depicts a group of rural villagers attempting to defend their village against Burmese invaders in a depiction of the eighteenth-century invasion that eventually resulted in the siege and then ruin of Ayutthaya (then the capital of Thailand). Notably, the villagers are abandoned by the rulers of the city and left to fend for themselves with little defence against the Burmese army and are eventually all massacred. However, the film depicts this as a necessary and heroic sacrifice, noting how the various characters refuse to leave their posts and flee, seeing their actions as vital to the defence and future survival of Thailand, a notion they place above all others in importance, including their own lives.

A comparable ideological agenda can be seen at work in *Behind the Painting*. This is the adaptation of a famous Thai novel that depicts an older aristocratic woman falling in love with a young male student. The Marxist sympathies of the original novel (which was written by a left wing intellectual who was later imprisoned by the post-war military regime for his radical beliefs and can be interpreted as representing the necessary death of the aristocracy in favour of a new and radical age) are notably forgotten in this adaptation (Siburapha. 1990). It instead focuses upon the sacrifices made by the angelic female character in order to comply with family needs and notions of tradition.

# The rejection of the lower-class perspective

Inherent in such an agenda is a rejection of the lower-class perspective that had been central to Thai filmmaking in the post-war years. As previously indicated, since the Second World War Thai film had been unable to bridge the geographical, cultural and class divisions within the country and so productions previously targeted either the lower-class and the rural/suburban audience or the urban upper/middle classes. In promoting such nationalistic discourses at this time of social crisis, Thai productions were, for the first time, able to achieve the wide appeal throughout Thailand that had so far proved elusive, with films such as *Nang Nak* and *Suriyothai* generating unprecedented box office revenue for a Thai film. For the first time the Heritage productions were able to bridge this gap through their nationalistic ideology of a unified Thai identity at a time of social crisis. *Daeng Bireley* first proved that Thai film could be viable as a blockbuster industry and that a wider audience was accessible through the use of high quality aesthetics presenting an older, somewhat more exoticized version of Thailand and Thainess. Nostalgia was evoked through both the story itself and the *mise-en-scène* of 'retro-chic spectacle' and so the film was able to successfully "universalize Thai film spectatorship" (Ingawanij, 2006:169) by breaking down the audience boundaries that before had so dominated and problematised the industry through this specific deployment of the past. Once this 'respectable' branch of spectators had been coaxed back into cinemas the technical innovations pioneered through the teen era could be put to use in the visually stunning blockbusters.

The Heritage productions were able to break the boundaries between the different audiences and ostensibly unify the nation cinematically. This reactionary depiction notably

erased the disaffected lower-class voice that had previously been articulated by the B-grade productions and the 16mm era before this. The Heritage depiction of the idyllic rural and the agricultural sector that was posited by Thai elites as the “real foundations of its society, economy, and culture” (Hewison, 1999:9) is one that actually signalled a rejection of previous representations of lower-class and rural experiences by earlier eras of cinema. As the previous chapter indicated, this section of Thai society was largely ignored during the nation’s push towards modernisation and it was the B-grade horror productions that had articulated and negotiated this traumatic (and inequitable) socio-cultural marginalisation of lower-class provincial Thailand. The culturally authentic heart of earlier horror cinema, which highlighted the abuses to which women were subject at the hands of economic development, is ripped out in New Thai Horror, just as the celebration of American style capitalism of the Teen movies is rejected for something equally fictive and equally ideological manipulative – rural-set Heritage cinema.

## **The Political Categorisation of *Nang***

### ***Nak***

This reactionary status and its rejection of the lower-class perspective can be indicated through a close examination of *Nang Nak*, one of the most notable and successful Heritage films of New Thai cinema. This film tells the well-known traditional Thai story of Nak. Nak is a young pregnant peasant woman who is devoted to her husband Mak. When Mak is called up to fight in a war and so is forced to leave her, Nak dies during his absence in a graphically depicted and difficult childbirth. However Nak’s love for her husband is too strong and when Mak returns, Nak refuses to pass on to the afterlife and instead remains with the man she loves as a ghost bringing up her ghost baby and deceiving him as to her true nature. Finally, after her tormenting of the villagers who try to

warn Mak about his wife, Mak discovers the truth and flees. A confrontation ensues in which the villagers burn down Nak's house and a shaman digs up her corpse to perform a violent exorcism. Finally, the high monk convinces the spirit of Nak to leave her worldly life. She agrees and as penance for her behaviour must go to serve the monk. The couple say a tearful last farewell before they are parted forever.

This film forged a definite turning point in the development of Thai cinema by demonstrating early on the success of this Heritage nostalgia in its appeal to the post-Crisis Thai viewer. To add to its significance, *Nang Nak* was also one of the first Thai films to achieve widespread international acclaim, winning twelve awards at a variety of international festivals<sup>3</sup>. As Knee indicates:

"These images serve the dual function of elegizing the past and broadcasting the film's national origins; they loudly and clearly tell us, "Made in Thailand," thus paradoxically working to position the film for international festival consumption (articulating "Thainess" as means of production differentiation) in a global industry at the same time as they imply regret over a recent lost past" (Knee, 2005:144).

Significantly, *Nang Nak* completely rejects the lower-class anger articulated by earlier incarnations of horror and instead follows the New Thai Heritage productions and the localist discourses promoted by elites. This adheres to Althusser's (1977) top-down model of state manipulation, as it promotes conformity to such elitist ideology as a means to reinforce the unfair values of the state, further demonstrating the film's rejection of the lower-class perspective. So, while the film is certainly similar to earlier eras of Thai film in that it locates its events within a lower-class and rural background, it is not concerned with representing such a community to itself, but appropriates this depiction to affirm the inferiority of this scenario in the contemporary age.

For instance, although Heritage productions do appear to champion this mythical world of self-sufficiency, they often attach dangerous and untamed characteristics to such a scenario, depicting protagonists as leading a precarious existence on the threshold of

civilisation. This constructs the *chaobannok*, the feminine and the rural context as far away from the urban centre of modernity and instead as a part of the dangerous, archaic and pre-modern animist spirit world that must be forcibly pacified and controlled. The feminine is a rural, chaotic, backward and monstrous animist spirit realm and is diametrically opposed to the organised, urban, patriarchal Buddhist order, indicating the hierarchical division of these class and gender constructions in modern Thailand and their negative and positive connotations. In *Nang Nak*, Nak's opposition to the ruling patriarchal Buddhist order is emphasised by her position deep in the untamed forest. The monk who eventually pacifies her angry spirit must travel from the town to her grave located deep in the jungle. Likewise when Mak finally discovers the truth about his wife he deserts his jungle home and runs to the safety of the village and its temple.

The narratives of the Heritage films also do not challenge the status-quo but promote conformity and self-sacrifice as a means of upholding the very system that has propagated inequality and suffering. *Nang Nak* follows such conservative themes by promoting a story that removes the ruling class's responsibility for the devastating wider context and instead implies that the desired status-quo can only be achieved and maintained through great personal cost and suffering from the individual. In an opening depiction that is similar to the abused and vengeful lower-class women of the B-grade productions, the film at first depicts Nak's refusal to submit to a patriarchal higher social order. This order is the natural circle of life and death, that is enforced by the Buddhist monks who try to uphold it by destroying her. The film sympathises with Nak's cause, showing her longing for the idyllic previous world she was happy in before uncontrollable outside forces cruelly shattered and destroyed her union with Mak. This can be interpreted as an allegory of the forces that engulfed the defenceless Thai citizen in the late 1990s after the economic crash encroached upon and destroyed the affluent progression they had been promised. As with the impoverished victims of the economic

crisis Nak's treatment is extremely unfair, and her absolute refusal to bow to the many laws that dictate she must move on from her husband is impressive.

Nonetheless, for all the sympathy invoked, the film then clearly advocates the pacification of Nak's impressive fighting spirit and the acceptance of the outside forces that she as an individual cannot control. Rather than fighting against, changing or holding such forces to account, the story of *Nang Nak* promotes obedience to a natural, social and religious order that may not necessarily lead to personal happiness but is restorative of a greater good. This narrative of personal sacrifice suggests that individuals must give up their desires and even their life in order to maintain and defend the status quo of historical Thailand in all its glory. Instead of fighting against such unfair treatment, *Nang Nak* responds by suggesting that this must be obeyed. If the film has a moral message then this is one of acceptance regarding situations beyond your control and adherence to this dominant order and in such morality lies a regressive nationalist ideology, itself in service to wider economic interests.

Instead of championing Nak's personal quest for unity with her family, the film instead concentrates upon her final submission to this 'natural' order, ending with her eventual acceptance of her new situation when she is made to relinquish her own desire for Mak and her baby by the high monk. This is portrayed very effectively in the final scene, in which a beaten and sobbing Nak sits low in her grave, accepting that she cannot continue to exist in the situation she desires. As Nak sits crying the message is clear: her idyllic previous life with its rural paradise and true love is now over, and despite the mourning involved this transition must be accepted and not challenged. The contrast between this huddled and isolated figure framed in a high-angle shot (figure 25.)



Figure 25.

and the previous omnipotent supernatural all-powerful figure who was earlier destroying and towering above the group of village men who tried to remove her by burning her house (figure 26.) could not be more stark.



Figure 26.

While Nak's desire to preserve her family unit may be an extremely sympathetic one, this merely exemplifies the degree of personal sacrifice required by the masses of Thailand in such despairing and unfair circumstances. If it is possible to read her situation as allegorical and articulating the plight of late 1990s Thai people, then this is one that



promotes conformity to the elite status quo and discourages personal expression, completely the opposite of the previous B-grade productions.

Inherent in this nostalgia is, of course, a retrograde gender ideology as this depiction becomes a conservative reaffirmation of patriarchal discourses. *Nang Nak* advocates the controlling of independent femininity as a means to preserve a mythical status quo and a still-patriarchal present. As in the 16mm era productions, Nak becomes monstrous when she exhibits independent mobility, desire, sexual agency and a position outside of the family. This is represented when Nak travels to kill both the old women who stole from her and then the friend who tried to warn her husband about her. Nak's monstrous arrival at their homes is announced by a terrifying thunder storm in which the characters scream and cry and doors and windows flap open and shut. It is also depicted in her desire for and pursuit of Mak when he flees from her after discovering the truth. She hangs upside-down from the temple ceiling above him calling out his name while the all-male monks try to protect him below, a frightening display of power that absolutely must be defeated in order to maintain the status quo. This ability is also constructed as distinctly feminine due to its contrast to the terrified Mak and the all-male Buddhist order huddled below. Nak then also commandeers the shaman's hand when he tries to exorcise her and forces him to bash in his own skull with a rock when he tries to banish her from the world of the living. During this her disembodied laughter echoes throughout, illustrating her immense power over her environment.

Contemporary Thailand therefore still continues to be imbued by patriarchal structures that permeate the social organisation of gender roles and constructions and Thai film continues to be a product of this cultural logic. The supernatural is still depicted as the means by which the marginalised feminine can exercise power or influence in society and this is monstrous, unnatural and undesirable in this post-crisis New Thai film. The final ending of *Nang Nak*, in which the spirit Nak must go to serve the Buddhist order as penance for her refusal to accept her fate, suggests how this patriarchal order must

conquer the archaic, lower-class female and control it in order for equilibrium to be restored

This depiction is rendered distinctly unfair given the contribution made by exploited female rural migrant workers during the 1980s, one which led to the extraordinary economic growth enjoyed by Thailand. For, as I have already argued, the economic boom had destabilised traditional conceptions of male and female, as women had now moved away from the static home and exercised independent mobility in their migration to cities in search of work and prospects. After the economic crisis, localism now called for a return to an idealised pre-modern rural status quo and implicit within this is the reaffirmation of traditional gender roles.

*Nang Nak* corresponds to this affirmation as it demonises independent mobile women, suggesting that they have potentially demonic qualities and a connection to the supernatural. The film continues the strong association between the feminine and the supernatural that is a part of both the Natural Language of horror and Thai film throughout the ages. This othering of the demonic feminine indicates how Thai horror continues to function as an avenue for the 'return of the repressed', and this repression still continues to be concerned with deviant and forbidden female characteristics. This again links back to the 16mm era productions that also promote such reactionary control of women at a time of social instability and upheaval. The depiction of women in *Nang Nak* is therefore similar to the reactionary demonisation of mobile, independent women in the 16mm era productions. However this is now one that originates from a top-down hierarchical source rather than a means for lower-class audiences to negotiate their own context of social upheaval.

# **The 16mm era characteristics in the New Thai industry**

If, as *Nang Nak* illustrates, New Thai film was now concerned with controlling and manipulating lower-class viewers into aspiring towards this elite-sponsored construction of Thai society, it is nonetheless notable that the marginalised perspective of the lower classes would return in the form of 16mm era characteristics. These would, stylistically at least, permeate New Thai film in the modern age even as the original lower-class themes of this era were suppressed. Previously part of a film form suited towards mass lower-class audiences, these elements are now a residual hangover from this earlier film tradition and one that is ironically now part of a means to cultivate the reactionary vision of an identity based upon nationalism and conformity. It is significant that while the film creates the idyllic lower-class agricultural and historical scenario as a means of elite-sponsored social control, these characteristics illustrate a bubbling through of genuine lower-class expression, one that haunts New Thai films as a traumatic presence and so challenges their reactionary status.

The resurgence of such lower-class stylistics betrays the origins of Thai film as a lower-class mass entertainment form made by and for the people that it is now attempting to control ideologically. These attributes continue to haunt filmmakers and their productions and resurface to disrupt cultural texts. In the contemporary Thai industry the traumatic resurgence of this lower-class film form disrupts the New Thai attempt to recreate the seamless continuity editing and narrative structures of the Natural Language of horror in a similar way to the maltreated screeching undead demonic women of previous eras who refused to rest in peace. In this way, these productions become a representation of the trauma endured by the Thai lower classes in the recent era, so building upon Blake (2008)

and Lowenstein's (2005) interpretation of horror films as functioning as outlet for such expression. Rather than merely thematic however, this traumatic expression is stylistic.

Nowhere is this traumatic presence more evident than through the reception of Thai film upon the international scene. It is this disruption that leads to the formal misunderstanding of New Thai film that I noted in my Introduction. The deviation of *Nang Nak* from the Natural Language of horror, one caused by the continued presence of the 16mm era film style, causes problems for non-Thai viewers who interpret such stylistics as inferior and unsophisticated. The disdainful attitudes that were earlier directed towards lower-class Thai films by Thai elites are now apparent in derogatory comments from viewers outside of Thailand. These viewers interpret the 16mm era stylistic attributes as a flawed and inferior imitation of the globally standardized Natural Language of horror, rather than a culturally specific film form. Thai film and the Thai spectator are depicted as deviating from the EuroAmerican Natural Language of Horror and this begins to explain both the incomprehensible nature of Thai film to non-Thai audiences and the unfavourable non-Thai reviews and interpretations of productions that are otherwise successful within Thailand. As one American reviewer states:

Why turn a film about an immortal love story into a film about a ghost that whips up harsh rainstorms and breaks people's necks? It just doesn't make sense, and the film would have been better if it had stayed true to its roots — that is, Nak's neverending love for Mak, and her desire to live happily ever after (*Beyond Hollywood*, 2002).

This comment demonstrates a lack of understanding of the blended 'numbers', an aspect that, as this thesis has argued, was directly connected to the aesthetic of attraction as a primary source of stimulation and the concrete position of the supernatural in Thai society. It appears that in the conventions of the Natural Language of horror, visceral horror numbers and overly emotional romance numbers cannot occur concurrently within the same production and be attributes of the same character. The international response to the wide distribution of New Thai horror films such as *Nang Nak* illustrates how it is the

conventions of the earlier film style that are causing non-Thai viewers outside of the targeted audience to interpret Thai film as an inferior imitation of the Natural Language of horror, without translating it as a product specific to Thai cultural logics.

An analysis of the hybridity of New Thai film is therefore key to understanding its position as a specifically Thai cultural product on the global scene. Such an analysis is a means of disputing non-Thai misunderstanding and illustrating the reasons behind the form of Thai film today. This recognises that the source behind this form is the continued lower-class subjectivity that while marginalised now haunts New Thai horror productions through these formal characteristics. These are stylistically retained (to the chagrin of foreign audience) but ideological thwarted, as they are now being deployed in service of a decidedly nationalist agenda. This illustrates that the form of Thai film can be attributed to the unequal and divided nature of Thai society. The existence of such characteristics and their deviation from the Natural Language of horror also indicates how it is through horror, the genre that forces society to confront its terrifying abject fears, that the betrayal of these lower-class origins becomes most visible within this otherwise elitist and reactionary portrayal.

## **The Hybrid Status of *Nang Nak***

This hybrid nature can be illustrated through further analysis of *Nang Nak*. Such analysis indicates that while the film is an ideologically conservative text that erases progressive lower-class depictions it also still exhibits lower-class 16mm era characteristics. As previous comments have indicated, while the film was able to cultivate appeal both nationally and internationally through its Heritage status, the vestige of the 16mm era film style problematised the production for non-Thai viewers in this new global context, ripping holes in the international aspirations of elite Thai filmmakers and so indicating that the

strange film form of contemporary Thai cinema can be attributed to the unfair and unequal nature of Thailand.

For instance the narrative structure of *Nang Nak* corresponds to that of the earlier 16mm era productions instead of Carroll's (1990) erotetic structure. As such a well-known horror story and cultural text that has been remade countless times throughout Thai film history, the film depends largely upon prior-knowledge to elicit an effect from the audience. The structuring of the narrative to depend upon this prior knowledge discounts the questions and answers of the erotetic narrative structure that is associated with the Natural Language of horror. Indeed, *Nang Nak* is so dependant upon this prior knowledge that non-Thai viewers not familiar with the story even express confusion as to the status of Nak herself and her transition between the living and the dead, which is not even explicitly confirmed until later in the film.

Instead *Nang Nak* adheres to the cause and effect structure of the 16mm era causal narrative. For example the love and devotion between Mak and Nak (around which the story is constructed and the means through which a substantial amount of the emotional 'numbers' are produced) is not developed as a characteristic but simply exists. Rather than devoting narrative time to constructing this romance and marriage the film instead relies upon the prior-knowledge of the Thai citizen who is already familiar with this story element. This is reminiscent of the instant devotion between the *Nang-Ek* and *Phra-Ek* figures from indigenous Thai entertainment and the 16mm era, illustrating how such earlier characteristics of Thai film imbue this contemporary text. *Nang Nak* even further relies upon the prior-knowledge of such character types by depicting the famous figure Somdej Toh<sup>4</sup> as the final stoic authoritative monk who is able to convince the ghost Nak to leave the world of the living and progress to the dead. This recognisable real life religious figure negates the need for an introduction or even a lengthy speech; indeed the dialogue in the scene in which he pacifies the angry Nak by talking to and teaching her of the need for her sacrifice is not even audible.

This structure is also extremely noticeable as the *Nang Nak* story would seem to offer an ideal scenario in which to construct an erotetic suspense narrative. This is due to the potential questions posed regarding the status of Nak, her eventual fate and the process of discovery Mak must undergo to find out about his wife. Although *Nang Nak* does give an answer as to the final fate of Nak, the film does not pose or raise questions around her changing status. For instance, the deception of Mak and his later discovery about his wife is not transferred into an obvious mystery or suspense story. Instead it simply presents Nak's transition from the living to the dead, her later torment and her final pacification as a given and known occurrence. Scenes are not structured to create curiosity through posing or answering questions and so are not connected with a suspenseful erotetic structure. Nak's predicament is known by the viewer long before Mak discovers the truth and so Mak's journey of discovery is not one that inspires curiosity, mystery or suspense, even though this would make a perfectly logical horror suspense story.

Instead of posing questions to elicit curiosity then, *Nang Nak* connects Thai viewers through the retelling of a traditional Thai tale that it is structured to rely upon their specific knowledge of this old story and its characters. This positions viewers distinctly as Thai citizens, so potentially entailing the conservative nationalism inherent in its status as distinctly Thai. Whereas beforehand the prior-known causal narrative was a means of cultivating shared pleasure for a lower-class audience and functioning within a rowdy lower-class cinema, it is now a means to inspire a distinct nationalistic Thai identity that becomes profoundly reactionary given the context of localist discourses and the economic crisis.

Instead of narrative, the 'causal' structure of *Nang Nak* places emphasis upon the aesthetic of attraction, again indicating the production's similarity to the 16mm era conventions. The attraction of this film lies significantly in a visual rather than narrative appeal, indicating its status as a film descended from this visceral tradition. Earlier post-war depictions of Nak's story such as *Mae-Nak-Prakanong* similarly extol numbers rather

than narrative integration and rely upon these moments of heightened horror, tragedy and even comedy to elicit emotional effects from the audience.

Indeed the high grossing Heritage films foreground an obsession with the presentation of visual signifiers to construct the idyllic fantasy world of historical (and often rural) Thailand. The aesthetic of attraction is therefore deployed as a primary means to mobilise the nostalgic and nationalist discourses of Thai-ness over that of narrative, so demonstrating the continued relevance of the 16mm era Thai film characteristics when constructing a response to and mediation of the wider social context.

The aesthetic of attraction can be recognised in what May identifies as the 'visual excess' of the Heritage productions. In investigating the shift from the teen cycle to the formation of the Heritage industry, Ingawanij's (2006) research underlines how the aesthetic of attraction remains deeply embedded in the contemporary New Thai productions. She indicates that rather than rejecting this style of filmmaking the Heritage productions utilised a very similar film style to that of the teen productions as a means of broadening the appeal of Thai film. She reveals that:

There is nothing in industrial terms, or in terms of the underlying aesthetic mode, substantially to differentiate heritage films from the conglomerate teen films that precipitated them. The connection between the two genres of film is there in the same monopolistically integrated mode of production as well as in the personnel responsible for them; in the primacy in each case of marketing and promotional tactics; and in a textual mode distinguished by pastiche and a strong degree of visual excess (Ingawanij, 2006:147).

This textual mode of 'pastiche' and 'visual excess' can also be traced back to the post-war 16mm era. In particular it can be connected with the aesthetic of attraction as a source of stimulation over that of narrative integration. This indicates the adherence of New Thai cinema to this earlier model of filmmaking, identifying a common linkage through the 'thrill' and 'visual excess' of old Thailand. This can be recognised in the elaborate aristocratic *mise-en-scène* of *Suriyothai* (such as the lavish royal palace, props and costumes) and the traditional rural tools, hair-cuts, clothes and even animals of *Bang Rajan*. These



'displays' of history construct nostalgia for a previous historical era within a narrative that is often little more than a shallow nationalistic portrayal of a series of simplistic good vs. evil conflicts.

It is through the aesthetic of attraction that *Nang Nak* constructs a display of historical lower-class rural Thailand that operates in service of such dominant ideologies of national identity and interpellates its audience accordingly. This Heritage version of *Nang Nak* was starkly different to any previous incarnation. The film deliberately cultivates discourses of nostalgia and authenticity through constructing an idyllic and pre-modern 'display' of lower-class rural Thailand. Rather than the depiction found in earlier productions such as the 16mm era *Mae-Nak-Prakanong* and the B-grade horror films of the 1970s and 80s, the *mise-en-scène* of *Nang Nak* has been significantly altered to represent an early rural Thai peasant village scenario that was very different to earlier productions. The film goes back to a previous era long before the introduction of Western-style capitalism and locates this deep within the jungle. These visual splendours of rural pre-modern Thailand and the 'unique' aspects of Thai village life immerse the viewer in the constructed mythical purity of this pre-modern world through the aesthetic of attraction.

For instance this recreation of 'Old Thailand' in all its rural splendour involves extended scenes that highlight the rural environment and traditional way of life, continuing what Ingawaniij calls the positioning of 'old Thai things' (2006) as connotations of a past idyllic, unspoilt and completely Thai existence. These consist of long shots displaying saturated sunsets across the landscape of rice paddies and close-ups of rice plants with small animals slithering between them. These are all underscored by dramatic music from traditional Thai instruments and ensembles. The rural historical Thai scenery (in its rivers, rice paddies and jungles) therefore provides an exoticized spectacle of Thailand and Thainess that evokes nostalgia for a previous simplistic and distinctly Thai era.

Together with the emphasis upon pure and idyllic scenery, costume and make-up have also been changed and add to this display. Most strikingly, Nak's appearance has changed from the beautiful long-haired light-skinned woman (who conforms to international conceptions of femininity) in productions such as *Mae-Nak-Prakanong*, to a dark-skinned peasant wearing old-fashioned Thai clothes with a cropped helmet hairstyle and blackened teeth. This adheres to the dress of pre-modern Thailand before the introduction of the 1940s Cultural Mandates<sup>5</sup>. Such mandates were designed to 'civilise' the country and bring it up to Western standards and involved, among other aspects, the rejecting of loose clothing and short hair in favour of trousers, shirts, skirts and long hair on women (all of which are notably uncomfortable to wear within a hot and humid climate). The appearance of the dark-skinned peasant Nak with her blackened teeth stained by chewing betel-nut and her old fashioned hairstyle is such a diversion from previous long-haired conventionally beautiful incarnations that she becomes an icon of old Thailand herself.

This depiction further illustrates how *Nang Nak* continues to adhere to the 16mm era film style as it serves no direct narrative purpose. Instead it forms a series of numbers that dramatically display the raw beauty of rural Thailand against which the tragic relationship of Nak and Mak is performed. For instance the film's final ending sequence of Nak's submission to the Buddhist order becomes an emotional number that foregrounds the *mise-en-scène* rather than a narrative episode. Instead of providing an answer to questions regarding Nak's fate, the scene functions to emphasise the spectacle of rural Thailand and Nak's emotional performance within it. Little occurs other than extensive crying and there is very little dialogue. There is no moral ambiguity and, crucially, no questions posed or answered to create suspense in a scene that could easily function within such a structure. Instead it is a number that depicts images of rural Thailand and Nak's idyllic past life along with her absolute despair at having to part from Mak and their life together. The two are depicted swimming in the river together outside their isolated

wooden home and are pictured sitting upon a tree branch looking out over a landscape of paddy fields while a buffalo grazes gently beneath them.

This emphasis upon numbers also blends a variety of genres into this single film, again an element associated with the earlier 16mm era of Thai film. The vast majority of 'numbers' in *Nang Nak* are not concerned with eliciting merely the fear and disgust associated with the horror genre but instead include romance, history, a possible nature documentary and even comedy. As a result *Nang Nak* can be equally labelled a historical or romantic film as well as a ghost or horror film. *Nang Nak* does contain some horrific numbers designed to elicit fear and disgust from the viewer. This is evident in the depiction of Nak's agonising labour and her later demonic terrorizing of the villagers and monks. There is also a short scene in which an old woman who stole the wedding ring from Nak's corpse is killed by her ghost and the body then eaten by lizards. However these examples notably are all secondary to the historical drama and romance numbers that are drawn out to become histrionic spectacles that inspire nostalgia for a time now past.

The influence of the 16mm era film form is also evident in the film style of *Nang Nak*. As this is designed to emphasise the display of rural Thailand, it adheres to the objective cinematography and editing of earlier Thai films, ones specifically suited to depicting numbers and the aesthetic of attraction. Many of the nostalgic numbers depicting Nak and rural Thailand do not employ the voyeuristic, subjective and point-of-view orientated shots associated with the Natural Language of horror. Instead these adhere to the 16mm era film style and its objective 'independent automate shots'. While *Nang Nak* certainly displays expert deployment of the Classical Hollywood continuity editing system and includes many point-of-view shots and shot-reverse-shot structures, it also places an emphasis upon long shots and takes. These transform scenes into displays of rural historical Thailand and graphic horror numbers rather than subjective narrative episodes. They are particularly evident in the many numbers that are solely concerned with displaying the natural *mise-en-scène* of rural Thailand, ones that operate as complete

breaks from the narrative. Numerous times throughout the film there occurs a break from the story in which scenes of rural Thai nature are depicted through long shots. These include forest scenes (figure 27.), sunsets (figure 28.) and rice paddies (figure 29.) and serve no purpose other than to display rural Thai scenery.



Figure 27.



Figure 28.

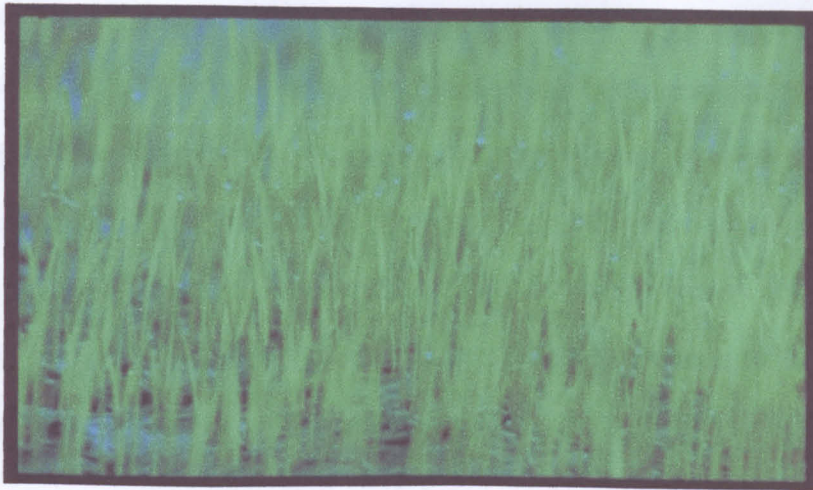


Figure 29.

This style of film making is also evident in scenes that depict characters. The ending of *Nang Nak* consists of a drawn-out histrionic number in which Nak rises up out of her grave to be pacified by a monk and finally agrees to leave Mak and pass over to the world of the dead. A final goodbye then follows between the two lovers before she sinks back into her grave and withers into a corpse. The cinematography in this scene does include brief shot-reverse-shot structure between Mak and Nak themselves but more prominent than this is the repeated return to long shots that encompass the entire scene including the watching villagers (figure 30.).



Figure 30.

Positioning the camera behind the watching villagers also suggests that the scene is being performed to this communal audience, linking back to the presentational mode and aware audience of the 16mm era productions. The scene is also inter-cut with a montage of flashback shots depicting Mak and Nak's life together within rural Thailand, all of which are again long shots of the two lovers together within the rural scenery. This includes the couple playing in the river together (figure 31.) and sitting on a tree branch overlooking a buffalo calming nosing through a rice paddy (figure 32.).

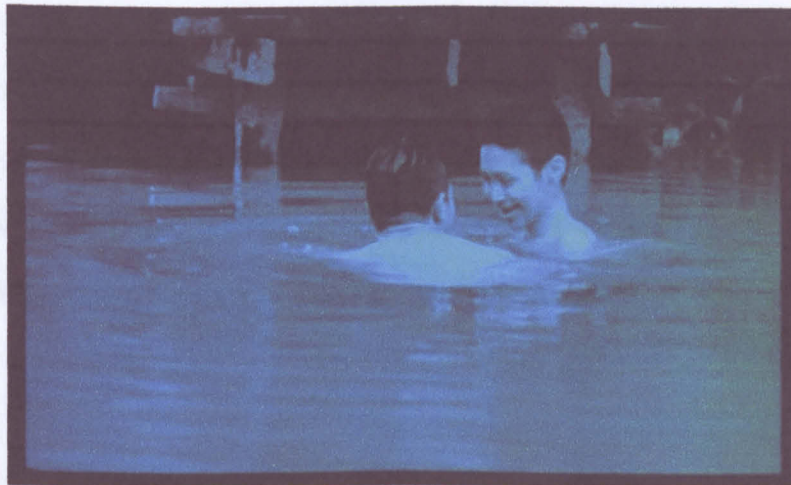


Figure 31.



Figure 32.

Mak and Nak become a display of rural Thailand in the same way as the objective rural nature shots that permeate the film, and the cinematography assists in creating this display. Again this hybridity of film styles evokes nostalgia for both the beauty of the idyllic rural scenario and the tragedy of Nak being forced to leave it.

As in the 16mm era productions, *Nang Nak* also continues to insert supernatural and fantastical elements into the diegetic world without an obvious violation of social norms. While emphasising the monstrousness of the supernatural, New Thai productions such as *Nang Nak* refuse to treat it as an unnatural or even surprising occurrence. Indeed a frightening and horrific violation would distract from the conservative nostalgic message of sacrifice and conformity and detract from Nak's nostalgic longing for her previous married bliss. The story and events of *Nang Nak*, based around a woman whose husband does not realise she is dead, indicates that even in the contemporary New Thai industry the supernatural can still interject into the diegetic world without becoming a violation of 'Natural Law'.

The lack of horrific disruption by Nak's initial transformation into a ghost illustrates how lower-class beliefs and practices still continue to imbue this elite-sponsored reactionary model of Thai film. It demonstrates how the New Thai industry originates from and is still imbued by a very different cultural tradition to that of the Natural Language of horror. As indicated in an earlier chapter, this belief system was one that was particularly prevalent in lower-class rural Thailand, indicating how the point of view and cultural beliefs from this marginalised tier of society continue to haunt the blockbuster and urban New Thai productions. The prominence of this attribute within this groundbreaking production also illustrates how even in the transition to the New Thai industry, this significant Thai ghost film remains imbued by the lower-class Thai film form and continues to negotiate the wider context within this formal framework, albeit one now commandeered by a top-down hierarchy.

For instance, Nak's existence as a ghost is concrete and absolute. She is not a frightening flimsy spectre or a violation of 'normality' but instead cooks meals, has sex and takes care of her baby. When Mak returns from his army service Nak appears, both to him and the viewer, exactly as expected with her baby. Even when a visiting local monk observes Nak and Mak's house in a ghostly state of decay (so explicitly emphasising that Mak is being deceived) the monk does not express shock or fear at the situation, indicating that despite its need for correction (Nak must be banished to the world of the dead) it is still an accepted part of the diegetic world, not a violation.

Nak's transition to the supernatural – her death and then ghostly incarnation – is also an accepted series of events that does not need any extraordinary special effects portrayal of rebirth, nor does her end transition to the dead, apart from a few seconds while she 'withers' into a corpse. Likewise the final ending separation number of Nak's submission to the 'natural' order is an elongated tragic goodbye sequence between the two lovers while the villagers sit quietly and traditional music plays. This again places emphasis upon the nostalgic longing for an idyllic time that has now past, cultivating nostalgia in a way that would not be possible in a spectacular number that terrifies both the audience and characters in its violation of normality. While Nak's existence is not permitted, it also does not appear to be unnatural but is a part of nature and exists within it. Rather than destroying Nak, the ending merely forces her to comply with the natural order she must obey – the separate worlds of the living and the dead – reinforcing the monk's statement that 'ghosts must be with ghosts'. In this scene the two lovers are able to caress and hold hands while they tearfully bid goodbye, behaviour that it is difficult to associate with an unnatural violation.

Most extraordinary of all is the scene in which Mak and (the now dead) Nak first have sex after his return from war. This illustrates the very physical status of Nak that she is able to both deceive and conduct such relations with her husband without him realising that she has died. This sex scene is also disturbingly inter-cut with earlier scenes depicting Nak's



death in childbirth. The two scenes appear to be associated by their mutual status as traumatic occurrences, as they both depict a negative event that should not be occurring. In both scenes a thunder storm echoes outside, as if emphasising this. However despite such an implication, the film does not suggest that either event is wholly unnatural. Death within childbirth is a natural, if traumatic incident and sex with a ghost after such a deception is also therefore implied to be an equally frightening, yet also an entirely natural, occurrence.

A close analysis of *Nang Nak* therefore supports my central thesis: it illustrates that in the New Thai industry Thai film retains characteristics that were coined in previous eras and so is a hybrid film form that falls outside of the conventions of the Natural Language of horror. The film also demonstrates the reactionary political categorisation of the New Thai industry and Thai horror, a position that erases the lower-class perspective that Thai film had historically been concerned with representing. As I have illustrated, however, this position is undercut by the characteristics from 16mm era lower-class film style which continues to distinguish Thai horror from the globally prominent Natural Language of horror, illustrating that the reasons behind such a deviation can ultimately be attributed to the unequal and divided nature of Thai society. The next chapter will explore how this hybrid nature continues to occur in subsequent New Thai horror productions that continue this reactionary political categorisation. Rather than concentrating purely upon nostalgic Heritage films, however, it will further my argument by examining productions that engage with other themes and discourses.

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<sup>1</sup> Both Chaiworaporn (2002) and Seveon (2006) formulate a ideological connection between the 1997 economic crisis and a search for the authentic Thainess contained in the discourses of the New Thai movement. Ingawanij (2006) conducts this on a much more concrete empirical level.

<sup>2</sup> It apparently cost 400 million Thai Baht, the equivalent of £6.1 million (BBC News, 2001). The Bangkok Post also continues to position it as the highest grossing film even as late as 2009 (Rithdee, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> These include four awards at the 1999 Asia Pacific Film Festival, one award at the 1999 Bangkok Film Festival, one award at the 2000 Rotterdam International Film Festival and seven awards at the Thailand National Film Association Awards in 2000.

<sup>4</sup> He was born in the eighteenth century and was a famous Buddhist monk.

<sup>5</sup> As stated earlier, these were introduced during the rule of Prime Minister Pibun at the stage when Thai authorities were attempting to cultivate a strong sense of nationalism both within the country and from abroad and wanted to model the country as civilized and Westernised (Van Esterik, 2000).

# **Chapter Four<sup>1</sup>: The Other in *Zee-Oui* and *Ghost Game***

Building on my analysis of *Nang Nak*, I now continue to illustrate how the New Thai industry remains a hybrid film form that retains characteristics from the lower-class 16mm era in films other than the Heritage productions. This chapter progresses my argument regarding the hybridity of contemporary New Thai films by examining two other New Thai horror films in depth: *Zee-Oui* and *Ghost Game*. These films further illustrate that New Thai horror upholds elite discourses and rejects the lower-class Thai perspective articulated by Thai films (and specifically Thai horror films) in previous eras but nonetheless remains imbued by this earlier film style.

In particular, these films demonstrate a similar will to the Heritage films as they attempt to unify a nation stratified by class, region and culture in order to promote adherence to the state in an era of social instability. However, rather than through a nostalgic retreat into the past, these films propagate such ideology through the construction of a homogenised national identity in the face of an alien Other. This attempts to inspire conformity to the status quo through reinforcing the superior qualities of Thainess and simultaneously demonising the vulnerable foreign Other who exists both within and outside its borders.

In such a depiction these films attempt to erase and silence the lower-class perspective that previous eras of Thai cinema were concerned with negotiating and articulating in favour of this elite ideology. However, further analysis indicates that characteristics from the 16mm era can still be detected within such productions. These characteristics cannot be entirely erased and continue to imbue productions as a representation of lower-class Thailand. What is more, they begin to problematise the creation of a viable ethnic Other

and the elitist ideology it upholds. The lower-class perspective therefore begins to undercut the unfair hierarchy of Thailand in the contemporary age.

## **Horror and the Other**

The construction of a threatening and frightening Other is a staple and prevalent discourse in the horror genre. Horror theory has deployed multiple incarnations of this for the purposes of examining this representation of difference in society and how it relates to the creation of horror. An examination of this concept indicates how it has also been recognised by theorists as a means to uphold and preserve the dominant order, so indicating the reactionary nature of New Thai films that now deploy this motif.

For instance, as I stated earlier when examining monstrous women in 16mm era horror films, Barbara Creed (1993) builds upon Julia Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection by arguing that the horror film constructs woman as a demonic Other through which to reinforce patriarchal order in society. Abjection seeks to separate the child from the abject world of the mother and encourage it to enter the patriarchal symbolic order of the father. Horror is then created when such borders are defiled and this transition does not take place correctly. The horror film therefore constructs the female as an unclean, monstrous and archaic Other in order to uphold the much more desirable 'normality' of patriarchal social order.

Likewise, Benshoff argues that homosexuality and homosexual behaviour is also coded as an Other in horror films and functions as a means to uphold the dominant heterosexual nature of 'normality'. He even states that "monster is to 'normality' as homosexual is to heterosexual" (1997:2) and further argues that the narrative elements of horror films actually 'demand' this depiction of an Otherness that is coded as queer. This is because the means by which horror is produced is through a 'disruption' and destabilisation of "the

heterosexual status quo" (Ibid:6) that functions as this 'normality'. Hence, the defeating of such sexual difference in the Other upholds this 'normality'.

By far the most dominant and influential study of the Other in the horror film is that of Robin Wood's (2004) 'horror as the return of surplus repression' concept. As stated earlier, this refers to the shaping of existence under patriarchal capitalism and the means by which those outside such a conception of 'normality' are subjugated to it. Wood links the Other to surplus repression; indeed, he states that the two are "truly inseparable" (Ibid:111). Surplus repression is the force that makes people into "monogamous, heterosexual, bourgeois, patriarchal capitalists" (Ibid:108) and hence conform to this version of 'normality' that adheres to the ideology favoured by dominant social groups and their corresponding social norms. Wood then identifies the monstrous Other in the horror film as a representation of the desires and behaviours that are repressed under such a system and so which constitute "that which society cannot recognize or accept but must deal with" (Ibid:111). These undesirable and repressed elements are 'dealt with' by being projected onto a threatening monstrous figure that can then be rejected and/or destroyed. Wood directly connects this dual concept specifically with the horror film, as he believes that it is this genre that responds to and engages with such a practice in the most blatant way through the figure of the monster. He even states that "the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilisation represses or oppresses" (Ibid:113).

Wood's analysis forms the basis from which a great deal of horror analysis is launched, indicating both the prevalence of this theoretical concept in the study of horror and how this can therefore accommodate and explore such a similar motif in the New Thai industry. For instance, Peter Hutchings builds upon the 'surplus repression as Other' concept and argues that *Silence of the Lambs* demonises male homosexuality as an Other in its depiction of the serial killer Jame Gumb and also observes how the

deployment of 'sodomasochistic imagery' seeks to depict alternative sexual behaviour as deviant and even evil in the *Hellraiser* series (2004:97).

Wood's concept is particularly appropriate to explore New Thai cinema as this creates an ethnic and foreign Other in order to construct a homogenised unified Thai nation and suppress internal difference or dissent during a period of social upheaval and economic instability. This particular ethnic and nationalist incarnation of the Other is recognised by Wood and other scholars deploying his concept. Wood mentions many different versions of the Other including "other cultures" and "ethnic groups within a culture" (2004:112) both of which are evident in New Thai cinema. Other scholars also build upon Wood's concept and attach the Other to a particular race and interpret it as a means to uphold racist values and the dominance of a particular ethnic group. Ken Gelder observes the prevalence of a monstrous ethnic Other in horror, stating "not every 'primitive' monster is raced, but it is certainly true that horror has persistently endowed the primal forces it unleashes, and so often relishes, with racial undertones" (2000:225). Gelder's examination of vampire stories in the early nineteenth century interprets such texts as representing threatening 'foreign influences' that the nation must expel. Likewise Fatima Tobing Rony (2000) illustrates how *King Kong* brings the uncivilised and backwards savagery of the foreign ethnic other in to threaten the civilisation of Manhattan. Elizabeth Young (2000) also relates the pitch-fork chasing in early film adaptations of *Frankenstein* to the surrounding context of race relations and anxiety around the lynching of black Americans at the time.

Wood also indicates how his basic formula can be extended to other genres and how it changes over time. This allows me to stretch such a concept beyond that of horror and deploy it to illustrate the reactionary nature of New Thai productions in general and their position as bourgeois tools of ideological manipulation. For instance Wood recognises this concept at work in the construction of Native Americans in the Western as a means to uphold the superiority of supposedly civilised White America. Likewise, he recognises how

the monster is always "changing from period to period as society's basic fears clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments" (Wood, 2004:118). This therefore demonstrates the changing status of Thai cinema as a tool of the upper classes and their ideology, rather than the lower-class perspective articulated in previous eras.

Through deploying Wood's concept, it is evident that New Thai films construct a nationalist and ethnic Other as a means to promote the superior qualities of Thainess and that this model of film now serves to uphold bourgeois ideology. For instance, Heritage productions such as *Suriyothai* and *Bang Rajan* depict the Burmese as a major historical threat towards Thailand, reinforcing national identity and the need for state security through depicting the invasion of the country in previous centuries. In both films the Burmese are depicted as a cruel and devious Other opposed to the positive qualities of Thainess. Burmese soldiers massacre defenceless Thai civilians purely for their own pleasure and greed, including the beautiful Thai princess Suriyothai who bravely rides out on her elephant to fight them. Laos has also been portrayed as an Other and is depicted as an inept and bumbling inferior rather than a murderous invader. The film *Mak Tae/Lucky Loser* (Adisorn Tresirikasem. 2006) tells the story of the (fictional) Laotian football team who manage to qualify for the world cup with the help of a Thai coach. The team members are comically ignorant of the ways of civilised life and express dissatisfaction with their own nationality, instead trying to emulate Western footballers by doing hilarious things such as dying their hair (and even their underarm hair) blonde. The film was considered so offensive and racist that it was eventually withdrawn and re-edited to make the team's originating country fictional instead. This was in response to Laotian officials, the Laotian Ambassador and the Thai foreign minister who all warned that the racist portrayal and belittling of Laotian people by a Thai film would damage and jeopardise the relationship between the two countries (The Nation, 2006).

New Thai horror productions also deploy this prevalent and reactionary horror motif of constructing a foreign ethnic 'other' as a means to reinforce the elite discourse of localism.

In order to uphold this dominant order and maintain the status quo, subordinate groups and behaviour are attached to such repressed desires and behaviours and so are rendered as inferior, threatening and monstrous. Thai-ness and Thai values are promoted and upheld through their difference to a monstrous foreign-ness. This indicates how New Thai horror continues to function as a top-down model of ideological manipulation similar to the Ideological State Apparatuses recognised by Althusser. As in *Nang Nak*, this depiction again upholds the dominant order and the system of inequality that is responsible for lower-class suffering, so erasing the lower-class perspective that Thai cinema had previously articulated in favour of a nationalistic model of conformity to the status-quo.

This can be seen in the horror productions *Zee-Oui* and *Ghost Game*. These continue the Heritage discourses of representing and promoting conformity to a true and pure Thainess, one that erases any lower-class subjectivity that could potentially express dissatisfaction in favour of a top-down model of conformity. Rather than through the internal historical depiction of *Nang Nak*, however, these productions construct Thainess as desirable and superior by its opposition to a monstrous and undesirable foreign 'Other'.

## ***Zee-Oui* and the Other**

*Zee-Oui* tells the story of a Chinese immigrant in the 1950s who murdered and ate up to eight Thai children. As is the case in *Nang Nak*, this is a remake of a well-known story that has been adapted for the screen before. It is based upon the true story of the Chinese serial killer Li Hui who entered Thailand in 1946 and was executed in 1959 for killing and eating up to eight Thai children. The 2004 film follows the main protagonist (played by the Chinese actor Long Duan) from his arrival off a ship in a bustling port in Bangkok, his work as a servant for a local Thai-Chinese family and his later movement around the country looking for work. It is during this time that *Zee-Oui* begins to kill and then eat the

various Thai children before he is finally apprehended and caught by a local female journalist and the police.

Through this depiction the film again promotes the mythical qualities of localism, indicating the reactionary ideological stance of the New Thai industry. The construction of Thailand is again one of idyllic paddy fields and smiling children far away from the dangerous outsider influences that were perceived as having caused such devastation in the late twentieth century. However, rather than the excessive displays of historical and rural *mise-en-scène* seen in *Nang Nak*, the positive qualities of this nationalistic image are reinforced through its difference to the barbaric and exploitive characteristics of the Chinese Zee-Oui.

The film follows Wood's (2004) 'Other as surplus repression' concept well: the monstrous Chinese protagonist threatens Thailand and Thai people as a damaging Other that must be defeated. As per Wood, this constructs Thainess as 'normality' and so subjugates those who fall outside such a definition by demonising them as a monstrous Other. This depiction of Thai national identity as inherently superior and under threat encourages conformity to such a homogenous identity during this era of instability. Therefore, rather than challenging the rulers who were responsible for the economic situation of Thailand after 1997, it removes blame from Thai elites and projects this onto a vulnerable foreign Other within and immediately adjacent to the country. Rather than challenging the dominant ideology, it creates a paranoia and xenophobic anxiety to protect this superior Thainess from the introduction of a damaging Other.

For instance, this can be seen in a scene half way through the film that depicts Zee-Oui preying upon village children at a local temple fair. The temple fair is a community event that consists of a large travelling fair often with fairground rides, a makeshift cinema screen, a boxing ring, a beauty contest, stalls selling food and sweets and a stage with a dancing and/or musical performance. The activity occurs outdoors, often at night, around



the village temple, an institution which in the rural village often functions as the centre of communal activities and is particularly significant in small rural villages where it becomes a major social event. A temple fair allows a community to come together and celebrate (most likely) a Buddhist holiday or a funeral/remembrance service or is simply a travelling commercial fair. Attending the fair upon a significant religious occasion and spending money can also be seen as a way to "make merit" and curry favour with the Buddha.

Due to its significance to the community, Thai films, novels and situational comedies often deploy the temple fair as a device to begin developments in the narrative as events occur that can only come about through the situation it creates. For instance, the protagonist can come into contact with people and situations to which he or she would not normally have access. They are also surrounded by a large amount of stimulation such as flashing lights, music and fast moving objects. There is a degree of autonomy allowed, as women and young children are able to stray from their family. In earlier 16mm productions such as *Mae-Nak-Prakanong*, it is used as a means of introducing future lovers and rivals. This narrative device also continues in New Thai productions. In *Monrak Transistor/Transistor Love Story* (Pen-Ek Ratanaruang. 2001), the temple fair is where the hero and heroine are first able to meet and dance together away from her disapproving father and rival suitors, so beginning the tragic love story. In *Beautiful Boxer* it is at a temple fair that the future boxing champion Nong Toom first views the sport of Muay Thai boxing and also discovers his enthusiasm for cross-dressing when he steals the lipstick of a dancer.

In *Zee-Oui* however, the scene at the temple fair serves to contrast the innocent and idyllic carefree image of rural Thailand with the bloodthirsty Chinese Zee-Oui and suggests the need to protect Thailand and Thai citizens from evil foreign influences. The holiday becomes a means by which the monstrous foreign Other can intrude to cause havoc and disruption. The sequence even suggests that somehow this outsider may already be within Thailand and that society has already been penetrated by this dangerous and threatening stranger who targets the most vulnerable situation (the temple

fair) and people (Thai children). Such vigilance and paranoia serves to further reinforce the nationalist agenda of localism. The film depicts the murderer arriving into the village and sneaking around during the temple fair tempting stray children with sweets and balloons before he seizes them, runs away with them and then murders them horribly. This safe and enjoyable lower-class holiday occasion that was formerly used as a light-hearted situation for plot development is now turned into the most horrific opportunity for a serial killer to invade a community and snatch children.

## **The Resurrection of Anti-Chineseness**

As a means to bolster such nationalist discourses the film depicts this monstrous Other as distinctly Chinese. Zee-Oui's monstrous nature is connected with his ethnicity, constructing him as a dangerous and specifically ethnic and foreign other. It therefore constructs a dominant Thai identity through demonising a minority ethnic group, reinforcing the definite and positive characteristic of Thainess (*Kwam-ben-Thai*) through its difference to monstrous Chinese-ness (*Kwam-ben-jiin*).

In such a depiction this film attempts to disturb social relations that appear otherwise content in order to propagate elite ideology. This indicates the reactionary nature of this film through its desire to promote nationalism as an identity and encourage conformity to this, rather than a genuine exploration of ethnicity in Thailand. The film resurrects racism towards the Chinese that, while it has never entirely disappeared, is not noted as a prominent part of Thai society in anthropological studies of the Sino-Thai Chinese community and ethnicity in Thailand in recent years. Scholars actually indicate the lack of social problems with the Chinese within Thailand. For instance Bernard Formoso states that "the social integration of the Overseas Chinese in Thailand is commonly presented as a model of success in the Southeast Asian context" (Formoso, 1996:218). Even the prominent position of this social group in the economic hierarchy of Thailand "does not

seem to create the interethnic tensions and resentment observed in other countries of Southeast Asia" (Ibid: 218). Likewise in a study of the Chinese population of Ayutthaya in 1977, Tobias indicates the lack of friction between, and common cooperation between Thai and Chinese households: "Thai usually invite Chinese neighbours, without a thought of ethnic difference; and Chinese usually invite Thai similarly – to Thai style occasions" (1977:310). While he acknowledges that stereotypes do exist, he argues that these do not appear to play a significant part in relations between two communities that are not entirely separate and between which inter-marriage occurs frequently. This integration is so prominent that people appear to perceive no conflict in identifying themselves as both Thai and Chinese: for instance he states that university students "are disproportionately immigrants children (*luukciin*), yet passionately Thai" (Ibid:305) and he notes among some "the commitment to be Thai *Chinese*" (Ibid:310).

The extent to which this social group is considered a part of Thailand is evident through an example given by William Callahan which illustrates how even during the tumultuous post-97 period of the economic crisis, politicians could not use Sino-Thai ethnicity as a target for blame:

Prime Minister Gen. Chaovalit Yongchaiyut tried to blame Sino-Thai capitalists for the 1997 economic meltdown, calling them "the nation's problem." Though this was a very successful diversionary measure in other countries -the state encouraged anti- Chinese riots in Indonesia to save Suharto- it did not work in Thailand. After a public outcry, Chaovalit apologized and complained that he had been misunderstood. (2003:495)

Instead, the kind of anti-Chinese-ness that is propagated in *Zee-Oui* appears to have been most prominent in the 1930s at a time when the Thai government tried to force the cultural assimilation of the Chinese in Thailand and so increase political control over this economically powerful minority group that controlled around 90% of the countries rice mills (the biggest industry in the country at this time). This Thai hostility towards the Chinese is recognised as the result of a "growing separatism" between the two social groups that was fostered by anti-Chinese rhetoric and unfair policies from the Thai

government designed to control this powerful economic class (Coughlin, 1955:313). Various oppressive anti-Chinese measures were introduced by Thai authorities to both restrict the growth of the Chinese community in Thailand and encourage its assimilation into the Thai majority. This involved limiting Chinese immigration into Thailand, levying higher taxes onto Chinese businesses and prohibiting education in the Chinese language (Leonard Unger, 1944:206-207). Lin Yu talks of 'anti-Chinese feeling' in this period (1936:197). Yu states that it is easy to understand the growth of this feeling as the Chinese seem to be a group that is easily targeted due to their perceived 'foreign' status at this point in time:

The Chinese form about a quarter of the population of the country. They have not been assimilated; on the contrary, they are tenacious of their own language and culture. They dominate the industry and trade of the country, including the processing and marketing of its basic food supplies. Under the autocratic royal rule of Siam, up to 1932, the rise of nationalism was belated; but when the royal power was broken and national feeling given free play, the powerful Chinese minority, which could easily be represented as a community exploiting the Siamese, made an easy target (Ibid:107).

*Zee-Oui* appears to be yet again attempting to select this community as a target, yet one that is now such an integral part of Thailand that it is not so easily victimised in the modern age. The film's attempt to resurrect this 'foreign-ness' that scholars note as being a factor in the Thai government's targeting of the Chinese in the 1930s is a means to retain social control over the population through creating an ethnic and cultural Other, further demonstrating the reactionary nature of New Thai cinema.

The selection of the *Zee-Oui* story in particular indicates how filmmakers attempt to connect with Thai viewers distinctly through the resurrection of this anti-Chinese discourse. This is because the very real story was already present in popular consciousness and had been connected to the ethnicity of its monstrous figure. Viewers had grown up as children with the frightening tale of the Chinese foreigner who ate Thai children and remembered their parents warnings "not to wander out after dark or the Chinese would come for them" (Rithdee 2004a). This selection was also a very deliberate

decision, indicating the desire to engage with this reactionary motif. The film was the directorial debut for Thai sisters and cinematographers Nida Sudasna and Buranee Ratchaiboon and was also the first feature film release for the newly formed Matching Motion Pictures Co. Ltd. This was one of many subsidiary companies of the largest advertising production company in Thailand 'Matching Studio', which was keen to branch into film making. For their opening production, Matching Studio deliberately chose this story. Executive Somchai Cheewasuthon, remarked in *The Nation* newspaper on 31 March 2003 that this story presents "the best way to expand our company". The identification of a story associated with such a racist discourse as being the 'best way to expand' for this company indicates the enthusiasm of filmmakers in the New Thai industry to engage with this reactionary and racist construction.

What is more, the reactionary nature of this depiction is also heightened by its notable rejection of not only the social cohesion of this minority within Thailand but also its erasing of possible previous progressive Thai cinematic depictions of Chinese ethnicity that have been noted by Ingawanij. In her analysis of the earlier 1980s teen cycle and its transformation to the New Thai industry, Ingawanij notes the loss of progressive representations that actually "might represent popular cultural heritage of the kind as yet invisible among heritage films of the officially endorsed quality" (2006:166). Ingawanij mentions the instance of the use of Japanesque clothing of protagonists in teen films as well as, perhaps more significantly, the "naturalization" of Chinese ethnicity. This "can be situated as part of a cultural break that occurred in the late 1980s, during which it became possible, and desirable, to out oneself as *luukjiin*" in a small number of the teen films where "Chineseness dictates the look of a home, situating some of the characters as *luukjiin*, rather than connoting through character stereotype capitalist modernisations exploitation of the (ethnic Thai) people" (Ingawanij, 2006:116 footnote 36). What Ingawanij identifies as a possible "popular cultural heritage" now appears completely lost when faced with the monstrosity of Zee-Oui and his Chinese-identified cannibalism and is

ironically erased in the pursuit of localism and its 'authentic' Thainess. *Zee-Oui's* disturbing depiction of "otherness" in the form of monstrous Chineseness signals a departure from depictions that recognised an ethnically diverse modern Thailand and instead a retreat back to the anti-Chinese feeling created in the pre-war age.

Comments and actions from the Thai filmmakers also indicate this very direct desire to construct an Other that is distinctly Chinese and so create this anti-Chineseness. For instance filmmakers notably took the unusual step of choosing a genuine Chinese actor from China to play the part of Zee-Oui. This was an unusual move in Thai cinema as there is no shortage of Thai and Thai-Chinese actors who could fill in this part and previously did. This casting choice was a fact publicised widely in early pre-production press conferences. Burani is quoted in *The Nation* stating "A Chinese See Oui [Zee-Oui] makes the character more realistic. The gestures are Chinese in nature as are the emotional expressions. Those elements would be lost if we used Thai actors" (Pajee, 2003). This choice demonstrates a similar aspiration for authenticity that was previously evident in the recreation of 'old Thailand' by New Thai productions such as *Suriyothai*, *Nang Nak* and *Bang Rajan*. However, in *Zee-Oui* this is a means to more concretely construct the Otherness that threatens Thailand as Chinese-ness and so allow it to more believably threaten superior good Thainess.

A close examination of the film indicates this racist construction of a Chinese Other. Right from the beginning Zee-Oui is constructed as an ethnic Other who is different to Thai people. His opening arrival in Thailand on a huge Chinese ship underlines this; he is surrounded by hundreds of dirty and impoverished Chinese immigrants and is hurried through a chaotic immigration system. He cannot communicate with Thai people and the Thai immigration officials. He is also sickly, is constantly coughing and is not as strong as the other Thai workers in the mill where he works, implying that somehow his Chinese body is weaker and inferior to those of the Thais.

This Chinese Other-ness then soon takes upon monstrous characteristics as it becomes attached to cannibalism, a practice that is firmly identified as an influence that stems from Zee-Oui's Chinese background. For instance, one scene flashes back to his time in the Chinese army. While his fellow soldiers are raping and murdering victims around him, the terrified Zee-Oui is forced to engage in cannibalism of the Japanese enemy. Publicity and reviews surrounding the film in Thailand also encourage this ethnic identified monstrosity, as they refer to this behaviour as his "instinct," to which he eventually reverts after being unable to succeed in Thai society. The film then even ends with a flashback scene set in China depicting Zee-Oui's peasant mother cutting out the heart of an executed criminal and feeding it to a young and sickly Zee-Oui in an attempt at curing him from his illness. His cannibalism, his cutting out and boiling of the children's organs, is revealed as an attempt to make a Chinese soup which his culture taught him will cure his illness and sickly disposition. This horrific practice is firmly situated as a Chinese custom, one in which the surrounding sickly Chinese peasants take part in almost as a frantic massacre upon the body while his mother screams out "the heart is mine!" Not only does Zee-Oui therefore construct this particular character as a monstrous Chinese other, but in this final scene implies the collective monstrosity of the Chinese people and their culture.

## ***Ghost Game and the Cambodian***

### **Other**

As in *Zee-Oui*, the horror film *Ghost Game* also deploys Wood's (2004) 'Other as surplus repression' concept. However instead of Chinese-ness, this film depicts Khmer culture as a deviant, undesirable and demonic ethnic Other that threatens contemporary Thai society. Yet again, this is a directly racist and xenophobic means to warn against the

dangers of the non-Thai Other and promote adherence to the state by depicting the superior qualities of Thainess. The film tells the story of eleven contestants in a game show who attempt to win a five million baht prize by spending a number of nights in a former Cambodian Khmer-Rouge prison camp in which people were tortured and killed during the genocide that was committed by this regime from 1975 to 1979. The contestant who can last the longest will win a cash prize of five million baht. After journeying from Thailand through the Cambodian jungle (which, I will indicate, helps construct the savagery of the Khmer Other) the contestants enter the camp and are each haunted and tormented by the various angry ghosts who inhabit the ruins. Many of them leave screaming and eventually everyone is killed by the bloodthirsty spirit of the former camp commander. During their stay they must also complete a series of macabre trials, some of which involve being strapped into the original torture devices and spending the night in coffins filled with skulls, a shocking level of cultural insensitivity to Cambodian history that merely uses it as a tool to construct Thai elitist ideology.

The reactionary nature of this film can be first illustrated by its comparison to other contemporary films that also employ the game-show motif. While *Ghost Game's* deployment of this is a means to inspire the decidedly nationalist and deeply racist discourse of localism, other non-Thai films notably deploy this to critique and explore society. For instance the American production *Series 7: The Contenders* (Daniel Minahan, 2001) and the well-known Japanese *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000) both use such a narrative motif to challenge and critique a dominant order that produces entertainment out of encouraging (often violent) competition in the pursuit of capitalist gain. They do not tie this narrative in with the xenophobic portrayal of a foreign Other but instead deploy it to explore the relationship between violence, gun-culture and entertainment within society.

In deploying this familiar motif, *Ghost Game* does not present a critical examination of Thai society but instead draws upon an already existing reactionary racist discourse that was solidified in the colonialist era and promoted by elites throughout the twentieth



century. As stated earlier, nationalism in Thailand developed rather differently to its Southeast Asian neighbours due to the fact that Thailand was never formally colonised. Laos and Cambodia were occupied by French colonialist powers, while Burma, on the other side of Thailand, was colonized by the British. Thailand managed to negotiate itself as a neutral space, a buffer zone for the colonial powers and so avoided formal colonisation. In order to do this, Thai elites were faced with the task of consolidating power over an area of land that had historically been divided up into various kingdoms with centres of power rather than solid borders and so was extremely fragmented and diverse. This was achieved through the construction of a nationalistic Thai identity, one based upon the notion of conformity to a constructed quality of Thai-ness that was defined mostly through its superiority to its immediate neighbours. The qualities of Thainess were promoted vehemently, so much so that the various ethnic identities of the different social groups within Thailand were erased (with citizens now referred to purely as Thai) as a means to consolidate power over this diverse population.

This discourse largely depended upon the construction of an inferior Other in order to define the elusive qualities of Thainess and this was specifically aimed at Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Vietnam, all of which were perceived as inferior nations due to their occupation by foreign powers. Winnichakul indicates how this Othering of neighbouring Southeast Asian nations has been a crucial part of maintaining political dominance by the Thai state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the extent that “the state and its security apparatus survive because of the enemy” (1994, 167). This enemy therefore must always be “presented, produced, or implicated, and then discursively sustained. It is always projected-if not overtly *desired*” (Ibid:167).<sup>1</sup> The New Thai industry now draws upon this elitist reactionary discourse, constructing this enemy not only through Othering the Chinese citizen *within* the country but also the Southeast Asian border nations *without*.

Cambodia in particular has been subject to a particularly harsh depiction by Thai nationalism and this is evident in the savage and barbaric depiction in *Ghost Game*. The

reactionary and xenophobic construction of this Khmer 'other' can be demonstrated by the Cambodian reaction to the film. The trivialisation of the Khmer Rouge genocide (a major national trauma that is still very much in living memory and is yet to really be acknowledged or negotiated on a personal or state level) was denounced by Cambodian authorities and the film signalled a new 'low' in Cambodia-Thai relations. The Cambodian culture minister Kong Kendara called the film disrespectful to the victims of the Khmer Rouge genocide stating "They want people to be scared, but the deaths (of hundreds of thousands of people) are not a game" (Bangkok Post, 2006). The interior ministry and the police even acted to hunt down and destroy any copies of the film found in Cambodia with the reason given by Kendra that

The movie makes the dead out to be bad, but they are innocents. Our national tragedy is not a game. This movie looks like the Thais are not respecting the Khmer (Ibid).

The Bangkok Post reported that the film

has united all factions of Khmer politics in indignation, with some saying they fear renewed friction between the two nations due to the Thai production's allegedly crass treatment of a highly sensitive and still painful period of Cambodian history (Ibid).

My Meak, the deputy governor of Pailin, a district in the Northwest of the country that was formerly a Khmer-rouge stronghold, also stated "This is not a tool to make business. The killing has stopped. We do not forget our past, but it should never be repeated in any form, and especially not in this way" (Ibid). The furore was so severe that the producers of the film sent a letter of apology to the Cambodian ambassador in Bangkok and Co-producers Tifa production house even issued a public apology to all Cambodians. The Thai filmmakers largely ignored such concerns however as the film was still released in its entirety, indicating how marginalised Cambodian voices are within Thailand even on an official level.

*Ghost Game* also draws upon a racist construction of Cambodia and its citizens that attaches mystical and black magic qualities to Khmer culture in order to Other the country and depict it as barbaric. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker indicate that “In the Thai imagination, Cambodia is a source of great spiritual power, and Khmers have access to powerful techniques” (2008:4). They give the example of Newin Chidchob (who in 2005 and 2006 was a close advisor to the then-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra) to indicate that this discourse exists on a state level as well as a popular one. For Thaksin, Newin was notable not only for his vote-buying skills but also because he was Khmer. Although he had never made any claim of spiritual power, Phongpaichit and Baker state that “the image clings to him because he is Khmer” (ibid), illustrating the strong association between Cambodia and the supernatural in Thai imagination. Prime Minister Thaksin enlisted Newin’s spiritual expertise, travelling to various temples around the country and performed spells and ceremonies (including have an elephant walk under him) designed to draw spiritual power from ancient monuments (including Khmer ones). The extraordinary treatment of Newin after Thaksin’s removal in the bloodless 2006 military coup indicates how this belief is not limited to one man, but is widespread and continues to exist on a state-level:

when he was arrested after the 2006 coup, he claimed his captors had stripped him down to his underwear before releasing him near his home. The army did not deny this accusation, but explained they were looking for his amulets. They had been told by a senior officer to take away his amulets in order to destroy his power. (ibid:4)

*Ghost Game* very directly associates Cambodia with the demonic supernatural and this is present liberally in the depiction of the ruined torture camp. From the very first moment that the characters arrive in the fictional camp a dirty Cambodian shaman performs a ritual for the spirits of the dead in front of the skull-filled memorial, one designed to pacify the spirits. This is notably completely adverse to the ordered saffron-robed chanting Buddhist monks depicted earlier in Thailand. It involves screaming and dancing while the performer himself wears very little and also slaughters an animal, rubbing its blood on to

the memorial as a sacrifice. There is no lengthy explanation for this ritual or indication as to how it will work: it is simply accepted as a necessary part of staying in the camp. Interestingly, this depiction is reminiscent of the northern female spirit cults, a lower-class minority culture that, I have previously indicated, has been similarly Othered within Thailand and so again associates this discourse with the lower classes. Significantly, the Cambodian ritual fails, the Shaman is overtaken by the angry spirits and has to be removed, indicating even the lack of this rudimentary order in this barbaric land.

Although *Ghost Game* is particularly notable due to its controversial portrayal of a sensitive subject and its dispute with Cambodian authorities, it is also not the only demonisation of Cambodia present in New Thai horror, further indicating the reactionary status of the New Thai industry. *Long Khong! Art of the Devil 2* also depicts Cambodia as a place of savagery, one identified as such through its portrayal of Cambodian shamans and black-magic Khmer-language spells. These encroach upon Thai citizens and cause chaos and horror that again specifically stems from this ethnically-identified otherness. The opening sequence in this film is of a Thai fisherman screaming in pain with a number of fishhooks emerging from places on his body. An old woman hurriedly called to diagnose his condition immediately states in no uncertain terms 'it's a Cambodian curse', as if to underline the severity of this particular affliction. The source of this curse is revealed to be a Cambodian shaman to whom many of the protagonists went to cast black magic spells designed to harm their enemies. Later in the film, when the psychotic and abused teacher Miss Panor enacts her vengeance, she chants Khmer-language spells and carves Khmer characters upon her body. This black magic, which the film warns will never leave you and will eventually consume you, leads her to burn and skin her students alive before drilling into their skulls with a power drill.

*Ghost Game* therefore constructs Cambodia as an uncivilised and barbaric land that must not be allowed to encroach upon Thailand and Thai people. This difference is also underlined by the emphasis placed upon clearly defining the physical boundary between

'safe' Thailand and 'savage' Cambodia. This illustrates the importance of maintaining such physical barriers against this dangerous, devious and harmful 'other' and promotes a nationalist vigilance to protect Thailand's borders. In order to promote the perception that Thailand is constantly under threat by barbaric others, Thai elites extend maps of Thailand deep into Laos and Cambodia and locate the country at the very maximum of its physical boundaries as they have been drawn at different historical periods. In particular this includes the northern parts of Cambodia and the magnificent Angkor Wat complex, centre of the twelfth century Khmer empire that stretched across Southeast Asia. The claim for this area as Thai is still repeated by Thai nationalists and is well-known in Cambodia. The 2003 Phnom Penh riots were a result of a false rumour that a Thai actress had stated that Angkor Wat was actually Thai and had been stolen by the Cambodians. The Thai embassy was burned and the border crossing between the two countries immediately closed. That this fictional remark could spark such extreme actions indicates the extent of the animosity between the two nations.

The many border squabbles between Thailand and Cambodia also contribute towards this construction of an ancient enemy encroaching upon and damaging Thainess. An age-old border dispute between the countries concerns the Khmer temple complex of Preah Vihear which sits directly on the boundary between Thailand and Cambodia. While the temple was designated by the International Court of Justice as being within Cambodian territory and belonging to Cambodia, it is only accessible through Thailand. The issue enrages Thai nationalists who claim that the temple is Thai. It has been used as a political tool by Thai nationalists attempting to portray the government as unpatriotic and 'selling out' to inferior Cambodia thieves. In 2008 Cambodian authorities attempted to register the temple as a world heritage site, an action that enraged Thailand and led to a stand-off in which several soldiers from both sides were killed.

*Ghost Game* continues to construct this important physical boundary between Thailand and the other. It is evident in the scene depicting the contestants' journey into Cambodia,

one that juxtaposes the savagery of the rural Cambodian *mise-en-scène* with that of the civilised urban Thai situation. The opening scenes in Thailand depict the contestants preparing for their trip into what they see and construct as a barbaric land. Saffron-robed Thai monks chant prayers for their well-being and the gentle sepia-toned temples and modern skyscrapers set against the Bangkok sunset are peaceful signs of a civilised and developed land. However when the contestants physically cross the boundary into the Cambodian camp the *mise-en-scène* immediately becomes threatening. The journey to the camp involves travelling deep into the jungle via a river boat; along the way there is no civilisation in the form of people, cities or infrastructure of any kind, again suggesting the backwardness and undeveloped nature of Cambodia. Trees overhang the boat and the contestants are warned not to dip their toes into the river, as though immediately after crossing the Thai border the environment has suddenly become dangerously savage and menacing. Much emphasis is placed upon the contestants physically entering the camp, with close-up shots of the rusty turnstile that admits them and long shots of them all staring up at the decrepit, aging camp entrance. The space immediately upon entering the camp is full of thick cobwebs and overgrown foliage that hangs menacingly. A memorial filled with skulls similar to the stupa that exists at the Choeung Ek killing fields greets the contestants; however, rather than a means of contemplation or respectful remembrance to the nameless millions who died, this looming grotesque monument is a suggestion of the utter barbarity of Cambodia. Likewise the ending of the film features a desperate dash to reach the Thai border by the remaining contestant, implying that the evil of the camp can only be escaped by leaving Cambodia all together.

This racist depiction through which to reinforce Thainess as a national identity is also reinforced by the supposed 'authenticity' that is attached to this portrayal of the Other. The film attempts to align its depiction as close as possible to the experiences of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge so as to emphasise the authenticity of this racist depiction is. Inside, the fictional camp is uncomfortably familiar to the original Tuol Sleng Khmer Rouge

torture camp. It is even stated that it is a former museum that was closed after mysterious deaths occurred and has now been neglected and abandoned, something that again suggests the barbarity and lack of organisation or authority in Cambodia. The skulls and bones that litter the camp are also reminiscent of the piles of discarded bones in the killing fields. The preserved rusting torture devices that were found in each room of Tuol-Sleng are also present as well as full mock-up water torture boxes in which the prisoners were shackled and which the contestants now climb into as part of the 'trials'. The DVD case advertising the film even depicts a staring ghost-like corpse strapped to one of the iron bed frames used as torture devices in Tuol-Sleng, ones made infamous due to photographs taken by the Vietnamese of the tortured corpses they found in this position in each room and which now decorate the walls of Tuol Sleng museum today. The walls of the fictional 'S-11' camp are also covered with the familiar black and white identification photographs of the Khmer Rouge victims and both the Thai contestants and the Cambodian ghosts all wear the same prisoner-style regulation uniforms worn under the Khmer Rouge.

## **The Hybrid Status of *Zee-Oui* and *Ghost Game***

It is significant therefore that despite the reactionary nature of these films and their cultivation of discourses that uphold the elitist and unequal dominant order, both *Zee-Oui* and *Ghost Game* are still imbued by the 16mm era characteristics. Similar to *Nang Nak* they are hybrid film forms, an amalgamation of both the 16mm era characteristics and the natural language of horror. In particular, the films continue to display an emphasis upon the aesthetic of attraction over that of narrative integration and blur the boundaries

between the supernatural world and the everyday. This demonstrates the continued existence of the lower-class perspective that this ideology is attempting to erase.

Notably, these 16mm era characteristics also conflict with the attempt to adhere to the Natural Language of horror and in doing so they begin to disrupt the creation of a convincing Other out of cultural alterity. The marginalised perspective of lower-class Thailand therefore not only refuses to be erased but also begins to undercut the reactionary ideological agenda of social elites in the Post-crisis era, indicating how this film form continues to function as a means to depict lower-class expression in the increasingly elitist contemporary age.

This is apparent through an examination of narrative structure in *Zee-Oui*. The narrative of the film has been structured to adhere to Carroll's erotetic narrative in order to create a convincing Chinese Other. Yet an examination of the film indicates that the residual reliance upon the aesthetic of attraction undercuts this attempt to attribute and connect Zee-Oui's Otherness distinctly with his Chineseness through this narrative structure.

The film constructs a suspense story that both poses and then answers questions as to why a real man would commit such terrible crimes rather than simply revelling in his graphic antics. This adoption of and emphasis upon such a question and answer structure is apparent in publicity around the film, which states

"The intention of the directors, Nida Sudasna and Buranee Ratchaiboon, is to represent questions about the story of Zee-Oui on what were the causes of Zee-Oui's cruelty."<sup>2</sup>

The filmmakers of *Zee-Oui* wanted to distinguish their contemporary depiction of this well-known figure from previous incarnations through this means, so further indicating their deliberate adoption of the erotetic structure from the Natural Language of horror. They state "In the way we discuss Zee-Oui again here, we do not consider him in the old way"<sup>3</sup>, indicating how they very deliberately changed the film. These previous depictions, as Parinyaporn Pajee remarks, "presented the murderer as a one-dimensional nutcase with



an insane personality” (Pajee, 2003), a depiction reminiscent of the ‘types’ of the 16mm era. Instead, filmmakers attempted to alter the character to being more than just a character type of the 16mm era that conforms to prior-known traits and expectations. He is instead constructed through an erotetic structure that slowly reveals the reasons behind his monstrous nature. As one of the directors states in the same article “our See Oui [Zee-Oui] is a human being with severe psychological troubles” (ibid).

This erotetic structure is intimately connected to depicting Zee-Oui as a monstrous Other that is distinctly Chinese and so contributes towards creating such elitist ideology. As I have already indicated, it is Zee-Oui’s Chineseness that ultimately forms the basis for the reasons behind his antics and so demonises him as an ethnic Other. The film attempts to engage with and answer questions as to why this man may be driven to commit such terrible crimes rather than just displaying his horrific antics and these answers are rooted in his ethnicity. The erotetic narrative therefore helps construct Zee-Oui’s monstrousness as a result of his Chineseness and upholds this nationalist ideology, indicating how this adherence to the Natural Language of horror is a part of the means by which the elitist ideology is upheld and the lower-class perspective ignored.

The incorporation of this structure indicates the filmmaker’s desire to emulate the Natural Language of horror and reject the characteristics associated with the 16mm era, so emphasising how marginalised the lower-class perspective is by the New Thai industry. However, this attempt to erase such lower-class characteristics and incorporate the erotetic structure to construct an ethnic Other is ultimately unsuccessful due to the residual reliance upon the aesthetic of attraction, a characteristic from the 16mm era that took precedence over narrative integration as a source of stimulation. Lower-class subjectivity therefore returns in the form of the 16mm era characteristics to disrupt the elitist ideology propagated by this film.

This disruption occurs due to the conflict produced between the initial sympathetic portrayal of Zee-Oui that aims to construct a cogent erotetic structure that can convincingly attribute his monstrous nature to his ethnicity, and the way in which the film eventually resorts to monstrous graphic display and a two-dimensional character type. *Zee-Oui* is pulled between the attempt to construct its main character as a psychologically damaged individual who has been created as such by his Chinese background (in accordance with the erotetic structure) and the graphic 'numbers' and two-dimensional character types of the older 16mm era film style (in accordance with the aesthetic of attraction).

This is demonstrated through a close examination of the film. It initially begins by deliberately portraying the character in a very sympathetic light, one that attempts to make Zee-Oui's actions seem more comprehensible and logical in accordance with the erotetic structure. The film depicts the anti-Chinese racism Zee-Oui encounters within Thailand and the poverty stricken conditions he is forced to live in by cruel exploitative employers. In the opening scenes his treatment by the Thai immigration authorities upon his arrival in Bangkok is particularly brutal. Alone, isolated and unable to communicate with any of those around him, his head is forcibly shaved, he is thrown in detention and his name is entered incorrectly. The incorrect pronunciation of his name is a recurring theme throughout the film, with Thai people constantly denying him subjectivity by refusing to give him his correct Chinese name 'Li Hui' and addressing him with the corrupted Thai version of 'Zee-Oui'. Notably he is labelled with the racist term *Jek-baa* (a "crazy chink") by callous Thai immigration officials and during this opening ordeal high-angle shots position him as isolated and vulnerable. His first job in Bangkok is particularly brutal: he must slaughter chickens for a cruel Thai-Chinese family whose children taunt him and he is forced to sleep in the slaughterhouse surrounded by blood.

This background exploration is then the means by which his monstrousness is explained. At first this appears to be attributed to his terrible treatment in Thailand, but slowly,

through the flashback scenes in China that I mentioned earlier, it is connected with his Chineseness and so attributed to his culture and ethnicity, indicating how crucial this characteristic is in the upholding of elite ideology.

This attempt to 'psychoanalyze' the character through an erotetic structure that attributes his monstrosity to his Chineseness is then problematised due to the emphasis upon graphic display. The aesthetic of attraction portrays his monstrous exploits and places emphasis upon these, rather than his ethnicity. The initially sympathetic 'character study' that sought to attribute the source of his behaviour to his ethnicity is forgotten in favour of a graphic display of dead children and internal organs that are not connected to his Chineseness. By the end of the film Zee-Oui's previous history takes second place to the grinning bogeyman tempting and then killing children rather than a complex bullied victim using a supposedly Chinese means to cure himself.

Critical reviews illustrate the confusion that resulted from this conflicting hybrid nature, so demonstrating the lack of a coherent ideological message that can construct the Chinese as a monstrous Other. Comments from *Bangkok Post* critic Kong Rithdee indicate how the film is torn between these different styles of filmmaking. Rithdee describes *Zee-Oui* as "a film that's torn between its self-imposed dilemma of being both a psycho-slasher and a character study at the same time" (Rithdee, 2004b) and he particularly singles out the attempt to evoke sympathy for the character as a failure. The effort to "psychoanalyze" the Zee-Oui figure seems to have backfired, with Rithdee terming it an "audacious attempt" which "disintegrates into a tenuous drama and sub-par Gothic slasher" (Rithdee, 2004c). The two-dimensional performance of such a monstrous character type prevents the production from garnering the sympathy needed to turn it into an 'authentic' psychological study and viable erotetic structure, so contributing towards the box office failure of the film. The harrowing scenes at the temple fair render the desired sympathy towards him as a bullied victim completely unfeasible for Rithdee and so likewise cannot convincingly

construct him as an Other created as such due to his Chineseness. This background study that specifically constructs him as monstrous is ultimately not feasible.

This attempt to construct Zee-Oui as a Chinese Other is also undermined by the apparent need to connect the monstrous actions of this central character with a supernatural element. The suggestion that Zee-Oui may in some way be supernatural is somewhat unexpected given previous efforts to 'psychoanalyze' him and attribute his actions to his Chinese background. Again this follows the characteristics of the 16mm era, which, as I have indicated, were drawn directly from the position of the supernatural as a legitimate means of social organisation in the lower-class context.

This is first suggested by the DVD case which aligns the film with the *Nang-Phii* genre, asking very specifically "Man or Ghost" (*Phii ru Khon*) on the cover (figure 33.).



Figure 33.

However the film then continues this supernatural insertion when it finally questions whether the protagonist's deeds are the work of a man or another supernatural force. This

is suggested at the end of the film when mingled with the end credits are a few closing depictions of Zee-Oui's trial. In prison he is approached by a police officer who informs him that if he "confesses" to the murder of all eight children, he will be allowed to return to China (a goal that he has spent the second half of the film pursuing). In a scene immediately following his confession, the heroine journalist, who played a big part in capturing him, then confides to her colleague that there is no possible means for Zee-Oui to have been in all the many places where the murdered children were found; therefore, he cannot be responsible for all the deaths. As the filmmakers state from their research around the film: "Sometimes two murders occurred in consecutive nights or even the same night, while the locations were quite far apart. At that time, the media posted a question whether this is the act of a human or a ghost".<sup>4</sup>

The filmmakers also note this very deliberately, illustrating their desire to insert a supernatural motivation into the film:

even after his death, the killings of children with their internal organs consumed continue even up to the present time. That might mean that the demons that possessed Zee-Oui are still here, moving from person to person as long as the society is still materialistic and forgets about the frailty of human soul [sic].<sup>5</sup>

This begins to problematise the film's construction of the character as a distinctly Chinese Other. Rather than attribute his actions purely to psychological and cultural factors, the film appears to need to attach it to a fantastical source. The ending therefore undermines the construction of Zee-Oui as a disturbed and monstrous Chinese man who has been created as such by his Chinese background. It begins to attribute what is initially portrayed as the cultural practices of a disturbed individual to the supernatural, an element that is not connected to any specific ethnic or cultural Other.

This conflict is also evident in *Ghost Game*. Again the aesthetic of attraction problematises the attempt to create a viable erotetic narrative that upholds the construction of civilised and superior Thainess through its opposition to a monstrous

Cambodian Other. In this case, while the aesthetic of attraction does function to create the monstrous Cambodian Other, the simultaneous lack of character development inherent in the concentration upon graphic display rather than narrative integration prevents the production from constructing the Thai characters as rounded individuals who can therefore reinforce the superiority of Thainess.

For instance, throughout the film there is little introduction to any of the Thai contestants or any time devoted to exploring and defining their personalities. The characters are introduced only as a group and are rarely distinguished as individuals. There is therefore little emotional response as they are each killed. Rather than upholding national superiority as Thai victims of a demonic ethnic Other, the frightened contestants and their eventual demise instead functions merely as a series of graphic 'numbers'. They cannot be constructed as viable superior beings over that of the Cambodian savages nor elicit the sympathy required to sustain such a depiction when they are under threat by this monstrous Other. Their pain and suffering becomes merely another part of the graphic display, rather than a means to uphold ideology by constructing the Thai characters as superior civilised beings under threat from a monstrous ethnic Other.

This is particularly evident in the ending number in which the ghost of the camp commander chases and finally kills the last remaining contestant. This female character could function as what Carol Clover (1993) recognises as a Final Girl. This is the final survivor of films such as *Halloween*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (Cunningham. 1980) and her prominence is such that this character can be considered to be an integral part of the Natural Language of horror. Clover describes the character of the Final Girl as being "watchful to the point of paranoia" and "intelligent and resourceful in a pinch" (1993:39). She is boyish and it is the adoption of characteristics that are typically considered masculine traits that set her apart from other characters (especially other female character) and ultimately allow her to survive by escaping from or even defeating the killer. The character is notably developed throughout the narrative of such horror films,

to the extent that she is “presented from the outset as the main character” (Ibid). Therefore “The practiced viewer distinguishes her from her friends minutes into the film” (Ibid).

Yut from *Ghost Game* could easily be identified as an adoption of this characteristic from the Natural Language of horror due to her status as the last contestant left alive and the only one who attempts a viable escape. She could easily function to demonstrate the superiority of Thainess through her daring escape from the demonic ghost of the Cambodian camp commander and certainly appears designed to do this. However due to the emphasis placed upon the aesthetic of attraction over that of narrative integration as a source of stimulation, the character development that Clover notes as being integral to the construction of the Final Girl as an intelligent and resourceful figure who is distinguished from other characters from the very beginning of the film is absent in *Ghost Game*. The residual emphasis upon the 16mm era characteristics of the causal narrative structure and a series of graphic ‘numbers’ means that there is no viable erotetic structure of questions constructed that the Final Girl eventually answers through her defeating or escape from the killer. Yut has therefore not been singled out from the group at the beginning of the film through displaying any particularly incisive abilities. As with the rest of the characters, she therefore does not embody a particularly positive or superior construction of Thainess. Her final escape from the camp inspires little reaction when rather than reaching the safety of Thailand, the contestant fails and is killed suddenly by the commander. Indeed this resolution instead serves as a graphic number and to emphasise the lack of emotional attachment to and investment in the character, rather than her superiority to Cambodian savagery.

An examination of *Zee-Oui* and *Ghost Game* therefore indicates that New Thai horror continues to be a reactionary response to the wider social context and to uphold elite ideology while simultaneously erasing the lower-class perspective that was visible in previous eras. The demonic ‘othering’ of Cambodia and its recent history in *Ghost Game*

indicates how New Thai horror cinema continues to adhere to this reactionary discourse and functions as a bourgeois means to exercise control over the Thai nation in the post-crisis era, an agenda that will even stoop so low as to alienate its neighbours and hijack their traumatic history for the purposes of promoting Thai nationalism and superiority. Likewise *Zee-Oui* departs from previous valid explorations of ethnicity in Thailand and resurrects an anti-Chinese discourse from the 1930s as a means to create a Chinese Other that can also uphold the superiority of Thainess yet has the potential to disturb relations with this social group.

However, this examination also indicates how the marginalised lower-class perspective from previous eras of Thai cinema again resurfaces in the formal parameters of such hybrid productions. This then disrupts the attempt to create a viable ethnic-identified other and emphasise the superiority of Thainess. The lower-class perspective therefore not only refuses to be erased but also returns to disrupt such bourgeois ideology in this increasingly elitist age. The next chapter further explores the presence of these characteristics as a formal expression and representation of lower-class Thailand. It illustrates how the erasing of such attributes in pursuit of global success through the emulation of the natural language of horror indicates a loss of this Thainess on the international scene.

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this Chapter have been published as 'The Monstrous Chinese "Other" in the Thai Horror Movie *Zee-Oui*' in the collection *Cinemas, Identities and Beyond*. Please see appendix 1 for full text and reference.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted on the *Zee-Oui* film website 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted on the *Zee-Oui* film website 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted on the *Zee-Oui* film website 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted on the *Zee-Oui* film website 2004.



# **Chapter Five<sup>1</sup>: *Shutter* and the 'vengeful ghost' films**

After exploring horror films of the New Thai industry that uphold such an elitist ideology in the post-Crisis era, chapter five begins to explore an alternative body of films that have a very different relationship to wider Thai society. The chapter explores a body of films in the New Thai industry that I call the vengeful ghost films. These insert a traumatised lower-class female ghost into the narrative who proceeds to take revenge upon and disrupt the bourgeois equilibrium of her male abusers. I argue that this 'vengeful ghost' motif functions to expose the abuse and inequality upon which the nationalist ideology of Localism is based and so these films begin to offer an alternative response to the wider social context that is much different to the Heritage productions.

However, I then illustrate that while the vengeful ghost motif would seem to offer a critique in the films that are popular in Thailand, the most successful of these films actually removes the 16mm era characteristics that have come to define the entertainment products of this divided nation in the contemporary age. This represents an essential loss of Thai subjectivity altogether in those films popular abroad and therefore signals the complete erasing and conservative marginalising of the Thai perspective on the international stage. An authentic cinematic Thai identity is therefore only to be found in the stylistic practices of the 16mm era, which New Thai cinema has attempted to both hybridize and eradicate.

## **The New Thai 'vengeful ghost' films**

The vengeful ghost films are an integral part of the New Thai industry. They continue a discourse that can be recognised throughout the history of both Thai cinema and the EuroAmerican Natural Language of horror. This is the association between the feminine and the supernatural, a connection that specifically reincarnates itself in the modern context and retains a strong presence in the New Thai industry. As with *Nang Nak*, many New Thai horror films depict the spirits of ghostly young women returning from the dead, continuing the age-old Othering of the female and an attempt to cast-off this demonic female abject that can be traced back through the B-grade productions to the 16mm era and connected to the patriarchal nature of Thai society.

As I have indicated in the opening chapter, this discourse can be attributed to the designation of the female as inferior under a patriarchal system. Again this indicates a continued connection between Thai film and the Natural Language of horror that I explored in my first chapter, as it illustrates the similar patriarchal nature of both cultural contexts. For example films such as *Shutter*, *Body...Sop 19/Body* (Paween Purijitpanya. 2007), *Buppahrahtree*, *Faed/Alone* (Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom. 2007), *Art of the Devil 2*, *Krasue Valentine/Ghost of Valentine*, *Phii Chong Air/The Sisters* (Tiwa Moeithaisong. 2004) and of course *Nang Nak* all display this connection and take as their grisly subject matter ghostly women who have returned from the dead.

However, close analysis indicates that the Vengeful Ghost films represent a potentially progressive streak alongside the reactionary depictions seen in such New Thai horror productions such as *Nang Nak*, *Zee-Oui* and *Ghost Game*. In what is a very different depiction to films such as *Nang Nak* these ghost women instead offer a potential rejection of the ideology promoted in the Heritage productions as they refuse to conform to and accept the unfair treatment that is accepted by characters such as Nak in *Nang Nak*. The story of abuse and vengeance becomes a recognition of the marginalised and exploited status of the rural and urban poor and a critique of the corresponding inequality such a hierarchical system breeds. It implies criticism of both patriarchy and the treatment of the

rural lower classes by the elitist order as the films force a confrontation with both the exploited angry feminine and the marginalised lower classes whose perspective was also erased by the Heritage productions.

As I have previously indicated, Localism idealises the rural scenario without criticising or acknowledging the conservative and patriarchal hierarchy upon which it is based. It glosses over the social inequality that led to economic devastation and instead actually encourages conformity to this dominant order through promoting idyllic and nationalistic scenarios. As Hewison (1999) stated earlier, Localism feeds into reactionary discourses of nationalism and chauvinism and does not challenge such systems but instead deflects criticism from this hierarchical exploitation. This therefore both erases and marginalises the lower-class perspective that previous eras of Thai cinema had articulated, forcing it to comply with such elitist ideology or forcibly expelling it. Ironically, as I have previously indicated, it is this perspective that has suffered the most throughout Thailand's economic boom and bust, being exploited in the economic push of the 1980s and hit hardest by its downfall after 1997. The Heritage productions such as *Suriyothai*, *Bang Rajan* and *Nang Nak* all depict women and the marginalised lower classes as willingly sacrificing themselves to uphold this dominant order. *Nang Nak* as I have indicated, continues the association between women and the supernatural but deploys it as a means to uphold the nationalist construction of localism and exemplify the self sacrifice it requires.

Rather than upholding this dominant order, however, the vengeful female ghosts of the New Thai industry disrupt the glossy localism propagated by the Heritage productions. These films function as a critique of Localism and its corresponding cinematic depictions. Rather than the sacrificial conformity depicted in *Suriyothai* or *Nang Nak*, the films tell the story of mistreated and abused young women who use supernatural powers to take revenge upon those who abused them. Many involve a lower-class woman who died under tragic circumstances now returning from the grave to enact vengeance upon her male abusers. A significant number of films in the New Thai industry deploy this narrative

motif. Films such as *Buppah Rahtree*, *Body*, *Phii Chong Air*, *Art of the Devil 2* and *Shutter* all follow this structure.

This motif can be interpreted as a traumatic response to continuing social inequality and the abusive and unaccountable surrounding context of Thai society which remained after the crisis of 1997. For instance in his research around the marketing of skin whitening products in Thailand, scholar Walter Persaud (2005) notes the existence of a sexist and racist hierarchy in post-crisis contemporary Thailand that continues to subjugate lower-class people and women in particular. An Oxfam research report from 2009 indicates that after the economic crisis lower-class Thai workers remained extremely vulnerable to and were not adequately protected from wider economic difficulties (Akkarakul et al., 2009). They also continued to enjoy very little employment security due to the lack of labour rights in Thailand and the continued suppression (which is even violent at times) of the trade union movement. The abuse of lower-class women in particular, as I indicated in my first chapter, played a large part in the exploitation of cheap labour in the post-war decades and created the economic boom that, as Peter Bell indicated earlier, was built "on the backs of women" (1997:55). When this boom collapsed in the 1997 economic crisis, the abuse of the poor continued and inherent within this the abuse of Thai women in particular. The Oxfam report indicates that the use of Thai women as cheap labour has continued in Thailand and, to add to this, economically and socially women workers were the hardest hit by the 1997 crisis. This is due to the fact that women traditionally carry the main responsibility for financially supporting their extended family, most likely their elderly parents. Along with this financial responsibility they are still much more likely to experience aggravated working conditions and receive unjust treatment from employers than male employees. This includes not being paid salaries or other money they are owed, being ignored by employers and even scolded. They are also always the first to be laid off in any difficulty. This treatment is also particularly significant given that Thailand

has an extremely high rate of female labour force participation, indicating the significant contribution women make to the economy (Akkarakul et al., 2009).

Instead of refusing to acknowledge the trauma experienced by the abused lower classes that has been caused by the post-97 context of economic boom and bust, the horror genre (as Blake (2008) illustrated in the first chapter) therefore becomes a means to negotiate and mediate this traumatic social context. This does not erase such inequalities in favour of idyllic nationalist scenarios but rather blasts open such a facade to depict a traumatised and marginalised perspective that demands to be noticed. In this way it is very similar to both the earlier B-grade productions and the many vengeance motifs deployed in horror films globally.

Rather than rejecting, changing or forcibly expelling this undesirable social abject, the films force the nationalistic and patriarchal social order to recognise this marginalised perspective that now terrorises and horrifies the status quo. The wronged women force society to accommodate their subjectivity by enacting their frustrations and vengeance upon those who have abused them, compelling their tormentors to not only recognise but also pay the ultimate price for their previous behaviour. This critique is emphasised by the fact that although the actions of these women may be terrifying, gruesome and appear somewhat excessive, they are not unmotivated. They have led a previously normal and content existence that was in some way disrupted by the cruel actions of another.

Therefore, while Thailand is portrayed as an exoticised idyllic land by the New Thai Heritage productions, this is sabotaged and exposed by the vengeful ghost films. These disrupt the social order that localism attempts to uphold as the abused and angry lower-class female *Phii* expose the hidden exploitation upon which this elitist patriarchal fantasy is based. They insert the exploited and marginalised lower-class and female perspective into depictions of Thai society, forcing it to re-accommodate that which was previously ignored by the elite-sponsored Heritage productions. This formerly invisible underbelly

with its tales of mistreatment and exploitation now shatters the glossy nationalistic depictions of the Heritage productions. The women horrifically subvert the glossy, highly-refined state-promoted hypocritical image of 'Amazing' Thailand and its "flowers of the nation" (Van Esterik, 2000:105) by exposing both the grim reality of patriarchal abuse and its consequences: female suffering that is later followed by anger and vengeance. If modern horror "inhabits the very fabric of ordinary life, daily picking away at the limits of reason and the aspirations underpinning 'moral improvement'" (Gelder, 2000:2), then these tales of female-abuse can be interpreted as a critique of the repressed anxieties 'picking away' at the 'moral improvement' of the localist ideology of capitalist and patriarchal late twentieth-century Thailand that has resulted in such an unjust society.

## ***Buppah Rahtree, Body and Art of the Devil 2***

This narrative motif and its corresponding disruption and critique of localism can be seen in a close analysis of the films *Buppah Rahtree, Body and Art of the Devil 2*. All three inject this abused lower-class and female subjectivity into the elitist equilibrium and so challenge the ideology of the Heritage productions. *Buppah Rahtree* tells the story of a shy and solitary lower-class female student called Buppah who is seduced by the rich young playboy Ek in Bangkok. Ek targeted Buppah due to her solitary and diligent character which seemed to present a challenge to his seduction techniques. His seduction of Buppah is actually part of a bet and he even secretly videotapes them having sex, showing it to his laughing friends afterwards. To add to this cruel and humiliating treatment, Ek then abandons Buppah to go and study in England and she later dies from a horrific botched abortion while waiting to be evicted from her dingy apartment in Bangkok. At first, Buppah's death appears to have little impact upon her immediate

environment, something that can again be interpreted as an illustration of the elitist nature of Thai society. There is no particular concern or commotion when it is revealed that she has died and her landlady appears much more concerned with removing the body so she can rent out the room again. Rather than the story ending here, however, Buppah's tormented and angry ghost then stays to make her presence and treatment known and make Ek pay for his cruelty. She refuses to leave the apartment and instead remains to terrify both her exorcists and her neighbours, resisting all attempts by her landlady to remove her. When Ek returns she murders him horribly by sawing off his legs and then attempts to kill his new girlfriend.

*Body* also tells a similar story of exploitation, this time the ghost of Dararai is haunting the doctor Sethee with whom she was having an affair. To keep the affair quiet, Sethee had murdered her and then flushed bits of her body down the sewer in Bangkok. Dararai torments Sethee from beyond the grave by hypnotising him to believe he is a student investigating her murder. He is constantly plagued by terrifying hallucinations and flashbacks, illustrating how her complete control and manipulation over him now disrupts the social order and forces him to confront the true horror of her brutal murder. He is eventually driven mad and arrested for her murder, but is impaled by metal pipes when trying to escape. Dararai's gnarled corpse is then revealed to have been watching his torment throughout, finally enacting her ultimate revenge by waking him up screaming from his hypnotic state when he is in the midst of being operated on in hospital for his terrible injuries.

*Art of the Devil 2* also depicts an abused woman who, similar to Buppah and Dararai, refuses to accept her fate and instead pursues her abusers in search of vengeance. Miss Panor's reputation was previously ruined by the students who played a cruel prank on her and ruined her reputation in order to punish her for her relationship with another teacher, indicating that her crime was one of female sexual self expression in a patriarchal world. It is later revealed that she was also cursed by men who visited a black magic shaman to

cast a love spell on her. However Miss Panor has been driven mad by this treatment and has her life ruined; she refuses to accept this unfair treatment and simply vanish from society. Instead, she allows the students to stay in her house in the forest and kills them in various ways, using spells to summon spirits to torment them. She uses her newly acquired black-magic skills, achieved through shamanism, occult worship and cannibalism, to slowly hunt down the terrified students and enact her shocking revenge. She puts one girl in a soup for her classmates to eat, makes lizards crawl out of a boy's back and fries a girl's face on a hot plate after she has gouged her eyes out. Her most gruesome feat is burning a student alive, stripping his skin off, pouring boiling water down his throat and then inserting a power drill in his forehead.

All three of these films function as a critique of the unfair and unequal nature of modern Thailand and Localist ideology. Most significantly this is evident through the narrative of unfair abuse. While the female protagonists may seem to be dangerously unstable, they do not begin as such but are driven to these actions by the treatment from their male abusers. Their grievances are also genuine, indicating the righteous nature of their revenge, even if it may appear excessive. For instance Buppah was a diligent student before Ek decided to abuse her, Dararai was a university lecturer with a Ph.D before she was murdered horribly, while Miss Panor was a teacher at the local school before her reputation and sanity was ruined by the students. None of them exhibited any pretensions towards extreme violence or mental instability, so connecting their terrible actions purely with their appalling treatment. This functions as an allegory of the continuing terrible treatment of Thai women in the contemporary age. It suggests that the continued abuse of these marginalised social groups and perspectives will have terrible consequences and will ultimately lead to social instability and chaos.

The films also extend this critique to the treatment of the lower classes. Two of the films depict their abused female protagonists as distinctly lower-class, so intensifying their critique by addressing this aspect of social inequality within Thailand. In *Buppah Rahtree*



Buppah is of a significantly lower social status than Ek: her apartment is tiny and cramped and she is also isolated and alone. In contrast, her cruel abuser owns a flashy car while his elitist parents live in luxury in Bangkok and with their immense riches are even able to send their spoiled son abroad to a rich country for his studies.

*Art of the Devil 2* also engages very much with the disparity between the rural lower class and urban upper class. It locates the abused and vengeful Miss Panor in a distinctively rural lower-class setting. She lives in an the isolated wooden forest house located on the banks of a river (one very similar to Nak's in *Nang Nak*) and the visiting students must travel away from the urban university via train and then river boat deep into the jungle to reach it, a journey that very clearly takes them away from the city and back into rural village life. This transition to the countryside is deliberately included in the beginning of the film to indicate the shift between these very different environments, so illustrating how these modern urban students have mistreated and then spurned the lower-class rural female in their quest to better themselves. The rural Thai setting, ill-treated and then rejected by the city elites, then becomes a suitable site in which Miss Panor's terrible revenge is played out.

This critique of Heritage ideology is further illustrated by the ending of all three films. In so many of the New Thai vengeful ghost films the story is not satisfactorily resolved or concluded and the equilibrium is not restored. Rather than neatly concluding their narratives by pacifying the threat or restoring order, the vengeful ghost films instead end rather ambiguously. This refusal of narrative closure further serves to disrupt dominant ideologies, as it does not pacify or destroy the ghost (as in *Nang Nak*) who is refusing to conform to the status quo.

For instance *Buppah Rahtree* ends in a stalemate with the ghost of Buppah still un-exorcised and living in her apartment with the abusive boyfriend she has killed. The ghost of Ek now also lives with her, permanently begging for forgiveness which she does not

appear to grant. The building's other residents must now learn to accommodate their new ghostly neighbours and her landlady ceases trying to exorcise her. It is unclear where they must go from now, but the film certainly implies that the society cannot go back to its original order. *Body* also ends with the trial and conviction of the main character Sethee for the murder of Dararai. It then seems to indicate that this punishment is not enough as he is finally impaled through the chest by a number of steel pipes. In the very final ending scene the ghost of Dararai then stands over him and states that she finally forgives him, waking him up screaming in agony in the midst of the operation to remove the pipes. This ending again does not restore the previous status quo, nor does it indicate the eventual fate of the characters; instead, it merely seems to indicate the ongoing anger and conflict between them and suggests that neither can go back to the previous state of being. *Art of the Devil 2* also ends somewhat ambiguously. Miss Panor is shot by the authorities and one of the students is finally revealed to have been a ghost, terrifying the only survivor who throws herself out of her hospital window. The death of all characters involved suggests the inevitable meltdown of the contemporary social order and the absence of any available social model.

This stalemate becomes all the more significant in light of the 2006 military coup and the class conflict that followed. It appears that these films foretold the inevitable meltdown of society and the chaos that was to follow by recognising that the unfair and abusive nature of contemporary Thai society could not continue. This was when the aristocracy, backed by the military, decided to oust the democratically elected government and replace it with a military regime. This upheaval occurred sometime after these films were made and resulted in a tumultuous stalemate of demonstrations, occupations and outright violence between the various factions in Thailand, the effects of which I address in my next chapter. Thailand was torn between competing factions and interests, who tried to push the country in various opposing directions. The sense of a future that cannot yet be born in the ending of the vengeful ghost films suggests the extent to which Thai film reflects the

growing instability in Thai society. Unlike the Heritage productions the vengeful ghost films seemed to recognise that the abusive and hierarchical order could not continue, it had to be destroyed and society must in some way be built anew and altered to accommodate lower-class subjectivity.

## ***Shutter***

This interpretation of the vengeful ghost films is further supported by an analysis of the international smash hit *Shutter*. This is probably the most notable and successful New Thai production to engage with this theme. *Shutter* becomes a particularly significant example of the vengeance motif within the New Thai industry due to its incredible success and its unusual ending. Rather than just the two polar opposites of abused and abuser, this film contains an unusual third character who attempts to reconcile these characters and so represents a possible way out of and even a solution to the chaotic stalemate of contemporary Thai relations.

*Shutter* was made by Phenomena Motion Pictures, an affiliate of the much larger Phenomena film productions, that (similar to Matching Motion Pictures who made *Zee-Oui*) was a small company set up to capitalize on the success of the New Thai industry. Of the forty eight Thai films released in 2004 (11 of which were horror films) *Shutter* was the highest grossing by far and was the fourth highest grossing film overall, beating the Hollywood historical epic *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004) and the Sci-Fi blockbuster *I, Robot* (Alex Proyas, 2004). It achieved an astounding level of success for a domestic horror film, taking over two and a half million dollars, almost one million more than the second-highest grossing Thai film for 2004, *The Bodyguard* (Petchtai Wongkamlao 2004). In the first week of release it grossed \$1,406,196 million dollars. In the second week the film shot up to claim a further \$2,182,160 million dollars<sup>2</sup>. Even years later, a fascination with *Shutter* remains within Thailand, as well as a degree of 'pride' in the international

success it achieved. Internet message boards still host discussions in which it is referred to as the 'best' Thai horror ever and the only genuinely frightening Thai film and major film websites devote pages to its beginnings and the continuing antics of its directors<sup>3</sup>.

*Shutter* offers the familiar critique of Thai society seen in the vengeful ghost films. As with the previous examples, the film tells the story of a blameless lower-class woman who is abused by cruel upper-class men. *Shutter's* ghost is that of the university student Natre, another solitary and shy dead female student who is haunting her former boyfriend Thun. As with Ek's selection of Buppah, Natre had been singled out and noticed by Thun due to her solitary and diligent character. He later grew tired of her attachment to him and instead preferred the group of thuggish male bullies who tormented her. This group of friends then raped Natre while Thun photographed the rape. This was a means to punish Natre for her continued pursuit of Thun after he had tired of her and she committed suicide soon after. As an angry and abused ghost Natre now chases Thun around apartment blocks and hangs forever perched on his shoulders, terrifying him by refusing to leave and killing all of his friends who mistreated her.

This critique is especially evident though the construction of the two main characters, whose subjectivities become intricately associated with, and so critique, the much wider arena of rural and urban inequality. Natre and Thun are depicted as originating from these very different worlds and the *mise-en-scène* reinforces these very different domains. The cruel abuser Thun is located within Bangkok and his world echoes this modern context. It is represented in his everyday life in the form of fast cars, capitalism, sexual freedom, skyscrapers in vast city-scapes, alcohol, glossy graduation gowns, modern architecture, stylish apartments and electronic communication technology. A visit to the abused Natre's house and her unhinged mother, however, indicates a very different rural background. This visit begins with a journey into rural Thailand (when Thun and his girlfriend try to discover Natre's fate) so foregrounding her position far outside that of urban modernity and the city. This journey encompasses rice paddies, traditional wooden houses, monks

being given alms and the village temple, all of which are very different to Thun's urban context. Natre's former existence is represented by old country houses, jars of dead preserved animals, ragged worn clothes, decaying country roads, leaking fluids, slightly unbalanced middle-aged mothers and intense romantic devotion, which are indicative of a connection to an older traditional rural and lower-class context. Her terrible treatment and corresponding vengeance then becomes a critique of Thun's behaviour as an exploitive and cruel urban upper-class Thai.

However alongside this now familiar motif, *Shutter* also possesses what is possibly the most interesting ending in terms of critiquing contemporary Thai society. As in the other vengeful ghost films *Shutter* does not restore the previous social order nor does it satisfactorily resolve its conclusion. However, unlike the previous examples it does attempt to reconcile the polar oppositions that now run through and disrupt Thai society, suggesting that it is through this reconciliation and acknowledgement that Thai society can solve its ongoing social problems.

This reconciliation is suggested through the additional character of Thun's girlfriend Jane. Jane is an unusual addition to the vengeful ghost films. She represents a connection between the two opposites of Natre and Thun and her actions at the end of the film offer a possible means to reconcile these opposing social forces and the stalemate they have created. A close analysis of this character illustrates how she is connected to both of these alternate sides of Thai society as she is able to function in both worlds and appeal to both Natre and Thun. For instance in the opening scene set immediately after Thun's friend Ton's wedding (who it is later revealed was one of Natre's rapists), Jane sits beside the male gang as they discuss 'whoring' and drink alcohol (Ton's new wife is excluded from knowing about his antics). She is comfortable and is included in the conversation, but notably does not drink. Jane is also depicted as independent; unlike Natre she does not crave Thun's affection: she can drive, lives independently in Bangkok and takes it upon herself to conduct her own investigations into the haunting. After the initial car crash

she studies the haunted photographs and despite Thun's persuasions will not forget the incident. She deciphers the photos and makes her way to the room where Natre studied alone and was eventually raped by Thun's gang. Her entering into the university biology lab marks a shift from her situation in Thun's domain (in his small, linear and modern apartment) to that of Natre's. In the large airy room full of natural light, jars of preserved creatures, stuffed animals and soft billowing curtains, Jane stays calm and collected and is able to 'communicate' with Natre for the first time. After taking a photograph of the spectral Natre she does not flee but responds to Natre's message, eventually discovering the truth about the former relationship and who Natre actually is. Jane is also able to communicate with Natre's mother, convincing her that she must hold a funeral for her deceased daughter, an action in which Thun failed. In effect Jane mediates between the two parties, responding to and assisting both.

Jane's position can therefore be interpreted as an indication of the future direction Thailand must take if it is to survive; it must be able to accommodate and reconcile both these subjectivities equally, without discrimination or prejudice. The importance of this reconciliation is represented most clearly in the ending, in which *Shutter* appears to suggest that Jane becomes the means to possibly 'rescue' contemporary Thailand from the social stalemate it is now trapped within. The film ends with an injured and silent Thun sitting in a mental hospital with the ghostly Natre still draped over his shoulders: the two socially-opposite former lovers are now trapped together and immobilised in a disturbing and tragic stalemate. Previously in the film Jane had decided to abandon Thun to his fate after learning of his cruel compliance in Natre's rape; however, in the final scene she returns to the abhorrent situation and the film ends with a crucial wordless scene in which she chooses to walk into the white-washed room after observing tearfully the depressing scene before her. The situation that she gazes upon is a tragedy for both sides of the conflict. The 'monstrousness' is created by the horrific sight of Natre and Thun's entwinement in which each is resigned to their fate of communal existence yet possesses

only incomprehensibility and contempt for the other. However the film's final scene allows for more progressive interpretations through this inclusion of Jane and her return which can perhaps offer a solution and even a positive outcome to the mess and horror that is internal Thai relations.

## **The Vengeful Ghost Films and the 16mm era characteristics**

However, while the film's subject matter can be interpreted as acknowledging and re-inserting marginalised lower-class subjectivity back into the social equilibrium, close analysis of *Shutter* also indicates that in doing so the film actually simultaneously erases the characteristics of the 16mm era film style. This incredibly successful New Thai film and its critique of Thai social inequality actually distances itself from the authentic lower-class origins of Thai cinema and rejects this film style in favour of incorporating aspects from the Natural Language of horror. Therefore, while its subject matter can be interpreted as a critique of contemporary Thailand, this is ultimately presented in a form which would seem to be imported and one which in its success would perhaps herald an erasure of the 'traditional' Thai cinematic form and the lower-class subjectivity that I have argued it represents.

Wider research then indicates how due to this rejecting of the 16mm era characteristics, *Shutter* begins to lose its specific Thai identity on the global scene. *Shutter's* adoption of characteristics associated with the Natural Language of horror coupled with the erasing of the 16mm era lower-class origins represents a possible loss of the Thainess that has come to distinguish Thai films internationally. This illustrates that while the themes and discourses of New Thai productions can vary as can their political relationship to wider society, the extent to which these productions are representative of Thailand in the

international context is indicated by whether they exhibit the characteristics that represent the insertion of lower-class Thailand into the elitist equilibrium. A Thai cinematic identity is therefore to be found in the incorporation of the 16mm era characteristics and Thai productions must retain such attributes if they are to assert a perspective that can be recognised as distinctly Thai in the global hierarchy. In other words, in order for Thai film to be recognised as Thai, it must be representative of the full spectrum of Thai society, rather than marginalising the film style of the urban and rural poor.

*Shutter's* adherence to the Natural Language of horror and lack of a specific Thai identity can be demonstrated through a close analysis of the film itself, its international reception and a comparison with other vengeful ghost films. In particular these other vengeful ghost films illustrate how the 16mm era characteristics cause productions to deviate from the Natural Language of horror and how this disruption therefore functions to reassert Thainess in the global context, one that is intricately connected to the continued presence of this lower-class film style. For instance, while *Buppah Rahtree* performed well in Thailand, its non-Thai reviewers appear perplexed by the strange format. As one critic writes after viewing the film at the Toronto International Film Festival 2004:

After a fairly promising start, *Rahtree: Flower of the Night* quickly transforms into an incredibly lame horror/comedy. It's actually quite remarkable how fast the film goes from semi-interesting to all-out disaster. (David Nusair, 2004).

While the mixing of these visceral genre traits is regarded as a 'disaster' by this non-Thai viewer, my close analysis has already indicated that the characteristic of privileging the aesthetic of attraction and blending various genres into a single film was historically an integral part of Thai film and has continued to imbue productions, indicating how this lower-class characteristic now functions to define Thai film in the international context.

The international promotion of *Buppahrahtree* further demonstrates the existence of a Thai cinematic identity that is created through the 16mm era characteristics. It is evident due to the fact that the international distributors attempted to erase this Thai subjectivity to



prevent the disruption of the Natural Language of horror. This is evident from the radical differences between the two different marketing styles adapted to promote the DVD: the original Thai version (figure 34.) and the international version (figure 35.).



Figure 34.



Figure 35.

The Thai version conforms to the visceral excess of the 16mm era Thai film form while the other adheres to more global horror trends, illustrating how the distinctly Thai status of the film is lost when such attributes are erased.

Comments regarding *Art of the Devil 2* from the popular film reviewing website 'Twitch film' also illustrate this assertion of Thainess on the global scene through this film style and its continued misunderstanding in the non-Thai context. The reviewer states "It's less concerned with plot than with shocks, but once the shocks start coming, they come fast, thick and inventive." (Brown, 2006) and

As a narrative it sputters badly, but as a visceral experience it makes for powerful stuff. The marketing on this isn't kidding when it says the film contains things you've never seen before and it contains a lot of them. (Ibid)

For these critics and viewers the privileging of the aesthetic of attraction over that of plot adheres to 'lowbrow' horror: the overt and graphic low-budget incarnations that exist on the fringe of 'good taste' (Hunt, 2000:326) and which are regarded as inferior to a rounded erotetic structure. Rather than a crude and 'lowbrow' characteristic, however, I have already illustrated that this visceral aesthetic of attraction has always been a significant characteristic of mainstream Thai cinema due to its origins and development, the presence of which again indicates a specifically Thai subjectivity in its reception on the global scene.

A close examination of *Buppah Rahtree*, *Body* and *Art of the Devil 2* also indicates how these films continue to display extensive characteristics from the earlier 16mm era and create this specific Thai cinematic identity through disrupting the Natural Language of horror. *Buppah Rahtree* becomes an excellent example of how despite the creation of a new and commercially viable industry through high-grossing blockbuster productions and an infrastructure of multiplexes to support them, the stylistics from previous film eras are still very evident. The film follows a causal narrative structure that blends many genres and privileges the aesthetic of attraction as a source of stimulation over that of narrative

integration. While its opening scenes set up the tragic narrative of Buppah's abuse and then death, the film then shifts to become a series of graphic comedy, horror and action numbers that follow a very loosely discernible climactic plot. There is no attempt to construct an erotetic structure by posing questions that require answers. Although the ending provides a surprise revelation that Ek is actually a ghost who has been killed previously by Buppah, this is only added within the last ten minutes of the film and does not impact at all upon the rest of the plot.

*Art of the Devil 2* also exhibits such characteristics and so continues this Thai cinematic identity. Its overcomplicated and unclear story does not construct a narrative that is effective as an erotetic horror structure. Instead the film privileges the aesthetic of attraction. Its main source of stimulation is to be found in a series of graphic numbers, the majority of which elicit extreme fear or disgust. For instance the film's opening scene is highly graphic: a fisherman in a rural village is taken to an old woman's house in terrible pain after being cursed by catching a catfish laced with fish hooks. As he screams in pain, a variety of extreme close-up shots reveal fish hooks emerging from various parts of his body. This sets the tone for the rest of the film in which the aesthetic of attraction – in this case extremely graphic horror numbers – takes precedence as source of stimulation. The film also ends with an extraordinarily graphic torture scene, in which Miss Panor ritually burns, skins, extracts teeth from and drills the student who has abused her.

However an examination of *Shutter* illustrates how this disruption from the 16mm era characteristics does not take place. Instead the production adheres to the Natural Language of horror and displays virtually none of the 16mm era characteristics that have come to represent the marginalised presence of lower-class Thailand in the contemporary age. *Shutter* begins to erase the 16mm era characteristics that have come to define Thai film on the international scene. While the subject matter can be identified as a staple New Thai motif and attached to the surrounding context, *Shutter's* narrative structure and *mise-en-scène* appear to be influenced by much more global horror trends and begin to lose

the Thai cinematic identity that is displayed by films such as *Buppah Rahtree* and *Art of the Devil 2*. In losing the lower-class film style the film loses its Thai identity on the global scene, so illustrating how in order to truly remain Thai, Thai film must continue to represent this lower-class perspective.

For instance, close analysis indicates that *Shutter's* filmmakers constructed the film to privilege narrative integration as a source of stimulation instead of the aesthetic of attraction favoured by the 16mm era and the hybrid New Thai films. Notably they recognised the significance of narrative structure in the appeal of horror films as they are quoted on a popular Thai film website as stating that the source behind the (perceived) bad quality and lack of success of Thai films lay in problems with the plots<sup>4</sup>. This indicates that they are aware of plot as a major factor in the defining of Thai film and yet also illustrates their determination to leave this Thai film style behind and adhere to the Natural Language of horror.

In *Shutter* the vengeful ghost motif is mapped onto a re-modelled suspense narrative and very deliberately constructs a question and answer erotetic structure as a means to elicit effects from the viewer. This is a completely different film form to hybrid New Thai films such as *Nang Nak* and *Buppahrahtree*. Rather than a prior-known causal narrative structure and the privileging of the aesthetic of attraction as a source of stimulation, *Shutter's* filmmakers have constructed a story in which the vengeful ghost Natre and her back story of abuse is slowly and terrifyingly revealed to the viewer through questions posed that the characters must solve.

Many questions are created through both earlier unexplained scenes and the character of Jane, who shares with the viewer a lack of prior-knowledge about the characters and situation and so conducts her own investigation to answer the mystery. For instance questions are posed as to why Thun's friend Ton shows up terrified at Thun's apartment repeatedly asking for some photographs and whispering 'it's that bitch'. These questions

are then answered later in the film when it is revealed that Ton was one of Natre's rapists and was asking for the photographs Thun took. Questions are also raised regarding the overall significance that is attached to the camera and the university biology lab. These are again answered later when the biology lab is finally revealed to have been the site of Natre's rape and the camera as having been used to take the incriminating photos, a symbol of Thun's ultimate betrayal of Natre. Through Jane's investigation into the clues left by Natre, the identity and purpose of the ghost is also slowly revealed. The film poses constant questions for Jane to answer such as the truth behind the identity of Natre's ghost, her previous relationship with Thun and the reasons behind her haunting. Through her position of ignorance then through her investigation and finally her growth into understanding, Jane's perspective constructs the erotetic narrative in which the audience learn the truth about Thun's murky past and Natre's vengeance.

Along with this newly formed erotetic structure, *Shutter* has also adopted the *mise-en-scène* of well-known Asian ghost films. The film re-moulded the 'Thainess' of its subject matter to comply with internationally successful Far East Asian Horror aesthetics. This adheres to a standardized globally prominent cinematic conception of 'Asian horror', one that again symbolises a rejection of the 16mm era characteristics and the Thainess these represent.

This is a Far East Asian and American aesthetic quite different to the Southeast Asian visceral Thai numbers with their traditional haunted forest houses, slapstick buffoons and gory scenes. *Shutter* is very different to the pre-modern *mise-en-scène* of historical rural Thailand depicted in *Nang Nak* with its dark skinned Nak sporting her traditional peasant hairstyle and blackened teeth. Similarly the slapstick comedy and teenage rockstars of *Buppah Rahtree* are absent from *Shutter*, while the blood and vomit splattered hacksaw-wielding figure of Buppah is a world away from the refined Natre. Instead *Shutter's* *mise-en-scène*, costumes and even performance clearly owe a debt to internationally renowned Japanese ghost films that have since become a staple ingredient in the Natural Language

of horror. The film creates a similar picture of 'Asian horror' that is cultivated in such productions as *Ringu*, *Dark Water* (Takashi Shimizu. 2002) and *Juon* (Hideo Nakata. 2002). This is recognised by Thai and non-Thai viewers, both of whom mark the film as stylistically similar to Japanese ghost films.<sup>5</sup>

For instance this similarity is echoed in the characters of *Shutter*. The long black hair, white face, stilted crawling and staring eyes of Natre are reminiscent of the vengeful Japanese *onryou* in Japanese horror films such as *Ringu* and *Ju-On*. A scene in which she crawls slowly and stiffly up Thun's bed is similar to both Sadako emerging from the television in *Ringu* and Kayako crawling down the stairs in *Ju-On*. Likewise Jane stays in her school uniform for a significant part of the story, echoing the prominence of Japanese school girl costumes in films such as *Battle Royale*, *Suicide Circle* (Shion Sono. 2001) and *Ringu*. In manners and dress, Thun himself can be easily be paralleled with Ruyuji who assists the protagonist in *Ring*. Likewise his dark enclosed apartment with its linear contours is comparable to apartments in the prior mentioned Japanese ghost films, ones very different to the shoddy Thai apartments with their make-shift washing lines and hair salons in *Buppah Rahtree*, and completely separate from the up-country Thai village of *Nang Nak*.

Due to *Shutter's* attempt to cultivate both the erotetic horror structure of the Natural Language of horror and the *mise-en-scène* of a global horror model it therefore becomes a challenge to locate the film's 'true' Thai origins. This indicates how the lower-class expression that caused the hybrid nature of the contemporary New Thai productions has now come to represent this Thainess within global models of film. The erasing of the 16mm era characteristics within Thai films corresponds to an erasure of Thai subjectivity on the global scene. This marginalises the Thai perspective in favour of the Natural Language of horror. The lower-class 16mm era characteristics are therefore crucial to the representation of Thailand as without these the Thai perspective begins to be erased and ignored in keeping with the global hierarchy established during colonialist times.

Out of all films examined so far, *Shutter* is the most difficult in which to recognise and identify Thailand as the film's country of origin. This indicates the erasing of Thai subjectivity. Indeed many non-Thai viewers express surprise that the film is actually Thai and confusion at being unable to recognise any distinguishing features of these national origins. Rather than the sporadic festival showings of *Buppah Rahtree*, *Shutter* can be found in high street DVD racks alongside *Ringu* and *Ju-On*. The film's deliberate altering of its narrative structure and *mise-en-scène* enabled it to cross borders far more easily and achieve a much wider popular distribution than any other Thai horror film. However there is virtually no reference to its Thai and Southeast Asian origins, an indication perhaps of the coagulated image 'Asia' still occupies in the Euro-Amerocentric dominated global consciousness.

This global marginalising of Thai subjectivity through the erasing of the 16mm era characteristics is also most evident in *Shutter's* 2008 Hollywood remake (Masayuki Ochiai. 2008). This ensured that any lingering connection to Thailand and Thai aesthetics was finally erased when the film was instead located in Japan, employed a Japanese director and followed an American couple Ben and Jane Shaw. The protagonists are now haunted by a genuine *onryou*, the abused young Japanese woman Megumi Tanaka. The central motif is now mapped upon a wider discourse of Western masculine abuse vs. Eastern feminine revenge with an American Jane now occupying the conflicting position of the affluent modern female who uncovers this hidden history of abuse.<sup>6</sup> Again following in the footsteps of *Ringu* and *Ju-On*, *Shutter's* adherence to such global aesthetic and narrative trends ensured Hollywood interest enough to purchase and re-make its tale of abuse, albeit one that appeared to erase all links to its Southeast Asian origins.

This chapter has therefore indicated that in contrast to the Heritage productions, certain horror films within the New Thai industry do critique the unfair hierarchy of Thai society and the corresponding ideology of localism. The vengeful ghost films offer a representation that highlights the abusive nature of Thai society and can be interpreted as

a critique of the continuing abuse of the Thai lower classes and Thai women in particular in the contemporary age. Their ambiguous endings further suggest that such a system cannot continue and Thai society in its present form must be dismantled, foreshadowing the military coup and the breakdown of society that I explore in Chapter six. However, I then further indicated that the most successful of the vengeful ghost films *Shutter* actually erases the 16mm era characteristics and that this removal then signals a loss of the Thainess that has come to define these productions on the global scene. This is most especially felt in the American-Japanese remake of *Shutter*, which erases all connections to its Thai origins. An authentic Thai cinematic identity is therefore to be found in such stylistic practices which represent the wide and divided nature of Thai society.

As I argue in the next chapter, the loss of this hybridity that has distinguished Thai film points to something more than simply an attempt by filmmakers to achieve international success. This incorporation of global models of filmmaking by Thai elites and rejection of the lower-class characteristics in films such as *Shutter* is simultaneous with the popularity of films targeting only and consumed purely by the lower classes. These fully deploy and embrace an updated version of the 16mm era characteristics. This is symptomatic of the increased polarisation of Thai society in the modern age and the growing political and social divide in Thai society. Originally a lower-class entertainment form, Thai film now seems to be increasingly polarised at a time when society is also developing stark social divisions. As the next chapter will illustrate, this continued division and inequality comes with particular social consequences such as the increased polarisation of politics within Thailand and the creation of extreme political factors that result from the country's continued elitist hierarchy and inequality.

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this Chapter have been published as 'Contemporary Thai Horror: The Horrific Incarnation of *Shutter*' in *Asian Cinema Journal*. Please see appendix 2 for full text and reference.

<sup>2</sup> Source: <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/thailand/?yr=2004&currency=us&p=.htm>>



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<sup>3</sup> This can be seen on websites such as <[www.siamzone.com](http://www.siamzone.com)>, <[www.popcornfor2.com](http://www.popcornfor2.com)> and <[www.thaifilmdirector.com](http://www.thaifilmdirector.com)>

<sup>4</sup>This is discussed in an article on leading Thai entertainment website Siam Zone, in which Phenomena Motion Pictures state that they acknowledged the trashy 'pure entertainment' element of Thai horror when planning *Shutter* and that the source behind this (perceived) bad quality and lack of success lay with problems in the plots

Retrieved from <[www.siamzone.com/movie/news/index.php?id=1999](http://www.siamzone.com/movie/news/index.php?id=1999)>

<sup>5</sup> An extensive article in Thai at <[www.popcornfor2.com/movies/archives/ft\\_061.html](http://www.popcornfor2.com/movies/archives/ft_061.html)> discusses Shutter's relationship to Japanese ghost films and marks the movie as stylistically similar to both *Juon* and *Ring*.

<sup>6</sup>A notable difference between these two productions is the ending, in which Thun/Ben sits silent and unmoving in a mental hospital with the spirit of Natre/Megumi draped possessively over his shoulders. The American version depicts Jane abandoning Ben to his fate as forever entwined with the angry *onryou*. In her Thai incarnation however, Jane returns ready to engage with this stalemate and so suggests that in her duality she can possibly construct a solution to the chaotic consequences modern Thailand finds itself entwined within.

# Chapter Six: The resurgence of the lower-class film style

After illustrating how the Thainess of New Thai films is represented through the hybrid nature of contemporary productions (which becomes lost in the quest to better emulate the Natural Language of horror and achieve international success), I now examine the existence of films in the New Thai industry that fully embrace the 16mm era characteristics. I illustrate that in recent years there has been a resurgence of successful New Thai productions that adhere much more to the film style of earlier years. These films exclusively target the Thai lower classes and embrace such attributes as a means to target this audience. As evinced by this growing body of Thai films, this significant body of Thai cinema drifts further away from the Natural Language of horror in its appeal to this lower-class audience who remain apart from the urban audiences to whom the hybrid New Thai productions are aimed. This further connects the 16mm era characteristics to this lower-class audience and its marginalised position within Thailand.

I contend that this body of films represents a reaffirmation of lower-class subjectivity within the New Thai industry. This also supports my contention that the 16mm era characteristics function as a traumatic expression of lower-class Thailand as the prevalence of such productions can be connected to recent oppressive political events within the country and the resurgence of lower-class social movements. Such an examination illustrates that despite the prevalence of the elitist Heritage productions and the loss of the 16mm era film style in films such as *Shutter*, there are still contemporary Thai films that remain the property of this marginalised social sphere in Thailand. The continued deviation of Thai film from global filmic models in the contemporary era, therefore, is in part a result of the inequality that continues to exist in contemporary

Thailand and creates stark differences in the entertainment forms produced by and enjoyed in this divided nation.

## **Lower-class productions in the New Thai industry**

Recent Thai film history first indicates the continued existence of this marginalised lower-class perspective and begins to contextualise such analysis. This illustrates that lower-class subjectivity never been entirely erased despite the success of the Heritage films and the erasure of the 16mm era characteristics in films such as *Shutter* in the contemporary era. Productions catering for the urban and provincial lower classes have continued to survive while New Thai productions adopt an increasingly hybrid form and uphold the dominant ideology. The marginalised 'voice' has therefore never been entirely absent from Thai cinema and so begins to lay the groundwork to allow it to undergo a resurgence during the increasing social polarisation of recent years.

As was the case with the 16mm era as well as the B-grade productions and the teen cycle, films targeting the culturally and economically marginalised urban and rural poor<sup>1</sup> in Thailand seem to have always been a part of Thai cinema yet have remained in an informal and almost unofficial guise that indicates the exclusion of this perspective within Thai society. The origins of these productions in the New Thai industry stem from what Chaiworaporn and Knee (2006) call 'B-grade works', which were popular in the early 1990s and were made by 'amateur directors'. These were "aimed directly for second-run theatres or provincial audiences" (Ibid:59) and so indicate how the B-grade productions of the 1980s (that were also enjoyed by the lower classes) continued into the 1990s.

These contemporary films also take their origins from what Chaiworaporn and Knee refer to as the "direct-to-video" phenomena that also targeted the masses in Thailand. This was

the pirate video and video rental market in Thailand, which increased rapidly between 1985 and 1990. It became a hub for provincial and suburban viewers of Thai films who now (with a slightly higher disposable income) were able to purchase cheap videocassette players and make use of the video rental businesses which had sprouted up across the country by entrepreneurial shopkeepers (Hamilton, 1993:523).

In the New Thai industry the same is now true for VCDs and VCD players. Productions targeting such audiences are in part a recent response to the increasing popularity of the inexpensive VCD format within Thailand and a continuation of the video market of the 1980s and 1990s. Many New Thai productions are not released in DVD format but actually in VCD, indicating their targeting of the urban and rural poor because of this cheaper format. They are able to reach outwards from the urban areas and downwards to the lower classes, catering for those who are either far away from the multiplexes or simply unable to afford such luxuries. The amount of VCD stalls in local village and provincial markets indicates the popularity of these cheap VCD productions with these viewers. Figures 36, 37 and 38 show four different VCD stalls in a small market in the Northeastern province of Chaiyaphum. These stores almost exclusively stock Thai productions, a move very much opposed to stores such as the popular chain Maeng Pong that fills its shelves with foreign blockbuster DVDs and can be found in every expensive urban shopping mall of Thailand.



Figure 36.



Figure 37.



Figure 38.

In the contemporary era the continuation of this targeting of the lower levels of Thai society is evident in films such as *Luang Phii Teng/Holy Man* (Note Chermymim. 2005), *Jaew/M.A.I.D.* (Yongyuth Thongkongthun. 2004), *Boonchu 9* (Bundit Rittakol. 2008), *Baan Phii Pop 2008* and *Wor Mah Ba Mahasanook* (Bunjong Sinthanamongkolkul. 2008). All of these New Thai productions were extremely successful within Thailand but especially so with provincial Thai audiences. For instance the slapstick comedies *Iron Ladies*, *Jaew* and *Holy Man* notably did not enjoy wide success outside of Thailand and according to Chaiworaporn targeted a specific audience inside the country. She states "These kinds of movies are always welcomed by local viewers. The stars are well-known and the films can reach audiences across the country, especially in the rural areas" (Chaiworaporn, 2007: 73). She also describes the families and wide age range of viewers to whom they appeal, stating that the majority are based outside Bangkok in the suburbs. For instance the main star in the slapstick comedy *Jaew* Pornchita Na Songkhla (the most popular television star in Thailand) spend time perfecting the north-eastern Isaan dialect for her character to use to specifically increase the film's lower-class and provincial appeal (Chaiworaporn, 2006b:114). Very few of these films enjoy success outside of Thailand and many are not

available with any form of dubbed translation or subtitles, further indicating the targeting of an exclusively Thai audience.

## **The social context of ‘class war’**

With the increasing high revenue of productions such as *Holy Man*, *Wor* and *Jaew* in the New Thai industry, it appears that these films and their prominent 16mm era characteristics are now pushing through into the mainstream and becoming more and more successful in recent years. Crucially, they appear to be increasing in popularity in a period when Thailand is becoming increasingly polarised, an era that some describe as constituting a ‘class war’ (Ungpakorn, 2009:83). The resurgence and popularity of productions that directly target the lower classes and strongly adhere to the 16mm era film form can be interpreted as part of a wider response to the concerted effort by conservative elites to erase lower-class rural subjectivity within Thai society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This illustrates that Thai film is once again functioning as a means of lower-class expression, as it did in the 16mm era, and negotiating a traumatic wider context. In this way productions again function as a traumatic representation of lower-class Thailand, rather than uphold the dominant ideology advocated by elites.

This attempted expunging of lower-class subjectivity within contemporary Thai society began with the removal of the democratically elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in a bloodless military coup in September 2006. This was followed by the continued refusal of ruling elites to hold democratic elections. This removal is significant to the marginalisation of the urban and rural poor within Thailand as Thaksin was the first politician to directly recognise the subjectivity of the impoverished masses and incorporate it into the political landscape. Thaksin was a millionaire media mogul and entrepreneur and his enormous popularity came from policies that directly targeted the rural poor. As a relatively new figure who was apart from traditional aristocratic Thai elites he was

arguably the first political figure to realise this potential vote and tap into the disgruntled and ignored lower classes who were suffering from Thailand's economic crisis in 1997.

Political commentators understand that Thaksin's overwhelming popularity was and is a direct result of the anger at the enormous disparity in income growth between that of 'privileged urban groups' and the rest of the country (Glassman, 2010). Thai political academic Giles Ji Ungpakorn understands that "For the first time in decades, a party gained mass support from the poor because it believed that the poor were not a burden" (2009:77). Thaksin and his 'Thai-Rak-Thai' (TRT) party targeted the rural lower-class population through relatively simple programs that nevertheless were one of the first government agendas to directly assist the poor and even acknowledge the poverty that had been created after the economic boom and bust. These included populist spending programs such as "national health insurance, a debt moratorium for farmers, and small and medium enterprise promotion" (Glassman, 2010:766). However this control over and access to Thailand's resources and his monopoly over electoral odds threatened older royalist elites and the opposition Democrat Party. These formed and led the yellow-shirted, ironically-named, 'People's Alliance for Democracy' (PAD) whose street demonstrations called for the forcible removal of Thaksin by the monarchy. Eventually the military staged a coup in September 2006 and the courts "dissolved TRT and barred over 100 of its leaders from politics" (Glassman, 2010:767).

The new regime then immediately set about dismantling this new stronghold that the poor had held in society. It reduced Thaksin's populist spending programs and refused to recognise the result of new democratic elections held in 2007. This illustrates the attempt to remove any lower-class voice from society and indicates how conservative elites instead treated it with utter disdain. As Ungpakorn indicates

Rather than accepting that the electorate support for Taksin was because of the government's first ever Universal Health Care scheme and many other pro-poor measures, Taksin's opponents claimed that the poor did not understand Democracy. (2009:78-79)



The Democrat party therefore formed a government in 2008 without winning any elections and completely ignoring the will of the masses (Glassman, 2010:768).

The response to this complete obliteration of the voice of the provincial and urban poor within Thai society was the formation of the Red Shirt movement. This movement indicates both the increased political polarisation of Thai society and the refusal of the lower classes to be yet again shut out. The Red Shirt movement was formed from the rural and urban poor, it was organised through and originated from Thaksin's popularity and represents an expression of anger towards the unfair treatment and elitist hierarchy of Thailand. Glassman indicates that the red shirt movement is largely made up of

agrarian, proletarian, lumpen-proletarian, and postproletarian workers, many from outside Bangkok, but many from Bangkok's periurban periphery and even from specific groups of workers in the city eg, taxi drivers" (2010:769).

It exists in direct opposition to the PAD yellow shirts who represent and are supported by the conservative elites. Regarding this lower-class versus upper-class opposition Ungpakorn even goes as far as to state that "What we have been seeing in Thailand since late 2005, is a growing class war between the urban and rural poor and the old elites" (2009:83) and certainly the many demonstrations, occupations, political bullying, rallies, deaths and large scale fights between yellow and red opponents attest to this. Ungpakorn calls the formation of the Red Shirts "a process of self empowerment of the poor" (Ibid:97); he characterises them as a representation of "the poor and the thirst for freedom and democracy" (Ibid:97) indicating how they represent the traumatic reassertion of this subjectivity within the national status quo when it has been previously denied.

The official response to the red shirt movement serves to expose the continuing elitist and discriminatory attitudes towards the urban and rural poor within the country that the red shirts are so concerned with. Thai elites made a continued attempt to erase the Red Shirt movement and yet again marginalise lower-class expression. Red Shirt protests have

been met with military violence and protestors have been killed and injured while in its quest to usurp democracy the yellow-shirted PAD is able to occupy government buildings and even Bangkok airport without facing any threats. Glassman illustrates the extreme measures that are taken in an attempt to destroy the Red Shirt movement:

the Democrat government has increasingly imposed a strict Internal Security Act to ban red-shirt demonstrations, while presiding over increasing censorship of the Internet and other media, and abiding intensified use of Thailand's draconian *lese-majeste* laws to punish opponents of the royalist - military - Democrat Party regime. (One Thai journalist, Darunee Chamchoengsilpakul, was sentenced to eighteen years in prison, after a trial closed to the public on 'national security' grounds, because of a speech she made criticizing the royalists and the monarchy for the coup. Others have also received harsh sentences, and several prominent figures have fled the country rather than face *lese-majeste* charges.) (2010:768)

This indicates the extent to which Thai elites are prepared to go to erase this movement and the populist subjectivity it represents, yet also the strength of the impoverished red shirt movement in that it will continue to call for demonstrations and rallies throughout Thailand that are attended by vast numbers who travel from distant provinces. Ironically, such state opposition has actually resulted in the growth of the movement and has even caused it to shift towards a movement representing the wider interests of the poor rather than concentrating exclusively upon following Thaksin.

## ***Wor Mah Ba Mahasanook and Baan***

### ***Phii Pop 2008***

The distinct targeting of this audience by films within the blockbuster New Thai industry can be interpreted as representative of the corresponding social efforts to reinsert and acknowledge lower-class subjectivity in Thai society during a period when this is being erased and denied. The existence of productions that are popular amongst the masses and rarely leave Thailand indicates the resurgence of this point of view in a mainstream

capacity. Likewise the increasing popularity of these films and the high revenue they generate is testament to the refusal of this lower-class perspective and its political movement to be erased within Thai society, a refusal that stands beside the political movements that have grown up from the rural poor in the contemporary era. In this way, such lower-class productions can be interpreted as a progressive response to the wider social context. They represent and reaffirm a perspective that I have indicated is erased from the ideological agenda of the Heritage productions and the film style of *Shutter* at a time when this particular perspective is also under threat in the wider political arena.

Significantly, these productions demonstrate a strong adherence to earlier forms of Thai film that also targeted the lower classes. This is particularly evident through their deployment of the 16mm era film style. Rather than the hybrid status of New Thai productions, these films directly embrace the 16mm era characteristics. This indicates that the reaffirmation of this perspective takes place through the 16mm era characteristics and that the prevalence of this film form can therefore be attributed to the resurgence of subjectivity and expression by the urban and rural poor in contemporary Thailand through movements such as the Red Shirts. Both the removal of such stylistics in films such as *Shutter* and the parallel embracing of the 16mm era film style by these films is therefore symptomatic of the wider polarisation of Thai society, specifically the attempt by Thai elites to erase and deny lower-class subjectivity and the corresponding attempt to reinsert it. This reinforces my contention that the existence of this film style within the New Thai industry is a direct product and representation of the Thai lower classes. Building upon this, it then further illustrates how the film style that distinguishes Thai productions in the contemporary age and causes them to run so counter to the Natural Language of horror can ultimately be attributed to the unequal nature of Thai society.

A close textual examination of two New Thai productions *Wor Mah Ba Mahasanook* and *Baan Phii Pop 2008* illustrates the prevalence of the 16mm era style of filmmaking and therefore the corresponding reaffirmation of the subjectivity of the marginalised masses in

the tumultuous contemporary age. The films also offer a case study of the horror genre, indicating how the influence from this earlier era of filmmaking continues to cause Thai film to differ so radically from the Natural Language of horror even almost a decade into the twenty-first century.

*Wor* tells the story of an upcountry village that is being terrorised by a mad dog. This kills numerous inhabitants and livestock and the story depicts the villagers going through all sorts of bizarre and very foolish remedies in their attempt to stave off the perceived threat. The villagers mistakenly flee from an intelligent temple dog called Chok; however, the threat is eventually revealed to be an escaped mad dog from outside the village that is eventually recaptured. *Baan Phii Pop 2008* meanwhile also tells the story of a rural village and its many varied inhabitants. They are visited by a group of doctors setting up a free clinic for the poor. The doctors interfere with the local shaman and prevent him from completing a violent exorcism. The shaman then casts a spell upon his wife that possesses her with the entrail-eating Pop ghost. However he then loses control over his incantations when the pop ogre refuses to allow him to exorcise his wife and continues to terrorise the village.

Both of these films specifically target the lower-class audience and so reassert the lower-class perspective. This is indicated by the fact that they are not available outside of Thailand, have not been released with English subtitles and *Wor* has only had a VCD rather than a DVD release. This is also evident through the issues and scenarios that are depicted and addressed, one that are relevant and even uniquely specific to the provincial viewer.

For instance both films champion everyday rural village life, locating the majority of the action within a village setting and depicting characters and scenarios that are associated with this. This is also the case in other high grossing New Thai productions that target the lower classes such as *Holy Man*, *Boonchuu 9*, *Noodle Boxer* (Rerkchai Paungpetch.

2006) and *See How They Run* (Jaturong Mokjok. 2006) all of which foreground rural and provincial Thailand. Chaiworaporn even describes these successful films as being "locally-orientated", and illustrates how they are particularly successful in "rural areas" (Chaiworaporn, 2007:73).

*Wor* and *Baan Phii Pop 2008* both take place exclusively within a rural village. *Baan Phii Pop 2008* even depicts a village temple fair, complete with rides and stalls. Likewise one of the very first scenes of *Wor* depicts a village market in which women are selling vegetables outside wooden houses while the background is full of chickens, pigs and buffalos. Motorbikes, the primary form of transport in rural villages, also abound, with characters arriving into scenes on them and using them to travel along the rudimentary country roads. In both films the houses and shops are also traditional rural wooden and bamboo dwellings with many built on stilts above the ground. The characters gather to discuss their predicament in large wooden communal rooms such as the temple or in the eating areas underneath houses. They wear baggy clothes such as bright t-shirts, loose trousers, flip flops and sarongs, all of which are typical lower-class rural dress in the contemporary era. The surrounding woods, jungles, fields, rivers and trees are also depicted, illustrating how far the village is from the urban situations that are foregrounded in New Thai films such as *Shutter*.

Unlike the Heritage productions, this depiction notably does not attempt to recreate the past, nor romanticise the rural setting. Neither *Wor* nor *Pop* promote an agenda that would enable these films to uphold the dominant ideology of localism. While the Heritage productions promote submission towards a bourgeois ideology and an elitist social order, films which directly target the lower classes such as *Wor* and *Pop* do not seek to uphold a dominant order through submission or sacrifice.

Instead the stories appear to concern a threat to the everyday life of the village. Defeating or surviving this involves the villagers coming together to discuss and defeat the danger in

a communal group, a positive depiction that reaffirms the strength of provincial Thailand and its small village communities. This show of community is very different to the individual tales of sacrifice promoted by Heritage productions such as *Nang Nak* and *Suriyothai*. For instance after the mad dog begins killing people and livestock in *Wor*, the villagers come together to figure out how to defeat and escape it. Although there is a central leader the whole village is involved in discussing the threat and making decisions, a very positive depiction of lower-class community that is almost entirely absent from the blockbuster New Thai productions.

The same is true in *Baan Phii Pop 2008* when the whole village arrives communally to confront the shaman about his possessed wife. This communal depiction also continues into the various 'numbers' and plot events in which characters take part in large groups. In several extended sequences the villagers are chased around and around en masse by the Pop host. In *Wor* all of the characters jump into the river en masse to escape the dog and huddle together at the end when cornered by it. The ending in particular reinforces the importance of the village community when the mad dog is captured by the outsiders who lost it and the temple dog Chok is exonerated. At this conclusion the various diverse village inhabitants come back out of hiding; they smile broadly at finally being able to go on with their lives while the central group of characters watches and rejoices.

## **The 16mm era characteristics in *Wor* and *Pop***

As I have previously indicated, however, it is the deployment of and adherence to the 16mm era characteristics that indicates how films such as *Wor* and *Pop* distinctly target the urban and rural poor and so are part of a genuine resurgence of lower-class subjectivity in the contemporary period. This recognition and reaffirmation of the lower-

class point of view is not only apparent through these specific characteristics directly, however, but also through a self-referentiality towards the era itself that reinforces the viewing community as essentially Thai. Most notably, in their depiction of lower-class life *Wor* and *Pop* directly make reference to and even pay homage to the 16mm era and the B-grade productions that were enjoyed by the lower classes in previous eras. The fact that contemporary productions will reference this previous filmic era as a source of pleasure also indicates how relevant this body of films and its audience still is within Thailand.

For instance *Baan Phii Pop 2008* is a direct homage to the B-grade era, being a contemporary remake of the earlier B-grade *Baan Phii Pop* series to the extent that it even stars the same lead actress. Likewise the director of *Wor* states that his intention was to make a film very similar to the *Baan Phii Pop* series by simply replacing the main ghost with a dog. *Baan Phii Pop 2008* also contains a number of scenes identical to the earlier 16mm productions. The lead actress is seen bathing in a sarong in the river and the group of fools are again spying on her in a direct parody of the scene from both *Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* in the 16mm era and *Baan Phii Pop* in the B-grade era. This indicates not only the continued relevance of the 16mm era to such viewers but also how bathing in the river is still an activity people in rural areas engage in, so indicating the continued stark differences in living conditions between audiences in Thailand.

However, the championing of lower-class subjectivity in the contemporary era is most evident in the deploying of the 16mm era characteristics and the direct adoption of this lower-class film style. Unlike the hybrid New Thai Heritage films or the total rejection of such stylistics by films such as *Shutter*, films such as *Baan Phii pop 2008* and *Wor* embrace wholeheartedly such characteristics and directly target this disaffected audience. While New Thai productions only appear to acknowledge the poor in the form of a traumatic disruption of productions by the 16mm era film style, these films give full acknowledgement to and embrace such entertainment preferences. This again

foregrounds their distinct assertion of and adherence to the masses and their point of view in the tumultuous contemporary period, illustrating the very different relationship these films hold to the dominant ideology. This therefore supports my thesis that the continued deviation of Thai films from the Natural Language of horror in the contemporary era is partly due to the vast inequality that exists within the country and the social conflict this has caused in recent years.

A close analysis of *Wor* and *Pop* illustrates how these productions continue to adhere to the 16mm era film style. For instance the films have a strong adherence towards genres that privilege the aesthetic of attraction as a source of stimulation over that of narrative. What is more they blend 'numbers' from various genres into one production. This removes the primary emotional affects of fear and disgust that I have previously indicated are associated with defining the horror genre, again causing Thai film to differ from the Natural Language of horror.

This is illustrated by the fact that all the productions mentioned so far are extremely visceral slapstick comedies. They also combine such comedy numbers with graphic horror numbers, so melding two genres that both privilege the aesthetic of attraction. They have many instances of characters falling over, getting hit on the head, dancing and generally eliciting hilarity with their strange costumes and outlandish behaviour. *Wor* contains numerous slapstick comedy numbers such as when the shy hero and heroine close their eyes and attempt to kiss but accidentally kiss the dog from the local temple that has sat between them. In another hilarious instance a superstitious character begins to believe that water is the way to ward off the threat and concertedly hangs bags of water around his neck instead of amulets. Another comedy number is created when a female character arrives into the village on the back of the motorbike and is so covered in dirt and dust from her journey that she must shake it all off before anyone recognises her. These slapstick numbers are combined liberally with instances of graphic horror. For instance when the first victim is killed there are lingering shots of the mangled corpse and the



investigator roughly prodding the wounds while suggesting hilariously inappropriate and outlandish sizes for the killer. Likewise after another murder, a character seizes a motorbike to drive off while the intestine of its previous owner is accidentally attached, allowing it to unwind from the body as he takes off. In another scene a character viciously beats another character in bed when he believes that the mad dog lies under the blankets, resulting in the victim spitting blood and gasping in pain.

*Baan Phii Pop 2008* also blends visceral graphic horror and slapstick comedy numbers. For instance a disgusting and horrific number involves the possessed host surrounded by dead chickens busily eating their raw entrails. One recurring comic motif involves characters hiding from the ghost in large empty water jars, creating humour through squeezing an impossible number of people into one jar. The fight with and escape from the Pop-possessed host also creates many comedy numbers. People are hit in the face by opening doors and frying pans, they goad the ghost with a red flag as though she were a bull and then flee terrified in sequences that are speeded up to create maximum hilarity. At the head of the fleeing crowd is an injured man with a crutch who is covered in bandages; he is apparently able to run faster than everyone else due to his supposed terror, adding to the amusement of the scene. Another number involves a group of fools trying to sneak into an attractive girl's mosquito net. Her father chases them off but as they flee their ladder becomes stuck between the trees. Later, the same fool accidentally puts a love potion on the wrong woman and is chased around by a lusting old woman. The villagers ask the local monk for advice on how to deal with the Pop ghost, but when the usually stoic figure sees the Pop ghost he is so scared that he runs through the wall and even over the surface of a lake.

Given the emphasis upon this visceral element, the narratives in both films also become little more than a causal transition from one number to the next. There is no trace of the suspenseful erotetic structure associated with the Natural Language of horror as there are simply no narrative questions posed throughout the films. The characters are again types

that conform to pre-determined roles, something that can be seen most evidently in the young lovers of *Wor*, whose story simply seems to involve them eventually kissing, an action that was always predetermined. The sequence of visceral 'numbers' and the emphasis placed upon the aesthetic of attraction also removes the need for an erotetic horror structure. Instead of raising questions that demand answers, the films progress causally from one outlandish and visceral incident to the next, creating 'numbers' rather than plot events. The entire last hour of *Baan Phii Pop 2008* for instance is taken up purely with a series of 'numbers' depicting the villagers' various escapades as they try to escape the Pop ghost. They run round and round the village as they are chased and attempt to hide in an entertaining sequence that bears no significance to the story whatsoever.

This blending of genres also serves to illustrate the natural status of the supernatural as a concrete part of society, rather than a violation of 'Natural Law'. Again this indicates how such productions adhere to the 16mm era characteristics in their targeting of the provincial viewers and remain very different to the Natural Language of horror. Significantly, wider research also indicates how this belief in the supernatural and the presence of spirits continues to contribute towards social organisation even in the modern post-97 context. In particular it has remained a particularly important (and quite acceptable) means for rural and urban poor to negotiate and respond to wider events in the contemporary age. Examples all indicate that little has changed in the unequal hierarchy for Thai citizens and the supernatural still exists as a prominent social discourse through which lower-class citizens can negotiate their wider frustrations and anxieties.

For instance, tales of screaming ghosts after the 2005 Boxing day Tsunami kept Thai tourists away from southern beaches, creating a major deficit due to the lack of internal (and inter-Asian) tourism. Such was the seriousness of this deficit that this belief even had to be addressed by the then-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who attempted to restart the industry by stating that the spirits had now 'moved on'. A recurring story included a

taxi driver picking up various passengers complete with luggage (in some versions this was a group of foreign friends or a foreign man and his Thai girlfriend) to go to the airport and turning round to find they had vanished. Screaming victims on the beaches were also reported. Notably these stories began to appear around ten days after the initial disaster when the scale and devastation ceased to be a shock and became part of reality for those living in the areas. Stories then spread beyond these communities and entered into the dominant discourse, so affecting internal tourism. This was interpreted as a form of post-traumatic stress for those who had witnessed such a violent tragedy and lost businesses, homes and family yet had no form of emotional or financial assistance, indicating the significance of the supernatural in society as well as the important function it provided as a coping mechanism at this difficult time (Cheung, 2005).

More dramatically in March 2010 Red Shirt protestors splashed several buckets and bottles of human blood (collected from their supporters) outside the walled mansion of the unelected Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. This was the latest in a string of protest attempts to force the government to call democratic elections after the earlier military coup that had deposed the populist prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Although interpreted by many as a dramatic symbolic gesture to highlight Abhisit and his government's appalling treatment of the lower classes and the death of democracy, it was also intended to place a curse upon the government. The shocking and rather repulsive nature of this protest was then attributed to the backward up-country ways of the protestors, most of whom came from impoverished rural provinces. This therefore not only indicates the importance of such belief systems to the lower classes but also highlights the continuing derogatory attitudes towards lower-class Thais.

Notably the opposing royalist protestors also engaged in similar practices. Sondhi Lim, one of the Leader's of the so-called People's Alliance for Democracy, got female activists to break the spells of 'evil wizards' who were attempting to damage Thailand and its monarchy by instructing them to place their used sanitary napkins at strategic points

around Bangkok's holiest sites. The negative power of the menstrual blood was intended to block any black magic and spirits but also gives an indication of the continued negative connotations of female sexuality and biology in the contemporary age (as well as rather cleverly drawing in Thai women to play their unique part in protecting the monarchy).

*Baan Phii Pop 2008* and *Wor* both liberally insert the supernatural into the equilibrium so indicating how they can be connected to this populist subjectivity in the contemporary age. For instance in *Baan Phii Pop 2008* the village shaman is part of the social organisation of rural society. Characters visit him to buy potions or have exorcisms performed. It is also entirely plausible to the villagers therefore that he has been casting spells and incantations that have damaged the village and caused the Pop ghost to possess his wife. While the pop ghost certainly disturbs the equilibrium through her scary antics, the villagers are very quick to accept her existence and do not question it. *Wor* also demonstrates this concrete belief system. Although the menace to the village is not actually supernatural, many believe originally that it is. They also attempt to warn off the danger with spells and incantations, beliefs which are even turned into a source of comedy.

The cinematography and editing structures of such productions also indicate how the films are specifically designed to function within the provincial scenario, furthering its connection to this audience. This context is very similar to the crude provincial cinema houses and travelling shows of the 16mm era as the rural viewing scenario has changed little in the thirty years since the 16mm era. Living conditions for the poor in Thailand are still radically different to that of urban elites despite Thailand's 'economic prosperity', a discrepancy that I have indicated has led to the class war of contemporary Thailand.

For instance rural areas still enjoy Fouquet's outdoor travelling itinerant cinemas which reject Hansen's 'classical principle'. These come into a village and broadcast a film as part of a holiday celebration or other special occasion. As in the 16mm era, films are

shown in a 'public space' that the 16mm era functioned within and continue to engender this communal scenario of shared pleasure. This therefore continues to be very different to the isolated voyeur positioning of the Natural Language of horror.

The popularity of cheap VCDs in villages also indicates the continuation of this viewing scenario as the large single-roomed communal homes of the rural village –now complete with televisions and VCD-players– also engender such a scenario. These traditional rural homes often house an extended family of several generations under one roof and consist of a single long central room in which the occupants gather after dark. Again the atmosphere of shared pleasure that engendered the 16mm era film style thrives. Figures 39, 40 and 41 display the inside of an old wooden traditional house from Na-Gair village in the remote northeastern province of Chaiyaphum and illustrate the importance of the television within this (complete with its VCD player). In this house, the family gather in the large communal room after dark and sit on straw mats. They talk, wind silk and may eat sweet things or occasionally drink a little alcohol. Other relatives and neighbours often join them. The television is central to this ending part of the day and is constantly on but rarely the centre of attention. It is an entertainment from which and to which the viewers can turn intermittently while also engaging with other activities, illustrating how the viewing situation of 16mm era Thai film continues in this situation.



Figure 39.



Figure 40.



Figure 41.

These productions therefore continue to deploy cinematography and editing that is similar to that of the 16mm era productions. While these New Thai films have dramatically improved their production values and quality of filmmaking and demonstrate seamless editing and sophisticated cinematography, an examination also indicates that they still very deliberately deploy 16mm era structures that can function within this informal communal scenario of shared pleasure. The films employ a presentational performance style to a largely static camera that is similar to a theatrical performance and (as this thesis has illustrated) was used extensively in the 16mm era and B-grade productions. This includes the frequent use of independent automate long shots in which performance is used to draw the viewer's attention rather than directing it through editing shots together.

This is illustrated in a scene that occurs at 8.48 minutes into *Baan Phii Pop 2008*. It is set at a temporary outdoor medical clinic that has been set up to help poor people in the village. A long shot depicts many characters lined up at the back of the clinic, several people then also join them by entering from the foreground of the shot (figure 42.).



Figure 42.

There is a quick cut to a reaction shot from the woman at the left hand side of the screen, who notices the man who is entering (figure 43.).



Figure 43.

However then the film cuts back to the long shot (figure 44) which continues for 42 seconds.





Figure 44.

The woman and the man who has just entered proceed to talk together in the right hand side of the screen. Their conversation is loud and is privileged over the ambient sound of chatting, illustrating that their relationship is significant within the story. However the cinematography and editing does not work in tandem to foreground them and the characters are not singled out by a separate two person-shot but remain in the lower right hand side of the larger long shot and the eyes of the viewer must find them within this. Likewise when the focus shifts to other characters within the group, the shot still does not change (figure 45.).



Figure 45.

This analysis indicates how even in the blockbuster New Thai industry films continue to be made specifically for the urban and rural poor. In the contemporary era there has been a

resurgence both politically and artistically of this perspective and many Thai films now appear to be the property of lower-class Thailand and this movement. While the New Thai industry may appear to be an elite-sponsored ideologically conservative entertainment form that seeks to remove all traces of its humble beginnings, the success of productions such as *Baan Phii Pop 2008* and *Wor* illustrate that this subjectivity is now interjecting into mainstream Thai society. Such texts are specifically targeting the urban and rural impoverished masses, so demonstrating their progressive reassertion of this marginalised subjectivity within Thailand.

Most significantly, this interjection is one that takes the form of the 16mm era characteristics. The continued deviation of Thai films from the Natural Language of horror can therefore ultimately be attributed to the stark social divisions within Thailand as these have allowed the film style coined in the post-war era to continue. If *Shutter's* success internationally is partly due to the embracing of a sophisticated global Natural Language of film and the rejection of the authentic Thainess that is the lower-class 16mm era stylistics, then the success of these lower-class Thai films is due to the opposite. They indicate that the 16mm era-derived film form is still alive and well in the contemporary age and has not vanished from Thai films but actually remains more prevalent than ever. Thai film therefore continues to remain remarkably different to the Natural Language of horror even far into the twenty first century. As Thailand becomes increasingly polarised in the contemporary era, so its entertainment products appear increasingly torn between the aesthetics of these diverse social groups. How Thai film will continue to cater for such a nation is unclear, as the difficulties experienced by Thailand and Thai people in the contemporary age appear to be far from over.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the term used to describe the lower-classes of Thailand by Thai scholar and former associate lecturer at Chulalongkorn University Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2009), whose analysis of the class struggle after 2006 forms much of the basis of my contextual analysis.

# Conclusion

This thesis has explored and demonstrated the hybrid nature of New Thai cinema in the contemporary age. It has indicated how this film form can be attributed to the socially unequal and divided nature of Thailand as a means to counter existing derogatory interpretations of Thai film. To this end, I began by conducting an analysis of the development of Thai film in the post-war era, known as the 16mm era, and in particular a case study of the popular horror genre. I deployed horror film theory to indicate the differences between this film form of the 16mm era and the EuroAmerican Natural Language of horror in order to construct a structural model of 'characteristically' Thai film. This characteristically Thai film form involves a blending of many genres into one production and does not elicit the primary emotions that are associated with the horror genre. It follows a causal narrative structure rather than Carroll's suspenseful erotetic narrative and inserts the supernatural liberally into productions without causing a violation of 'Natural Law'. It also caters for a communal viewing context and so does not replicate the cinematography and editing structures associated with the horror genre.

This analysis not only defined a characteristically Thai film form in opposition to this EuroAmerican Natural Language but also indicated that this post-war 16mm era film form could be specifically connected to the lower-class Thai viewer and their provincial environment. This was because the structural attributes of this 16mm era film form were a result of aspects such as the indigenous media already present, the status of the supernatural within lower-class society and the actual viewing context of the rural villages. Likewise this connection was also apparent through deploying Wood's interpretation of the horror film as representing the 'return of the repressed' which indicated that the themes of such productions functioned to both interpret and negotiate the wider society for a specifically lower-class viewer.

I then went on to indicate how Thai films since this period remain imbued by characteristics from this earlier lower-class film style that has continued to affect their form. This is particularly evident through the disdain that continues to be directed towards such characteristics by Thai elites. Despite this negative attitude, close analysis indicated that this film form continues to imbue Thai films up into the contemporary New Thai industry that emerged in 1997. My research indicated that this causes New Thai films to deviate from the EuroAmerican models of film and instead to follow a hybrid film form that retains elements from this earlier lower-class style. My findings suggest that it is therefore the hierarchical and unequal nature of Thailand itself that continues to distinguish Thai films as this determines the radical differences between the style of entertainment products within the nation.

My research further indicates how the political categorisation of Thai films has changed since the post-war era. It illustrates how the characteristics from this earlier era of film have now become both a representation and a traumatic expression of this lower-class tier of society, one that becomes denigrated and marginalised in the contemporary era. While the post-war era saw the development of an informal industry that directly targeted the lower classes, my research illustrates how film in the New Thai industry has since become the property of Thai elites and now functions to uphold elitist discourses. New Thai productions begin to erase the lower-class film form and instead adhere much more to the supposedly universal Natural Language of horror. The lower-class characteristics continue to exist however. In films such as *Nang Nak* such stylistics disrupt the attempt to emulate this model and therefore they still function as a traumatic expression of marginalised lower-class subjectivity in the contemporary age that refuses to be erased. What is more, in films such as *Zee-Oui* and *Ghost Game*, such characteristics even undercut the dominant ideology and so function as a lower-class disruption of this elitist agenda. I then indicated how the hybrid nature of New Thai film and its stylistic practices have now come to define a Thai cinematic identity on the international scene, so

indicating how this expression of lower-class subjectivity represents the insertion of Thainess in the international context, one that is lost when this tier of society is ignored. Finally, I indicated how New Thai forms appear increasingly polarised since the political and social upheaval since 2005. New Thai film appears pulled between the 'class war' that has erupted and now produces an increasing number of films that embrace the lower-class film style and so reaffirm a lower-class perspective in this tumultuous time. The continued deviation of Thai films from the Natural Language of horror, therefore, can ultimately be attributed to the stark social divisions and inequality within Thailand which have allowed the film style coined in the post-war era to continue and influence Thai productions.

My thesis has ramifications for the future study of Thai cinema. Most significantly, my research indicates that the analysis of Thai cultural products (and film in particular) cannot and must not be conducted purely within the boundaries of the nation and nationality. By this I mean that the study of Thai texts cannot be divorced from a study of the different social groups within the nation and defined purely by national boundaries. This is because (as I have indicated) the formal and thematic parameters of such texts vary so greatly according to the diverse communities that a definite and distinguishing model of Thai culture and specific cultural products is difficult to define. This is due to their position as both catering for and existing between such radically different social groups, whether they uphold the dominant ideology or function as a lower-class means to disrupt and/or negotiate this.

This is significant in light of the continuing concentration upon the study of national cinemas in academic collections such as that of Knee and Chaiworaporn (ref) and Uabumrungjit (ref). These all acknowledge the diverse development of film within Thailand and the various communities such models are pulled between. However with the tendency of academic analysis to explore film industries under the umbrella of nationality (as seen in the study of national cinemas such as Japan and Korea), there is a danger of

designating such texts as purely 'Thai' and representative of the entire nation rather than as a product of various social groups within the nation. Whilst it may seem appropriate to conduct the study of cinemas in Britain or other European nations along national boundaries, my thesis has indicated that this is not necessarily valid in countries that developed along very different lines where the concept of the national has been a fairly late development and is not necessarily the most significant force in the shaping of an individual's cultural practices or preferences. This is particularly true in the case of under-explored cultural products such as those from Thailand. My thesis has demonstrated that ethnicity, cultural background and most importantly social class must all be taken into account when exploring Thai productions due to the historical construction of the nation from a collection of very diverse communities and the unequal divisions this has created. This is also particularly significant in the contemporary age when Thailand is struggling to contain the competing agenda of these different groups and cultural products are torn between them. My examination of the New Thai industry has indicated that Thai films are shaped by their relationship to these various communities and must be explored through this, not simply designated as Thai.

Furthermore, my study has ramifications not only for the study of Thai film but also for the study of non-EuroAmerican cinema in general. Specifically this concerns the deployment of film theory to investigate films and industries that have developed outside of the Euro-American context. My thesis demonstrates the validity of Jackson's argument in the field of film studies: that theory derived from one cultural context cannot simply be deployed to evaluate another without conducting a translation of such frameworks that is based upon empirical data and information.

Although Jackson was not referring specifically to film theory, my study indicated how it is crucial that Jackson's observations are taken into account when deploying such frameworks to study film, otherwise as Jackson states, such analysis runs the risk of erasing cultural specificity and even perpetuating a Eurocentric hierarchy. In an age when

the study of Non-EuroAmerican film is increasingly prominent in various academic anthologies and collections, this observation holds particular significance. It indicates how empirical research must take place together with and even before film theory is deployed. Academics and theorists must remain aware of this when studying film from under-explored and particularly developing nations that are outside of the EuroAmerican sphere and equip themselves with the appropriate tools of language, history and cultural context before being able to deploy theory, otherwise they may perpetuate the hierarchies they are actually concerned with addressing.

This issue was explored through my study of Screen Theory. This analysis also has particular ramifications for the continued use of this framework given the increasingly global nature of the contemporary study of film. An examination of the communal viewing context from which Thai film has developed indicated how Screen Theory is inappropriate to be deployed as a tool to investigate Thai film and specifically film that functions in a different context to that of the scenarios associated with Hansen's classical principle. It illustrated that Screen Theory is not a universal means to study film but is dependent upon a culturally and historically specific viewing context. This indicates that it cannot be taken and deployed to non-EuroAmerican models of film without substantial empirical research beforehand, specifically into the viewing context and the scenario in which it is designed to function.

Furthermore in this 'translation' of Screen Theory my thesis exposes the importance of the viewing context in the study of film as an element that must be taken into account in future analysis. It emphasised the importance of studying and documenting how the way in which cinema is watched and consumed affects the construction of the text, an aspect that is rarely acknowledged by academics. My study indicated that this formerly unacknowledged element must now be researched as a significant influence that shapes the construction and development of film, one that cannot remain hidden due to the diverse nature and development of film in different nations and contexts. As I have

already stated, this has significant implications for the continued deployment of Screen Theory which depends upon the voyeuristic Euro-American scenario of a darkened room. My thesis indicates how a specific examination of the text, the audience and the space in which it must function are all necessary to gain a full understanding of this film form and its relationship to dominant theoretical frameworks.

My research is also significant to two areas that must be further investigated in the study of Thai film. The first involves actual empirical audience studies in order to solidify the links I have made between different forms of film and the different social groups within Thailand. My connection between the 16mm era characteristics and the rural lower classes of Thailand was based upon Thai reports and articles that firmly connected the post-war productions with such viewers. This analysis was also supplemented by an investigation into the viewing context that examined how the films have been adapted to function in such a social space. However, there remains scope to investigate the viewers themselves and their relationship with this particular style of filmmaking. Research in the form of audience studies such as qualitative interviews that have been conducted to investigate the popularity of difference entertainment products amongst difference audiences in Japan (Hanaki et al. 2007) are required to illustrate how, why and the extent to which rural and urban viewers continue to retain such diverse cinematic preferences. This could concretely illustrate the divisions between the viewing practices and preferences of such social groups and so would add much weight to my analysis. It would also further investigate how other elements such as age, sex and political beliefs also influence cinematic preference for Thai viewers, as well as how such a preference changes over time depending on social circumstances. This change becomes particularly significant given the movement of young people out of rural villages and into the cities in search of employment and training which transforms their relationship to capitalism and modernity, one area that my post-doctoral research will investigate.



The second area that requires further consideration in order to build upon my analysis is an investigation into the links between the film style of this characteristically Thai form and the films of other non-EuroAmerican and specifically Southeast Asia nations. This thesis has notably not drawn upon any stylistic or thematic links between Thai cinema and other Non-EuroAmerican or, even more specifically, Asian cinemas. This was a very deliberate decision as such a comparison should not be attempted before all the data about Thai cinematic development has been collected, correlated and a specific film style defined and then investigated. As this crucial information was missing from the limited existing analysis of Thai cinema, such a comparison could not be launched as yet due to the risk of eclipsing the Thai cultural logics that Jackson illustrated must be understood before deeper comparative analysis ensues.

Building upon the analysis in this thesis, however, such a comparison should shortly be launched. Using the characteristically Thai film style that I have defined, this analysis could begin to indicate if a common film form exists in models that have developed outside of the EuroAmerican context, thus further exposing the false construction of the EuroAmerican viewpoint as being the Natural Language of film. Such an investigation should not only constitute a textual analysis of the themes and stories of such films but, using the characteristically Thai framework, would also investigate the film style employed by different nations. Such an analysis could then also investigate whether there exist links between films that have developed in nations that share similar cultural elements, for instance those that have developed specifically within Southeast Asia. It would indicate whether other Southeast Asian films also developed to cater for a communal context rather than an isolated voyeur and if they also blur the boundaries with the supernatural.

Lalitha Gopalan (2002) refers to Indian cinema, for instance, as a "cinema of interruptions" and describes how Indian films 'interrupt' the "hermetic universe" of Hollywood films by inserting "song and dance sequences, comedy tracks and multi-plot narratives" (Ibid:18). These 'interruptions' are reminiscent of my work with 'numbers' in Thai films and also

point to a possible causal rather than an erotetic narrative structure. Likewise Capino (2006) talks of the hybridity in Philippine cinema which involves the diverse mixing of genres and a degree of 'mimicry' and 'appropriation' mixed with local Philippine references which appear comparable to the 'numbers' in Thai cinema. Capino interprets these as representative of "the complex cultural practices that attend a postcolonial people's mode of existence" (Ibid:36) and which operate as a form of cultural negotiation for its audience in possibly a similar way to that of the 16mm era productions and their characteristics. In the last decade, Vietnamese film appears to be undergoing a revival comparable to that experienced by Thailand in the birth of the New Thai movement as it ceases to be purely a propaganda machine to espouse the values of the state and becomes 'commercial' (Norindr, 2006:57). As it reaches what Norindr calls a "crucial juncture" in the development of Vietnamese cinema, further analysis can build upon my own study to investigate the extent to which the cinemas these (almost) neighbours follow a style similar to that of Thai film. This will hopefully challenge any disdainful outsider attitudes by asserting that such non-EuroAmerican national cinemas are not crude or unsophisticated but rather are complex cultural products that cater for a very distinct, albeit culturally marginalised, viewpoint that must be retained in the face of an increasingly elitist global hierarchy.

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*Nang Sao Sawan/Miss Suwanna of Siam* (Thailand, 1923, dir. Henry MacRae)

*Chok Song Chan/Double Luck* (Thailand, 1927, dir. Manit Wasuwat)

## **Thai Film in the 1930s:**

*Long Thang/Going Astray* (Thailand, 1932, dir. Wasuwat Brothers)

*Phleng Wan Jail/His Sweet Melody* (Thailand, 1937 dir. Khun Wichitmatra)

## **Thai Film in the 1940s:**

*Supab Burut Suatai/Thai Gentleman Bandit* (Thailand, 1949 dir. M. C. Sukrawandit Ditsakul and Tae Prakartwutisan)

## **Thai Film in the 1950s:**

*Santi-Wina* (Thailand, 1954 dir. Ratana Pestonji)

*Rong Raem Narok/Country Hotel* (Thailand, 1957 dir. Ratana Pestonji)

*Mae-Nak-Prakanong* (Thailand, 1959 dir. Rangsir Tasanapayak)

## **Thai Film in the 1960s:**

*Præ Dam/Black Silk* (Thailand, 1961 dir. Ratana Pestonji)

*Namtaam Mai Waan/Sugar is not sweet* (Thailand, 1965 dir. Ratana Pestonji)

*Glae-Fae* (Thailand, 1966 dir. Sanaan Khraprayoon)

*Jaø-Mae-Takianthong* (Thailand, 1966 dir. Unknown)

*Nguu-Phii* (Thailand, 1966 dir. Rat Saet-Thaa-Phak-Dee)

*Nang-Prai-Tee-Nii* (Thailand, 1967 dir. Nakarin)

*Praai-Phitsawat* (Thailand, 1968 dir. Chaluy Sri Rattana)

*Yort-Gaen* (Thailand, 1968 dir. Amnuai Kalatnimi)

*Jaawm-Khon* (Thailand, 1969 dir. Daen Krisada)

*Phii-Saht-Sen-Haa* (Thailand, 1969 dir. Pan-Kam)

**Thai Film in the 1970s:**

*Insee Thong* (Thailand, 1970 dir. Mitr Chaibancha)

*Monrak-Lukung* (Thailand, 1970 dir. Rangsi Thatsana Payak)

*Tone* (Thailand, 1970 dir. Piak Poster)

*Khao Chue Kam* (Thailand, 1973 dir. Chatrichalerm Yukol)

*Talad Phromajaree* (Thailand, 1973 dir. Sakka Jarujinda)

*Haek-kaai-narok-dian-bian-foo* (Thailand, 1977 dir. Choomphorn Tepitak)

**Thai Film in the 1980s:**

*Suam-Noi-Noikalon-Mak-Noi* (Thailand, 1985 dir. Adirek Wataleela and Thanit Jitnukul)

*Puan/Friends* (Thailand, 1986 dir. Apitchaat Pothipiroj)

*Phuu-Ti-Sa-Ney-Haa* (Thailand, 1987 dir. Supasith)

*Boonchoo* (Thailand, 1988 dir. Bhandit Rittakol)

*Chalui* (Thailand, 1988 dir. Adirek Wataleela)

*Baan Phii Pop* (Thailand, 1989 dir. Srisawat)

**Thai Film in the 1990s:**

*Phi-Sam-Oy* (Thailand, 1990 dir. Nai-Gaay)

*Phii-Saat-Meng-Mum-Sao* (Thailand, 1990 dir. Wan-Chana)

*Rong-Ta-Lap-Phlap* (Thailand, 1992 dir. Prachya Pinkaew)

*Jolokay-Phii-Sing* (Thailand, 1993 dir. Rit-Ti-Narong)

*Loke thang bai hai nai khon diaw/Romantic Blues* (Thailand, 1995 dir. Rashane Limtrakul)

*2499 Antapan Krong Muang/Daeng Birley and the Young Gangsters* (Thailand, 1997 dir. Nonzee Nimibutr)

*Nang Nak* (Thailand, 1999 dir. Nonzee Nimibutr)

**Thai Film in the 2000s:**

*Bang Rajan* (Thailand, 2000 dir. Thanit Jitnukul)

*Iron Ladies* (Thailand, 2000 dir. Yongyuth Thongkonthun)

*Jan Dara* (Thailand, 2001 dir. Nonzee Nimibutr)

*Khang Lang Phap/Behind the Painting* (Thailand, 2001 dir. Cherd Songsri)

*Monrak Transistor/Transistor Love Story* (Thailand, 2001 dir. Pen-Ek Ratanaruang)

*Suriyothai* (Thailand, 2001 dir. Chatrichalerm Yukol)

*Beautiful Boxer* (Thailand, 2003 dir. Ekachai Uekrongtham)

*Buppah Rahtree/Rahtree Flower of The Night* (Thailand, 2003, dir. Yuthlert Sippapak)

*Fan Char/ My Girl* (Thailand, 2003 dir. Vittha Gojiew, Songyos Sugmakanan, Nithiwat Tharathorn, Witthaya Thongyooyong, Anusorn Trisirikasem, Komgrit Triwimol)

*Hom Rong/The Overture* (Thailand, 2004 dir. Ittisoontorn Vichailak)

*Jaew/M.A.I.D.* (Thailand, 2004 dir. Yongyuth Thongkongthun)

*Phii Chong Air/The Sisters* (Thailand, 2004 dir. Tiwa Moeithaisong)

*Shutter* (Thailand, 2004 dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom)

*The Bodyguard* (Thailand, 2004 dir. Petchtai Wongkamlao)

*Zee-Oui* (Thailand, 2004 dir. Nida Sudasna and Buranee Ratchaiboon)

*Long Khong/Art of the Devil 2* (Thailand, 2005 dir. 'The Ronin Team': Pasith Buranajan, Kongkiat Khomsiri, Isara Nadee, Seree Phongnithi, Yosapong Polsap, Putipong Saisikaew, Art Thamthrakul)

*Luang Phii Teng/Holy Man* (Thailand, 2005 dir. Note Chernyim)

*Ben Choo Gap Phii/The Unseeable* (Thailand, 2006 dir. Wisit Sasanatieng)

*Krasue Valentine/Ghost of Valentine* (Thailand, 2006 dir. Yuthlert Sippapak)

*Lee-Thaa-Phii/Ghost Game* (Thailand, 2006 dir. Sarawut Wichiansam)

*Mak Tae/Lucky Loser* (Thailand, 2006 dir. Adisorn Tresirikasem)

*Noodle Boxer* (Thailand, 2006 dir. Rerkchai Paungpetch)

*See How They Run* (Thailand, 2006 dir. Jaturong Mokjok)

*Baan Phii Sing/The House* (Thailand, 2007 dir. Monthon Arayangkoon)

*Body...Sop 19/Body* (Thailand, 2007 dir. Paween Purijitpanya)

*Faed/Alone* (Thailand, 2007 dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom)

*Baan Phii Pop 2008* (Thailand, 2008 dir. Bunham Taitanabul)

*Boonchu 9* (Thailand, 2008 dir. Bundit Rittakol)

*Sii Prang/4bia* (Thailand, 2008 dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun, Paween Purikitpanya, Yongyoot Thongkongtoon and Parkpoom Wongpoom)

*Wor Mah Ba Mahasanook* (Thailand, 2008 dir. Bunjong Sinthanamongkolkul)

### **Non-Thai Films:**

*King Kong* (America, 1933 dir. Cooper and Schoedsack)

*Psycho* (America, 1960 dir. Alfred Hitchcock)

*Finian's Rainbow* (America, 1968 dir. Francis Ford Coppola)

*The Exorcist* (America, 1974 dir. William Friedkin)

*The Man with The Golden Gun* (UK, 1974 dir. Guy Hamilton)

*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (America, 1974 dir. Tobe Hooper)

*Jaws* (America, 1975 dir. Steve Spielberg)

*The Omen* (America, 1976 dir. Richard Donner)

*Halloween* (America, 1978 dir. John Carpenter)

*Alien* (America, 1979 dir. Ridley Scott)

*Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (America, 1980 dir. Sean S. Cunningham)

*Ringu/Ring* (Japan, 1998 dir. Hideo Nakata)

*Battle Royale* (Japan, 2000 dir. Kinji Fukasaku)

*The Beach* (UK, 2000 dir. Danny Boyle)

*Suicide Circle* (Japan, 2001 dir. Shion Sono)

*Dark Water* (Japan, 2002 dir. Hideo Nakata)

*Juon* (Japan, 2002 dir. Takashi Shimizu)

*Series 7: The Contenders* (America, 2003 dir. Daniel Minahan)

*Alexander* (America, 2004 dir. Oliver Stone)

*Bridget Jones 2: The Edge of Reason* (UK, 2004 dir. Beeban Kidron)



*I, Robot* (America, 2004 dir. Alex Proyas)

*Troy* (America, 2004 dir. Wolfgang Petersen)

*The Elephant King* (America, 2006 dir. Seth Grossman)

*Shutter* (America, 2008 dir. Masayuki Ochiai)

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## CHAPTER SIX

# THE MONSTROUS CHINESE "OTHER" IN THE THAI HORROR MOVIE *ZEE-OUI*

MARY AINSLIE

The Thai film industry is arguably one of the fastest growing in South-East Asia and has been breaking box office records since the birth of the new post-97 big-budget industry, often referred to as "New Thai Cinema."<sup>66</sup> On the back of the establishment of new multiplex movie theatres from 1994 onwards, and the structural re-organisation of the industry through the wave of urban teen dramas in the mid-1980s to early 1990s, the filmic renaissance of New Thai cinema was the definite product of the recognition of a new bourgeois urban spectatorship, one apart from the teen or provincial (up-country) niche audiences addressed in decades before (Ingawanij 2006). Utilising the same urban multiplex system which the previous teen movement had nurtured into being, New Thai cinema instead addressed "the more 'respectable' swathe of potential film consumers brought into concentration by the Bangkok multiplexes," (ibid., 169) so transforming the urban cinema from a den of teenage angst to a space "positioning this group of potential viewers as the spectator engaged in the pleasure of remembrance" (ibid., 175).

This chapter will work from the premise that an analysis of the transformation of Thai cinema can be most productively explored through the recent incarnations of the ever-popular horror genre and in particular will pick the case study of the 2004 film *Zee-Oui* (Buranee Rachjaibun and Nida Suthat Na Ayutthaya, Thailand, 2004) to illustrate how the depiction of its central Chinese character as a monstrous "other" has been deliberately tailored by filmmakers to serve the various social discourses brought into being by the context and circumstances surrounding the birth of New Thai cinema. It will then suggest that this alteration highlights a difference from what has been identified as earlier progressive depictions of the Chinese-Thai citizen, and so ironically in the pursuit of discourses of "authenticity" and "nostalgia" through its notable sympathetic narrative of character development, *Zee-Oui* erases previous valid cinematic explorations of ethnicity within Thailand.

### Economic boom and crisis

From 1987 to 1997, Thailand experienced an "unprecedented economic boom" (Hewison 1999) when the Thai government adopted the export-orientated neo-liberal growth model promoted by the World Bank (Bell 1997) and designed to fast-track the Thai economy and turn Bangkok into the next Hong Kong or Singapore.<sup>67</sup> The boom was not to last however and when jittery non-Thai investors began to pull money out of the country, the Thai Baht devalued and the ensuing panic culminated in the devastating economic crisis of 1997. Personal fortunes vanished, children were pulled from university and workers forced to

return to their villages. The many Mercedes ceased and the half-built skyscrapers stood abandoned.

As a nation which had begun to define itself through this economic expansion, Thailand was also ideologically affected. With the collapse of the Thai economy, Pasuk Phongpaichit illustrates how the discourse of "localism"—a concentration upon self-sufficiency and the rural community as opposed to wider market capitalism—"achieved considerable prominence in the context of the crisis" (Phongpaichit 2005, 161). As an alternative to the previous state defined "push" towards the acquisition of modernity and progress in the rapid transition "from a pre-modern order to a society dominated by urban capitalism" (Phongpaichit and Baker 1997, 21), this discourse originated as a term of resistance for those initially left behind by the economic boom. As Pasuk Phongpaichit states "ideas about the importance of locality and community have been proposed in opposition to the emphasis on growth and urbanization" (Phongpaichit 2005, 161). Although as a concept it is applied to individuals or communities, Kevin Hewison illustrates that it can also be applied to the nation: "The suggestion is that a self-sufficient nation does not need the outside world, and may choose its links rather than be forced into international markets and trade" (Hewison 1999, 9). Dangerous outsider influence, perceived as having destroyed Thailand and crippled its people, could be avoided.

### **Cinema in Crisis and A Historical Remedy: New Thai Cinema**

Thai film scholar May Abadol Ingawanij indicates how "the Thai-culture-in-crisis discourse"—to which "localism" was a response—"was revitalized in the domain of cinema" (Ingawanij 2006, 161) when it was noted that domestic film releases had dropped "from over a hundred in 1990 to fewer than 20 in 1997" (*ibid.*, 164).<sup>68</sup> In the context of the crisis, this appears to have been interpreted as another example of the swamping of "authentic" Thainess by outsider non-Thai (specifically Hollywood) trends (Ingawanij 2006).

The devastating economic crash was attributed by many to foreign investors and over-zealous Thai elites, and few of those implicated were ever held to account. It was in mobilising a nostalgia for a lost and pure historical Thai culture that Thai films were successfully opened up to wider (and specifically bourgeois) viewers and New Thai cinema was born. New big-budget productions took over from the previous music-video teen orientated market in Thailand, creating productions which concerned themselves primarily with nostalgia and the representation of an authentic Thainess (Chaiworaporn, Ingawanij, Seveon).<sup>69</sup> Ingawanij refers to these historical epics as "heritage films" and as the movement gathered steam, more followed.

In its quest to both counteract damaging outsider influences and re-define the elusive Thainess, New Thai Cinema concentrated particularly upon historical depictions and placed emphasis upon nationalist-orientated discourses of "nostalgia" and "authenticity" (Ingawanij 2006, Knee and Chaiworaporn 2006, Seveon 2006), in keeping with Pasuk's newly adopted localism that likewise placed emphasis upon regressing back to the unadulterated roots of Thainess. Anchalee Chaiworaporn titles this *Nang Yon Yuk* or "returning to the past" cinema and notes a dramatic increase in the production and popularity of this genre in the New Thai movement. Films such as *Nang Nak* (Nonzee Nimibutr, Thailand, 1999), *Bang Rajan* (Tanit Jitnukul, Thailand, 2000), *Khang Lang Phap/Behind the Painting* (Cherd Songsri, Thailand, 2001), *Hom Rong/The Overture* (Ittisontorn Vichailak, Thailand, 2004), *Fan Chan/My Girl* (Vittha Gojiew et al., Thailand, 2003),<sup>70</sup> and of course the highest grossing film *Suriyothai* (Chatrichalern Yukol, Thailand, 2001) in Thai film history, all fall into this category. All these productions notably engage with traditional stories or reference true people and events interspersed with intertextual and cultural references specific to Thai culture, history and people. Each also takes place in a setting which is able to foreground the location, *mise-en-scène*, costumes

and props of historical Thailand, presenting an idyllic vision of the nation and the unique traits of Thainess.

Alongside the heritage productions and the *Nang Yon Yuk* genre, Chaiworaporn and Knee also note other popular generic trends in the New Thai industry, one of which is the revival of the old and much used horror genre or *Nang Phii*: literally, "Ghost film."<sup>71</sup> Left over from a pre-Buddhist animist belief which still powerfully permeates society (Morris 2002, 79; Kitiarsa 1999, 4), the subject matter of ghosts and the supernatural has always been embraced by Thai cinema. A significantly large number of Thai films produced each year fall into this genre category and in the contemporary industry this cinematic tradition continues in successful productions such as *Nang Nak*, *Shutter-Kòt-Dtít-Win-Yaan/Shutter* (Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, Thailand, 2004), *Khon Len Khong/Art of the Devil* (Tanit Jitnukul, Thailand, 2004), *Buppahrahtree/Rahtree: Flower of the Night* (Yuthlert Sippapak, Thailand, 2003) and many more. In terms of budget size, appeal and aesthetics, these examples are all recognisable as a significant departure from pre-97 cinematic trends, and instead enjoy much in common with the previously mentioned heritage productions.

Continuing Anchalee's *Nang Yon Yuk* trends, many contemporary *Nang Phii* productions fixate upon the representation of the past, though perhaps not in the same nostalgic idealised fashion. The centrality of horror to New Thai cinema is easily evident in the very birth of the movement: the 1999 production *Nang Nak*, a traditional Thai ghost story remade with international standard aesthetics, took the country by storm with its extraordinary success.<sup>72</sup> The tale of a devoted wife who dies in childbirth yet refuses to leave her husband returning from war, *Nang Nak* was amongst the very first productions to demonstrate the financial viability of "old Thailand" when combined with Hollywood-standard production values. Recreating the famous scare-story as a tragic-romance, the film presents a mythical and un-spoilt past deeply embedded within rural nature.

Scholars therefore locate the differences between pre- and post-New Thai cinema in the textual themes and motifs of the productions, as well as their overall aesthetic standard, both aspects stemming from 1990s industrial (re)organisation of the Thai film industry and the surrounding social discourses. I suggest that it is through the popular horror genre that the change enacted upon Thai film in this transition to the contemporary industry can be best explored. This is due to both the thematic and narrative differences between pre- and post-New Thai horror films, and the expansive body of theory available on horror cinema developed in the Euro-American context and adapted to the Hollywood model which shapes the global cinematic "cultural lingua franca" (Shohat and Stam 1996, 149) which contemporary Thai horror cinema appears to have embraced and attempts to cultivate (albeit alongside some very distinct Thai qualities which deserve their own exploration). The higher budgets and ensuing technical sophistication have brought Thai cinema into sync with an international (in particular, Hollywood) filmic standard, allowing wider exhibition both domestically and (in some cases) worldwide. Textually, productions are even deliberately altered to enamor them to this wider audience, a practice particularly significant in Thai horror films which, as the case of *Nang Nak* illustrates, can become increasingly distanced from previous incarnations, instead embracing global forms and conventions. Likewise, theoretical analyses with attention to the specifics in Thai culture could be mobilised to allow greater understanding of Thai cinema. The theory of horror, with its heterogeneity garnered from many culturally and historically different movements and thoughts, is useful in this regard.

### **Zee-Oui and the Other**

One possible method of identifying and accounting for these cinematic changes in the horror genre is through exploring the depiction of recognisable discourses of horror. In particular, the prevalence of a concern centring upon a theme present in very standard and familiar American horror productions such as *Halloween* (John Carpenter, USA, 1978). Other notable slasher films can be noticed. This is a concentration upon the

introduction of a threat from an "other" to internal Thai society, and one which has specifically infiltrated the country from the outside. Right from Robin Wood's 1979 American Nightmare essay, the "Return of the Repressed" concept has been one of the oldest and what Pam Cook calls "the most sustained" (Cook 1992, 101) discussions of the horror film theoretically. Although by far not a new phenomenon in Thai horror, it deserves extra attention due to the notable changes in a recent filmic depiction.

Such a notion can be seen in the 2004 production *Zee-Oui*, a film based upon the true story of the Chinese serial killer Li Hui who entered Thailand in 1946 and was executed in 1959 for killing and eating up eight Thai children. The 2004 film follows the main protagonist (played by the Chinese actor Long Duan) as he arrives in Thailand from China, gets a job as a servant to a local family, and then moves further around the country looking for work. During this time, Zee-Oui kills and eats the various Thai children before being apprehended and caught by a local female journalist and the police.

Released in Thailand in October 2004, the film was the directorial debut for Thai sisters and cinematographers Nida Sudasna and Buranee Ratchaiboon, who give the film its highly acclaimed vast scenic background through which *Zee-Oui* runs. Like many other new contemporary Thai filmmakers, they have an advertising background. It was also the first feature film release for the newly formed Matching Motion Pictures Co. Ltd., one of many subsidiary companies of the largest advertising production company in Thailand "Matching Studio," which was keen to branch into film making and for which *Zee-Oui* was the first feature production. Taking on the project of *Zee-Oui* seemed perfect for the company's desired foray into the world of filmmaking, indeed the characteristics of the new film industry and its big budget historical blockbusters had been noticed by company executives. Somchai Cheewasuthon, who had originally intended to begin with a small drama using his own team, remarked in *The Nation* newspaper on 31 March 2003:

Now small movies don't look so healthy. And we were worried that our movie would be brushed aside as a low quality flick. That's why we chose the "See-Oui" project. I am now convinced that it is the best way to expand our company.

The film also drew on collaborative international links, with the Chinese actor Long Duan—a graduate from the prestigious Central Drama Academy in Beijing—flown from China to take on the lead character and American Debra Katemeyer assisting with the script. This move was not so difficult due to Matching Studio recently branching out into China.

The choice of a genuine Chinese actor from China (an unusual move in Thai cinema, with there being no shortage of Thai and Thai-Chinese actors who could fill in this part) demonstrates aspirations for the discourses of authenticity championed by New Thai cinema. It was a fact publicised widely in early pre-production press conferences. Burani is quoted in *The Nation* stating "A Chinese See Oui [Zee-Qui] makes the character more realistic. The gestures are Chinese in nature as are the emotional expressions. Those elements would be lost if we used Thai actors" (Pajee 2003). This comment also demonstrates the perceived differences between Thai and Chinese characteristics, an aspect much more significant (and sinister) in the film's ending.

For this opening production, Matching Studio deliberately chose an old and well-known story which resonated well with its target audience, who had grown up as children with the frightening tale of the Chinese foreigner who ate Thai children, and remembered their parents warnings "not to wander out after dark or the Chinese would come for them" (Rithdee 2004a). The decision by the directors and production company to choose a well-known story automatically imbued with nostalgia and authenticity highlights their desire to connect with viewers through this means and follow the discourses of the New Thai cinema movement. The central figure Zee-Oui has also been previously portrayed in a much earlier film and TV adaptation, entering into popular mythology as a bogeyman-type character. His preserved body is still on display in the Bangkok Siriraj museum of forensic medicine, in a glass case surrounded by old newspaper clippings and labels

sensationalising his horrendous exploits. As a mythical figure he inspires interest, awe, repulsion but above all curiosity. As a monstrous figure who is also a foreigner, he is the perfect representation for the horrific consequences of the intrusion of an Other into Thai society.

## **The Temple Fair**

This intrusion follows Wood's age-old basic formula well: the Monster threatens normality, disrupts it, and in its horrific premise the film plays upon the xenophobic anxiety created through this introduction of an alien element into Thai society. This "normality" Wood defines as "conformity to the dominant social norms," and indeed this threat is most recognisable through the inclusion of the "temple fair" within the film, a crucial aspect in the creation of the horror as an innocent and defenseless "social norm."

A temple fair is exactly what it suggests, a large travelling fair often with fairground rides, a makeshift cinema screen, a boxing ring, a beauty contest, stalls selling food and sweets and a dance/music performance. This activity occurs outdoors (often at night) around the village temple, an institution which in the village context often functions as the centre of communal activities. This is an occasion that particularly in rural areas becomes a major social event as a significant local amenity. A temple fair allows a community to come together, and celebrate (most likely) a Buddhist holiday or a funeral/remembrance service, or is simply a travelling commercial fair. It often occurs only a few times a year. Attending the fair upon a significant religious occasion and spending money can also be seen as ways to "make merit" and curry favour with the Buddha.

In Thai films, novels and sitcoms, the temple fair serves as a device to begin developments in the narrative; events occur which can only come about through the situation it creates. For instance, the protagonist can come into contact with people and situations that he or she would not normally have access to. A large amount of stimulation surrounds, with flashing lights, music and fast moving objects. There is also a degree of autonomy allowed, as women and young children are able to stray from their family. In *Monrak Transistor/Transistor Love Story* (Pen-Ek Ratanaruang, Thailand, 2001), the temple fair is where the hero and heroine are first able to meet and dance together. In *Beautiful Boxer* (Ekachai Uekrongtham, Thailand, 2003) it is at a temple fair that future boxing champion Nong Toom first views the sport of Muay Thai boxing. In earlier productions such as *Mae-Nak-Pra-Ka-Nong* (Thailand, 1958), it is used as a method of introduction between future lovers and rivals. Above all, it is the level of freedom within these communal occasions, and the possible fear connected to this, that *Zee-Oui* has used to exploit the temple fair as a possible site for horrific occurrences.

So the use of the temple fair is a very specific move by filmmakers. It is seen as simply the only circumstance in which the character has the opportunity to snatch these children. It is comparable to American cinema's use of the holiday of Halloween as a situation when society becomes lax and irresponsible and unwittingly lets in "the other" to cause havoc and disruption. A formerly "safe" and enjoyable holiday occasion, one utilised by Thai romance, historical and children's films as a light-hearted situation for plot development, is then turned into the most horrific opportunity for a serial killer to snatch children.

## **The (Chinese) Stranger in (Thai) Society**

The use of the temple fair betrays an anxiety focused upon the idea of a threat coming from within Thailand itself, a suggestion that somehow the outsider may already be among "us." The threat, although resulting from a stranger, is still coming from within. In a sense, Thailand is depicted as already penetrated by a dangerous and negative presence which targets the most vulnerable situation (the temple fair) and people (Thai children). The 2004 film suggests an atmosphere of vulnerability and irresponsibility, promoting a paranoia to protect the youth of Thailand against the infiltrated "other." This depiction is

reminiscent of the sociologist Simmel's observations of how the unconnected and objective positioning of the stranger within a modernising European society can be distorted and exaggerated by those who may feel threatened and who when attacked, can claim that "provocation has come from the outside" (Simmel 1950, 405). The figure of the stranger can thus serve as a nationalistic reinforcement of our own culture, as the stranger's position in the group (of Thailand)

is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself. (ibid., 402)

In their incompatibility, these qualities, however initially tragic and sympathetic, quickly take on a horrific embodiment in that which is very firmly depicted as the Chinese traditional mythical practice of cannibalism, and so are strongly identified as being an influence which stems from Zee-Oui's Chineseness. This is represented throughout the film in scenes such as the flashback to the forced cannibalism of the Chinese army, the Chinese knife given to him by his mother that he treasures and uses to kill the children, and the eventual final explanation scene, as well as publicity and reviews surrounding the film in Thailand. Indeed Thai publicity referred to this behaviour as his "instinct," to which he eventually resorts after trying in every other way to succeed in society.

Throughout the film, the character Zee-Oui is defined by this other-ness which is constantly reinforced as his Chineseness.<sup>73</sup> This monstrous element is firmly positioned as being apart from Thai culture, and its influences as having resulted from the introduction of the stranger. Therefore the 2004 adaptation appears to be reinforcing the definite and positive characteristic of Thainess (*Kwam-ben-Thai*) through its difference to monstrous Chineseness (*Kwam-ben-jiin*).

However the need for such an extreme monstrous portrayal foregrounds the anxiety over the suspected falseness of this common feature of Thainess:

strangeness is not due to different and ununderstandable matters. It is rather caused by the fact that similarity, harmony, and nearness are accompanied by the feeling that they are not really the unique property of this particular relationship [or community i.e. Thailand]. (Simmel 1950, 407)

The film *Zee-Oui* reaffirms this characteristic of Thainess and foregrounds the film's desire to make this a distinctive property of the Thai national identity and nation, in keeping with the desires of the New Thai cinema movement. Cinema is perfect as a visual portrayal of this nationalist ideology. For all the bad qualities and bad people Zee-Oui meets in Thailand, none of them kill and eat children!

## A Sympathetic Cannibal

As a high-budget New Thai film concerned with mobilising discourses of Thainess, it is the somewhat surprising sympathetic portrayal and character exploration which singles out this most recent adaptation of the well-known Zee-Oui story. Before the monstrous cannibalism can develop fully, a tragic story and sympathetic angle to the character appears to play a part in the suggestion of the incompatibility of Thailand and the outsider.<sup>74</sup> As the filmmaker sisters state of this exploration "In the way we discuss Zee-Oui again here, we do not consider him in the old way,"<sup>75</sup> so distinguishing this production from pre-New Thai Film adaptations. The narrative of an invading and murdering foreigner may seem immediately to be the ideal subject for a xenophobic portrayal of a monstrous Other, and yet the film at first begins by deliberately portraying the character in a very sympathetic light, showing the anti-Chinese racism he encounters within Thailand and the poverty stricken conditions he lives in. His treatment by the Thai immigration authorities upon his arrival in Bangkok is particularly brutal; his head is forcibly shaved, he is thrown in detention and his name is entered incorrectly. He is labelled with the racist term *Jek-*

*baa*, a "crazy chink," while lacking the linguistic ability to understand any of those around him. Constantly sickly, he saves money for medicine but then has this destroyed by Thai tormentors. Throughout this ordeal the camera shots position him as an isolated and vulnerable stranger,<sup>76</sup> and follow his main perspective of viewing Thailand and Thai people, who engage with his plight only to laugh at him or exploit him, a rather unusual sympathetic positioning of a Chinese occupying the moral high ground over Thai in a Thai film.

Although the positioning of the character as a monstrous Other is similar to internationally renowned and defining cinematic slasher killers such as Michael or Jason, this particular depiction of the character Zee-Oui is nevertheless difficult to place within Wood's "Monsters" and their conventions. Zee-Oui is certainly no ambiguous, half hidden, unknowable Michael or Leatherface. He does not conform to Carol Clover's analysis of the slasher serial killer:

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre and Halloween introduced another sort of killer: one whose only role is that of killer and one whose identity as such is clear from the outset. (Clover 1996, 77)

Zee-Oui is different, even though he would fulfil both of these criteria perfectly and in his earlier incarnations certainly does, which, Parinyaporn Pajee remarks, "presented the murderer as a one-dimensional nutcase with an insane personality" (Pajee 2003).

His difference to standard horrific strangers such as Michael and Leatherface, is in the film's very sympathetic early depictions of him, the explorations into his motivations and experiences. As the director Nida Suthat Na Ayutthaya states in the same article "our See Oui [Zee-Qui] is a human being with severe psychological troubles." This quickly foregrounds the question: Why do filmmakers choose to portray him in such a sympathetic light? Why do they engage so much with his perspective and his experiences? As this is where he seems to differ from other notable killers. His position as a threatening stranger, a monstrous Other, to reinforce "Thainess" as I have illustrated, does not require this portrayal.

In this surprising depiction, the aim seems to be to make his actions seem more comprehensible. While also revealing in Zee-Oui's horrific antics, the film seems to be preoccupied with answering "why." As publicity around the film states "The intention of the directors, Nida Sudasna [aka Nida Suthat Na Ayutthaya] and Buranee Ratchaiboon [aka Buranee Rachjaibun], is to represent questions about the story of Zee-Oui on what were the causes of Zee-Oui's cruelty."<sup>77</sup> All of the various "character-building" scenes of Zee-Oui's life (both in Thailand and in China) contribute in some way to an understanding of his actions. Eventually, despite the beginning sympathetic portrayal, Zee-Oui's cannibalistic qualities are inextricably linked to influences of Chinese culture, attributing his monstrosity to his otherness, his Chineseness, rather than his treatment while in Thailand. The film ends with a flashback scene set in China depicting his peasant mother cutting out the heart of an executed criminal and feeding it to a young and sickly Zee-Oui in an attempt at curing him. His cannibalism, his cutting out and boiling of the children's organs, is revealed as an attempt to make a Chinese soup which his culture taught him will cure his illness and sickly disposition. This horrific practice is firmly situated as a Chinese custom, one in which the various surrounding sickly Chinese peasants take part in almost as a frantic massacring orgy. This scene provides a handy method of letting Thailand "off the hook" of the previous responsibility for Zee-Oui's abuse in the country by saying "well, he may have had a terrible time while in Thailand...but he was a Chinaman after all!"

So while initially appearing as a surprising attempt at "understanding" the Monstrous other, the film quickly morphs into a disturbingly cartoonish mode, depicting the protagonist preying upon Temple fairs, snatching young children, cutting out their hearts and eating them. These scenes in particular, take place against the background of the jolly music and colourful flashing lights of the fair, while Zee-Oui uses sweets and balloons



to tempt the children away from the safety of the family and community. This is a far contrast to the scared and vulnerable figure getting off the Chinese boat at Bangkok in the beginning of the film; by the time of the temple fair, Zee-Oui's humanity from the earlier section of the film has completely disappeared, he is portrayed as a leering, grinning stereotypical paedophilic figure. The earlier attempt to award humanity to Zee-Oui, merely serves instead as a warning to possibly sympathisers that the introduction or toleration of the stranger will only end in disaster, a familiar message to the post-crisis Thai viewer. Through the process of understanding, blame is able to be convincingly projected upon ethnicity (otherness as Chineseness) as the cause of his cruelty.

From the background of its filmmakers and production company to the choice of a genuine Chinese actor and psychological story, *Zee-Oui* resonates with every aspect of New Thai cinema. Despite this meticulous creation however, the film itself failed to achieve success. Indeed, in April 2005 *The Nation* records that "more than half the Thai films released last year failed," within which it includes *Zee-Oui* (Pajee 2005). *Zee-Oui* became one of many underperforming ambitious productions from newly created companies hoping to join the boom of Thai cinema in 2004. Regarding the many filmic hits and misses of that past year, director Yongyoot Thongkongtoon states of Thai film: "A film can be successful if there's a specific target audience and it communicates with that audience" (Pajee and Thoopakrajae 2005). It would appear that *Zee-Oui* certainly had the former, but somehow failed to succeed in the latter.

The effort to "psychoanalyze" the Zee-Oui figure, seems to have backfired, with *Bangkok Post* critic Kong Rithdee terming it an "audacious attempt" which "disintegrates into a tenuous drama and sub-par Gothic slasher" (Rithdee 2004c). His comments describe *Zee-Oui* as "a film that's torn between its self-imposed dilemma of being both a psychoslasher and a character study at the same time" (Rithdee 2004b) and he particularly singles out the attempt to evoke sympathy for the character as a failure. The harrowing scenes at the temple fair of the grinning bogeyman tempting and then killing children, render the desired sympathy towards him as a bullied victim completely unfeasible for Kong. The film therefore appears divided between its status as a modern New Thai character drama and old-fashioned slasher horror; it does not successfully meld these two discourses.

This is one reason why the horror genre above all others (and *Zee-Oui* in particular) becomes such a significant tool of insight into the New Thai transformation. As I discussed earlier, the established *Nang-Phii* genre is problematic when translated purely into "horror," and the 2004 film of *Zee-Oui* is not necessarily placed within this category. Regarding the film's genre, Thai language retailers' responses are mixed. One Thai website describes it as a Thai history film (*Nang-Thai-Pra-Wat-Ti-Saat*) placing it in line with the heritage productions, another as simply "abnormal" (*Mai-Tam-Ma-Daa*) and yet another chooses to describe it in English as a "crime/thriller." However the DVD case aligns the film with the *Nang-Phii* genre, asking very specifically "Man or Ghost" (*Phii ru Khon*) in an attempt to attach itself to this popularity while also remaining within the Heritage bracket.

This confusion results from filmmakers efforts to reach diverse and wide audiences. The bogeyman monster conforms to Zee-Oui's earlier incarnations, yet the pursuit of authenticity (emphasised by the sympathetic "character study") is aligned with New Thai discourses and their global affectations. This highlights the inherent difficulties in bringing Thai cinema—which, as I indicated earlier, has remained for so long within its "niche" forms—in line with international filmic models. This is particularly evident regarding a genre such as horror, which although heterogenic in its many forms, differs from the *Nang-Phii* standard which demands merely that the production contains a ghost. The 2004 production, as I have indicated, does not fit within monstrous slasher conventions or pre-New Thai incarnations, nor can it garner the sympathy needed to turn it into an authentic psychological study, and this conflict appears to have been its undoing.

## Conclusion: True Thainess?

The disturbing depiction of "otherness" in the form of monstrous Chineseness could possibly, in its pursuit of the "authenticity" and "nostalgia" associated with true Thainess, ironically and paradoxically signal a departure from earlier seemingly progressive movements towards the recognition of the ethnically diverse modern Thailand in favour of xenophobic and threatening stereotypes. Regarding the transformation to a blockbuster industry concerned with the representation of authenticity, Ingawanij notes a specific loss here, which occurred with the demotion of the early 1990s teen cycle that actually "might represent popular cultural heritage of the kind as yet invisible among heritage films of the officially endorsed quality" (2006, 166).

Ingawanij mentions the instance of the use of Japanesque clothing of protagonists in teen films as well as, perhaps more significantly, the "naturalization" of Chinese ethnicity. This "can be situated as part of a cultural break that occurred in the late 1980s, during which it became possible, and desirable, to out oneself as *luukjiin*" in a small number of the teen films where "Chineseness dictates the look of a home, situating some of the characters as *luukjiin*, rather than connoting through character stereotype capitalist modernisations exploitation of the (ethnic Thai) people" (see Ingawanij 2006, 116 footnote 36). What Ingawanij identifies as a possible "popular cultural heritage" however appears completely lost when faced with the monstrousness of Zee-Oui and his Chinese-identified cannibalism. This Other is also not simply confined to Chinese-ethnicity, but can also be identified in the Cambodian witchdoctors of *Long Khong/Art of the Devil 2* (The Ronin Team, Thailand, 2005), whose Khmer-language spells encroach upon Thai citizens and cause chaos and horror which specifically stems again from ethnically-identified otherness.

The monstrous ethnicity of Zee-Oui, however, does perhaps end on a more ambiguous note. Mingled with the end credits are a few closing depictions of Zee-Oui's trial. In prison he is approached by a police officer who informs him that if he "confesses" to the murder of all eight children, he will be allowed to return to China (a goal that he has spent the second half of the film pursuing). The heroine journalist, who played a big part in capturing him, confides to her colleague that there is no possible means for Zee-Oui to have been in all the many places where the murdered children were found, therefore he cannot be responsible for all the deaths. As the filmmakers state from their research around the film: "Sometimes two murders occurred in consecutive nights or even the same night, while the locations were quite far apart. At that time, the media posted a question whether this is the act of a human or a ghost,"<sup>78</sup> and this they have been chosen to ask very directly in the marketing of the film when the DVD case asks "Man or Ghost?"

This ending serves two very significant ends. Firstly, it reflects the general mistrust within Thailand of the police and authority figures, who are renowned for their corruption and double-dealing (the choice of a heroine who is a journalist to capture Zee-Oui, and therefore very much apart from these figures, is a very deliberate one). Secondly, it alarmingly suggests that Thai society is not free of this monstrous other, another threat remains internally but cannot be located. It will continue to prey upon Thai citizens. Filmmakers note this very deliberately, stating:

even after his death, the killings of children with their internal organs consumed continue even up to the present time. That might mean that the demons that possessed Zee-Oui are still here, moving from person to person as long as the society is still materialistic and forgets about the frailty of human soul.<sup>79</sup>

In the 2004 adaptation, the capture and execution of Zee-Oui is not sufficient to rid Thailand of this "demon" threat. The "other" still lingers and reinforces the paranoid atmosphere. The non-Thai becomes a damaging other, intruding and introducing harmful activities designed to threaten Thailand, Thai people and their way of life. The 2004 film, despite its box office failure, consciously recycled and readapted the tale of Zee-Oui to

suit the present context, specifically to provide the audience with an understanding as to why a real man would commit such horrible crimes. New Thai influences were combined with an old fashioned bogeyman tale to produce an exercise in paranoia and xenophobia, one which departs from previous valid explorations of ethnicity in Thailand and which is paradoxically conducted in the name of authenticity and nostalgia. In the context of the Thai-culture-in-crisis discourses, the story of Zee-Oui represents yet another alien force acting to threaten and damage Thailand, even though it occurred over fifty years ago. The ending suggests an ongoing threat, one which promotes the continuation of the racism against the vulnerable "Stranger" that ironically the film has donated a large amount of narrative time to critiquing.

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## Notes

<sup>66</sup> This term is somewhat misleading however. Chaiworaporn and Knee note that despite the enormous boom in filmmaking, "this is not to claim that there was suddenly a clear-cut "new Thai cinema" movement at that moment" (Chaiworaporn and Knee 2006, 60).

<sup>67</sup> This involved the rapid development of industry and urbanisation coupled with mass urban immigration, which began to change the very nature of Thai society and eventually turned Thailand into the fifth most unequal country in the world in terms of wealth distribution. A vast wealth of literature exists from anthropological analysis and accounts of the dramatic changes enacted upon rural family structures and gender conceptions throughout this period.

<sup>68</sup> Blame for the reduced output was attributed to the teen movie trend of the 1990s, a highly reflective and somewhat post-modern movement developed in the late 1980s which had very successfully recognised the potential urban teen market for pop-culture realised in cinema (Ingawanij 2006) but in the mid to late 1990s it was labeled as "poor" and "imitative" (particularly in the context of the crisis) (Ingawanij 2006, 164-65). In reality however, as Ingawanij states "leading production houses were shifting towards allocating higher budgets for fewer films, conforming to the new industrial norm of high production value products accompanied by well orchestrated promotional campaigns" (ibid., 164), a move which had led to the industrial organisation of the industry in an urban, modern context, leading to the successful establishment of multiplex cinemas in almost all major cities.

<sup>69</sup> Both Chaiworaporn and Seveon formulate an ideological connection between the 1997 economic crisis and a search for the authentic Thainess contained in the discourses of the New Thai movement. Ingawanij conducts this on a much more concrete empirical level.

<sup>70</sup> This film has seven directors: Adisorn Trisirikasem, Komgrit Triwimol, Witthaya Thongyooyong Nithwat Tharathorn, Songyos Sugmakanan and Vicha Gojiew.

<sup>71</sup> The designation "horror" as a genre in Thailand is problematic in terms of translation, an aspect which I explore in depth in my forthcoming PhD thesis. Nang Phii can merely indicate a film with a ghost in it, and as such is not necessarily horrific, often falling under the umbrella of melodrama or comedy. Equally, there are Thai films classified as horror which do not contain ghosts (*13 Game Sayawng/13 Beloved* (Chukiat Sakveerakul and Stewart St. John, Thailand, 2006), *Long Khong/Art of the Devil 2* (Pasith Buranajan et. al, Thailand, 2005)) and so do not complement the Nang Phii term. Various other labels are therefore in circulation, such as Nang-Sayong (scary film) and many descriptions simply resort to English labels such as "thriller." For the purposes of this chapter however, Nang Phii will be employed as the most common description of horror films in Thailand and one which is applied to Zee-Oui.

<sup>72</sup> Regarding this film, Knee and Chaiworaporn state "significantly the film suggested a strategy to counter the Hollywood competition on its home turf by employing higher production values than those associated with Thai horror films in decades past while simultaneously making use of indigenous story materials; what would once have been a tongue-in-cheek horror comedy became instead a moody horror-romance in authentic period settings" (2006, 62).

<sup>73</sup> From his first arrival in Thailand on a Chinese ship surrounded by hundreds of dirty and impoverished Chinese immigrants, Zee-Oui struggles to learn Thai language and his mind constantly flashes back to the cruelty and desolation he left behind in China while he is also racially abused in Thailand.

<sup>74</sup> Again this can be linked to post-crisis discourses, many of which held outsider non-Thai influence as responsible for the economic woes.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted on Zee-Oui film website in 2004.

<sup>76</sup> At times he even appears childlike—heightening his connection with children—and it is worth noting that the first "friend" he makes in Thailand is the small daughter of one of his bosses, who is also his first victim when he kills her accidentally in his sleep.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted on Zee-Oui film website in 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted on Zee-Oui film website in 2004.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted on Zee-Oui film website in 2004.

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# Contemporary Thai horror: the Horrific Incarnation of *Shutter* Mary Ainslie

**Abstract:** This article explores the creation, discourses and distribution of the 2004 New Thai horror film *Shutter*. A high-grossing film nationally and internationally, *Shutter* is based in Bangkok and follows a story of supernatural revenge by the spirit of a young upcountry woman who returns to wreak vengeance upon the men and former boyfriend who abused her in life. While considered by Bangkok fans to be the 'best' Thai horror ever and 'the only genuinely scary Thai movie', this paper will argue that *Shutter* ironically signalled a deliberate departure from traditional Thai horror aesthetics and narrative structure. Instead, shaped in favour of a pan-Asian 'look' and appeal and one familiar to non-Thai viewers (through films such as *Ringu* etc), it thereby paradoxically achieved success as a 'Thai film' while erasing many cultural specificities of Thai cinema and significantly its 2008 Hollywood remake was set in Japan starring American actors. This paper explores the ramifications of such redesigning to both the Thainess of *Shutter's* subject matter and its wider social implications.

**Keywords:** New Thai cinema; Horror; *Phii*; Excess; Film Form; Suspense.

In September 2004, recently graduated Thai short-film directors Pakpoom Wongpoom and Banjong Pisanthanakun released their first feature length film *Shutter* (*Shutter-Kòt-Dtít-Win-Yaan* 2004 dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom) in Thailand. The movie was the debut for the newly founded Phenomena Motion Pictures, an affiliate of Phenomena film productions, for whom *Shutter* was the first horror movie ever released. Of the 48 Thai films released in 2004, 11 were horror movies and *Shutter* was the highest grossing by far. Taking over two and a half million dollars, almost one million more than the second-highest grossing Thai movie for 2004, *The Bodyguard* (2004 dir. Panna Rittikrai and Petchtai Wongkamlao), *Shutter* achieved astounding success for a domestic horror movie. In its opening weekend release it grossed \$1,406,196 million dollars and eventually amassed over \$2,584,600.<sup>80</sup> Remarkably, the film went on to become the highest grossing Thai movie for 2004, and the fourth highest overall, beating the Hollywood historical epic *Troy* (2004 dir. Wolfgang Petersen) and the Sci-Fi blockbuster *I, Robot* (2004 dir. Alex Proyas).

The remarkable success and status of *Shutter* within the contemporary New Thai industry is the focus of this paper. As arguably the fastest growing film industry in Southeast Asia, Thai film has enjoyed wide popularity and success both domestically and internationally since the birth of the New Thai cinema movement at the end of the 1990s.<sup>81</sup> This paper will conduct an analysis of *Shutter* investigating its creation, form, aesthetics and subject matter in relation to the discourses of the New Thai industry. Through this examination it will indicate how this successful production ironically signals a deliberate departure from traditional Thai horror aesthetics and narrative structure, thereby ensuring that *Shutter* is simultaneously and paradoxically lauded as a successful 'Thai film' while actually erasing many cultural specificities of Thai horror cinema, a fact no more clearly evident than in the locating of its 2008 Hollywood remake in Japan.

### New Thai cinema and 'Visual Excess'

Sparked by the reorganisation of the exhibition industry by the earlier teen pop movie cycle of the 1980s, the filmic renaissance of New Thai cinema was a result both of the targeting of a new urban bourgeois spectator and the establishment of urban multiplexes from 1994 onwards (May Abadol Ingawanij, 2006), with output shooting from around two dozen productions in 1997 to around 60 in 2003 (Chaiworaporn and Knee, 2006:58). It was the 1997 surprise smash hit *Daeng Bireley And The Young Gangsters (2499 Artapan Krong Muang 1997* dir. Nonzee Nimibutr) that introduced a "new chapter in the modern history of Thai cinema" (Siwaporn Pongsuwan, 2002:4) when it was finally able to "universalize Thai film spectatorship" (May Abadol Ingawanij, 2006:169) by breaking down the audience boundaries that before had so divided filmic appeal. The success of this 1950s-based gangster film was followed shortly by the traditional ghost story *Nang Nak* (1999 dir. Nonzee Nimibutr) that was set in a pre-modern rural and exclusively Thai setting. The success of both films proved that a wider audience was accessible through the use of high quality aesthetics to present an older, somewhat more exoticized version of Thailand and Thainess. *Daeng Bireley* was the first production to utilise what film scholar May Adadol Ingawanij titles the "Thai sakon nostalgia" element, which she defines as a blend of 'Thainess' and selected international aesthetics that cultivated this wide appeal through depicting a fantasized and exoticized old Thailand (May Abadol Ingawanij, 2006). As the New Thai industry gathered steam, more big-budget historical 'heritage' epics in the same aesthetic guise as *Nang Nak* and *Daeng Bireley* followed, depicting an idyllic 'old Thailand' through bright saturated *mise-en-scène* and nostalgia-inducing long shots containing temples, rural buildings and the sun setting over idyllic paddy fields.<sup>82</sup>

However despite such a seemingly clear transition occurring in the targeted audience, discourses and budgets of New Thai cinema, the heritage productions actually utilise very similar aesthetics and motifs to those of earlier mass produced films addressing teen and upcountry viewers in previous decades. May Abadol Ingawanij states that the earlier 1980s pop culture teenage productions, an era much dismissed as a low quality period of film production, are connected to New Thai heritage productions through "a textual mode distinguished by pastiche and a strong degree of visual excess" (May Abadol Ingawanij, 2006:147). In *Nang Nak*, this 'visual excess' can be recognised in the exotic and stimulating rural *mise-en-scène* of pre-modern Thailand depicted through saturated long shots of sunlit paddy fields and close-ups of various animals. This is also complimented by emotional numbers such as the long drawn out ending sequence in which the two lovers who must be parted repeatedly and tearfully call out the name of the other in a sequence that befits more a Shakespearean tragedy than a horror movie. Through this display of 'visual excess', the well known story becomes a means to cultivate a nostalgic and possibly comforting construction of Thailand at a time of social instability.

Despite the temptation to position New Thai cinema as a movement that is starkly different to pre-97 Thai productions therefore, there actually remains the continuous presence of an earlier 'local' Thai film style embedded deep within such texts. This is realised in what Ingawanij titles as 'visual excess' and which I interpret as a concentration upon the aesthetic of attraction as a source of stimulation over that of narrative integration, and nowhere does this become so recognisable than in New Thai horror.

Named *Nang Phii* -literally ghost or spirit film- this genre originates from a pre-Buddhist animist discourse that still powerfully permeates Thai society. Ghosts and spirits -or *Phii*- have always been a staple part of Thai cinema, and this continues in the contemporary industry, evident in such successful productions as *Nang Nak*, *Buppah Rahtree* (2003 dir. Yuthlert Sippapak), *Art of the Devil 2 (Long Khong 2005* dir. The Ronin Team), *Body (Body Sop 19, 2007* dir. Paireen Purikitpanya) and of course *Shutter*. I argue that the influence of this longstanding aesthetic of visual excess within the New Thai industry becomes particularly visible in New Thai horror incarnations as the reliance such films place upon the aesthetic of attraction means that productions don't always adhere to scholarly definitions of horror that characterise the genre in terms of its narrative structure

and intended affect upon the viewer. Noel Carroll's understanding of the dominant form of the horror film is that it is narrative structure that produces pleasure and interest, engaging audience attention through the "processes of proof and discovery" (Carroll, 1990:128) inherent in a suspense narrative of question and answer fulfilment. However while Carroll believes that this dominant form is the main method of connection for the majority of popular horror narratives (Carroll, 1990:134) it does not appear appropriate as a means to explore Thai films given the disposition of Thai cinema towards 'visual excess'.

This process of discovery is largely absent as a source of engagement from successful New Thai horror films with their emphasis upon numbers of attraction as a source of stimulation. For instance the exclusion of this standard structure differentiates *Nang Nak* from Carroll's definition of horror. Due to its emphasis upon heritage *mise-en-scène* and a story based upon prior-knowledge, *Nang Nak* largely excludes a 'proof and discovery' narrative as a source of stimulation in favour of spectacle. However due to its status primarily as a heritage production, this does not conflict with expectations as narrative stimulation is instead replaced by numbers that elicit appeal largely through an exoticised display of old Thailand. It is the 2003 New Thai horror production *Buppah Rahtree* that becomes an excellent example of how despite the creation of a new and commercially viable industry through high-grossing blockbuster productions and an infrastructure of multiplexes to support them, the stylistics from previous B-movie eras are still very evident and begin to problematise the film's adherence to terms such as 'horror'.

*Buppah Rahtree* is the story of the lower-class female student Buppah, who is seduced by a rich young playboy in Bangkok. After he abandons her to go and study in England, Buppah dies from a horrific botched abortion while waiting to be evicted from her dingy one-room apartment in Bangkok. *Buppah Rahtree* chooses the same setting as the much more successful *Shutter*: the sprawling urban chaos of Bangkok and similarly to both *Nang Nak* and *Shutter* it also depicts the tragedy and mistreatment of a young woman. But the movie becomes much more interesting when attention is paid to the bizarre form of its narrative. While its opening appears to set up Carroll's narrative processes of discovery, *Buppah Rahtree* then shifts to become a series of graphic comedy, horror and action numbers that follow a very loosely discernible climactic plot. In the chaotic humour that follows Buppah's death, the perspective of Buppah is forgotten in favour of sporadic episodes of crude slapstick comedy. The film surreally transforms into a bizarre horror-comedy that follows the terrified reactions of the building's other bizarre residents to their new neighbour: the ghost of Buppah. These include the obese ladyboys who own the hair-dressing salon downstairs, a downs-syndrome shop clerk with his various comedic allies, a troupe of whiskey-swigging fake ghost busters and a room full of teenage wannabe rock stars. Diverse attempts by the frustrated capitalist landlady to exorcise Buppah's terrifying ghost take centre stage. The original story (which sets itself up to be similar to *Shutter*'s tragic tale), is lost in the chaotic antics of visual humour and narratively-meaningless extended comedy scenes in which the ghost of Buppah terrorises her would-be exorcisers, chasing them down corridors and elevators.

With its tragic tale positioned alongside such unsubtle histrionic numbers, *Buppah Rahtree* appears pulled between the visual excess of the earlier B-movies and the narrative structures Carroll articulates. This is encapsulated within the two distinct marketing styles adapted to promote the DVD of *Buppah Rahtree*: the international version, and the Thai version the second of which conforms to the visceral excess of the 'local' Thai film form articulated by Ingawaniij while the other adheres to more global horror trends.



The Hong Kong international DVD release of *Rahtree: Flower of the Night*



The Thailand DVD release of *Buppah Rahtree*

This fusion has evidently also created tensions in the narrative, pulling the film between different stylistics and genre expectations. Notably, while *Buppah Rahtree* performed well in Thailand, its non-Thai reviewers appear perplexed by the strange format. As one critic writes after viewing the film at the Toronto International Film Festival 2004: "After a fairly promising start, *Rahtree: Flower of the Night* quickly transforms into an incredibly lame horror/comedy. It's actually quite remarkable how fast the film goes from semi-interesting to all-out disaster." (David Nusair, 2004). Non-Thai comments reveal the Thai horror structural practice as so alien when compared to the narrative conventions and viewer



expectations of Carroll's standardized horror narrative form that viewers are unable to accommodate such differences and choose instead to debase and demean them: the high level of parody is regarded as unoriginal, and the mixing of visceral genre traits a 'disaster'. For these critics and viewers these aesthetics adhere to 'lowbrow' horror: the overt and graphic low-budget incarnations that exist on the fringe of 'good taste' (Hunt, 2000:326). *This low international regard is precisely the perception that Phenomenon and GMM Pictures sought to avoid in the making of Shutter when they stated that the aim was to create a quality film not based purely on entertainment but one that could give its audience 'something else'. Significantly, filmmakers located this precise appeal in narrative structure, stating that the source behind the (perceived) bad quality and lack of success of Thai movies lay in problems in the plots.*<sup>83</sup> This attention to plot detail marks *Shutter* as very different to the visual excess of successful New Thai horror productions such as *Nang Nak* and *Buppah Rahtree*, as it very deliberately constructs a question and answer narrative as a mean of eliciting effects from the viewer.

### Shutter

*Shutter* tells the story of the affluent Bangkok-dwelling photographer Thun and his girlfriend Jane. When driving home one night from a friend's wedding, they accidentally hit a girl in the road. After driving off and leaving her, strange white blurs begin to appear on Thun's photographs and Jane begins investigating the spirit she believes is haunting them. This investigation uncovers a prior story of patriarchal abuse by Thun and his friends towards the young upcountry girl Natre. Natre's spirit slowly reveals itself, intruding into the couple's life until the final climactic revelation of the gang-rape that caused her suicide and which Thun had photographed as blackmail to keep her silent. Throughout this story the film poses constant questions around aspects such as the identity of the ghost, her relationship with Thun and the reasons behind her haunting. These are created through the lack of prior-knowledge in the characters and situation. The relevance of an early scene in which Thun's friend Ton shows up terrified in his apartment repeatedly asking for some photographs and whispering 'it's that bitch', does not become apparent until the revelations at the end of the film. Similarly, the reasons behind Natre's ghost leading Jane to the university biology lab and revealing herself in a photograph there is not explained to either Jane or the viewer until the ending revelation that this is the place where she was raped. The significance attached towards the camera throughout the film is also only apparent at the very end.



Through these many scenes and motifs all characters are at various points positioned as the main source of identification for the viewer, yet each operates from a position that at times seems to run counter to the others. Characters are revealed to be concealing information, and the viewer at various points knows more and less than the character whose point of view is presented to them. This constant change and unanswered questions keep the viewer in both suspense and uncertainty as to the outcome, the past and the 'true' occurrences, none of which are revealed until the very end of the movie. The film's narrative is therefore a process of discovery, using the perspective of each character to piece together the previous events.

This concentration upon suspense, mystery and its solution reflects how *Shutter* was deliberately tailored by filmmakers to adhere to such dominant structures and indeed it appears to have succeeded in following this standardized version of the horror movie narrative. The deliberate designing of *Shutter's* narrative structure indicates a difference between dominant international discourses of horror and the Thai film style, indicating that not only is the subject matter of horror movies attached to their wider social and cultural context, but so is the form they take.

The Thainess of *Shutter* can be found in its subject matter: the ghostly return of a young dead woman who uses her new supernatural powers to take revenge upon those who abused her in life. A common motif in New Thai horror films, one also evident in *Nang Nak* and *Buppah Rathree* as well as numerous others, these repulsive yet righteous females can be interpreted as a metaphorical response to wider anxieties around the abuse and mistreatment of Thai women in the rapid push towards modernisation throughout the late twentieth century. As economist Peter Bell explains "Thailand's economic miracle has been built largely on the backs of women" (Bell, 1997:55). The 1980's produced what Bell terms "the feminisation of production", a process of rapid economic growth which rested ultimately "upon the patriarchal subordination of women in factories, commercial sex work, and unpaid agricultural and household labour" (Bell, 1997:56). Along with the rural poor and ethnic minorities, Thai women benefited the least from this so-called 'miracle' and suffered the most as a result of its downfall in the economic crisis of 1997.

If Thailand is portrayed as an exoticised idyllic land by the New Thai heritage productions, then this is therefore sabotaged by the abused and vengeful female *Phii* who shatter such glossy nationalistic depictions with their tales of mistreatment and exploitation, horrifically subverting the glossy, highly-refined state-promoted hypocritical image of 'Amazing' Thailand and its "flowers of the nation" (Van Esterik, 2000:105). If modern horror "inhabits the very fabric of ordinary life, daily picking away at the limits of reason and the aspirations underpinning 'moral improvement'" (Gelder, 2000:2), then *Shutter's* tale of female-abuse can be interpreted as a progressive critique of the repressed anxieties 'picking away' at the 'moral improvement' of capitalist and patriarchal late 20<sup>th</sup> century Thailand.<sup>84</sup>

Therefore in its quest for wide appeal, filmmakers mapped this Thai motif onto a re-modelled suspense narrative. However *Shutter* not only deployed a question and answer format, but also re-moulded the 'Thainess' of its subject matter to comply with internationally successful Far East Asian Horror aesthetics. The vengeful *onryou*-reminiscent long black-haired and white faced *Phii* Natre, with her stilted crawling and staring eyes ensures that comparisons to films such as *Ringu* (1998 dir. Hideo Nakata) and *Ju-On* (2003 dir. Takashi Shimizu) are inevitable and both Thai and non-Thai reviews mark the film as stylistically similar to such well-known Japanese ghost films. A scene in which Natre crawls slowly and stiffly up Thun's bed is similar to both Sadako emerging from the television in *Ringu* and Kayako crawling down the stairs in *Ju-On*.



This is very different to *Nang Nak*, which deploys the pre-modern *mise-en-scène* of historical rural Thailand with its dark skinned Nak sporting her traditional peasant 'helmet' hairstyle and blackened teeth. Similarly the slapstick comedy and teenage rockstars of *Buppah Rahtree* are absent, while the blood and vomit splattered hacksaw-wielding figure of Buppah is a world away from the refined *onryou*.

*Shutter* therefore becomes a particularly interesting study of New Thai cinema in the global context. In its attempt to cultivate wide appeal filmmakers adopted the *mise-en-scène* of a standardized globally prominent image of 'Asian horror', a Far East Asian aesthetic quite different to the Southeast Asian visceral Thai excess.<sup>85</sup> Occupying this vaguely defined and liminal space through deliberately altering not only its narrative structure but also its *mise-en-scène*, enabled the film to cross borders far more easily and achieve a much wider popular distribution than any other Thai horror movie. Rather than the sporadic festival showings of *Buppah Rahtree*, *Shutter* can be found in high street DVD racks alongside *Ringu* and *Ju-On*, with virtually no reference to its Thai and Southeast Asian origins, an indication perhaps of the coagulated image 'Asia' still occupies in the Euro-Amerocentric dominated global consciousness.

Therefore, with its removal of the visual excesses of Thai horror and the incorporation of such recognisably 'Asian' aesthetics woven into a narrative process of discovery, *Shutter* seems to achieve its success at the cost of the erasure of such indigenous Thai accents. Indeed the 2008 Hollywood remake, commissioned largely due to the innovative story, ensured that any lingering connection to Thailand and Thai aesthetics was finally erased when the film was instead located in Japan, employed a Japanese director and followed an American couple Ben and Jane Shaw who are haunted by the now genuine *onryou*, the abused young Japanese woman Megumi Tanaka. The oppositions of the subject matter are now mapped upon a wider discourse of Western masculine abuse vs Eastern feminine revenge with an American Jane now occupying the conflicting position of the affluent modern female who uncovers this hidden history of abuse.<sup>86</sup> Again following in the footsteps of *Ringu* and *Ju-On*, *Shutter's* adherence to such global aesthetic and narrative trends ensured Hollywood interest enough to purchase and re-make its tale of abuse, albeit one that appeared to erase all links to its Southeast Asian origins.

### Conclusion

It appears that *Shutter*, with its dynamic young team of innovative scriptwriters and the desire of Phenomena and GMM pictures to produce a 'something else' different to the historical love story *Nang Nak* and comical farce of *Buppah Rahtree* owed much of its

success to a rejection of the stylistics from previous Thai film incarnations. While its subject matter can be identified as a particular New Thai cinema motif and attached to the surrounding context, its narrative structure and *mise-en-scène* are influenced by much more global horror trends. This complicates the degree of pride attached to *Shutter's* success as a Thai movie, as it appears to substantially alter and even reject the stylistics that identify Thai film on the international stage. Another difficulty also becomes apparent; if the subject matter of this film can be interpreted as a critique of the horrors of modernity and its exploitive influence in Thailand, then it is also utilising a form which would seem to be imported and one which in its success would perhaps herald an erasure of the 'traditional' Thai cinematic form. In this continual re-structuring of rather than engagement with the past, it's possible that the vengeful screeching undead females of New Thai horror will be active for many years to come.

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<sup>80</sup>Box Office Mojo. 2010. Retrieved from <[http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/thailand/yearly/?yr=2004&p="](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/thailand/yearly/?yr=2004&p=)>

<sup>81</sup>The new post-97 big-budget industry is labelled by Thai film critic and scholar Anchalee Chaiworaporn as 'New Thai Cinema' or even the Thai 'Second New-Wave', after the boom of productions in the 70s and the socially critical movement. Anchalee Chaiworaporn. "New Thai Cinema." Online posting. Retrieved from <[http://www.fipresci.org/world\\_cinema/south/south\\_english\\_asian\\_cinema\\_thailand.htm](http://www.fipresci.org/world_cinema/south/south_english_asian_cinema_thailand.htm)>

<sup>82</sup>May Abadol Ingawanij refers to these historical epics as 'heritage films' while Anchalee Chaiworaporn titles this *Nang Yon Yuk* or 'returning to the past' cinema and notes a dramatic increase in the production and popularity of this genre in the New Thai movement, connecting it to the surrounding climate of the 1997 economic crisis and the elite-promoted nationalist discourses as a means of contending its devastating aftermath. These stories and characters are ones which therefore impart well towards discourses of nationalism, in particular the value of suffering for a higher, purer gain, that treats past times "a resource for a (usually celebratory) reexamination of the roots of Thai identity" (Chaiworaporn and Knee, 2006:63). Anchalee notes how a significantly high percentage of Thai films in the New filmic movement fall into the category of *Nang Yon Yuk*, and even titles this appeal "nostalgia syndrome" (Chaiworaporn, 2002). Films such as *Nang Nak*, *Bang Rajan*, *Behind the Painting*, *The Overture*, *Jan Dara*, *Fan Chan* and the royal epic *Suriyothai*, all fall into this category

<sup>83</sup>This is discussed in an article on leading Thai entertainment website Siam Zone, in which Phenomena Motion Pictures state that they acknowledged the trashy 'pure entertainment' element of Thai horror when planning *Shutter* and that the source behind this (perceived) bad quality and lack of success lay with problems in the plots Retrieved from <[www.siamzone.com/movie/news/index.php?id=1999](http://www.siamzone.com/movie/news/index.php?id=1999)>

<sup>84</sup>The abused up-country Natre is positioned as an 'other' counter to the modernity of Thun. Natre now uses her supernatural abilities to intrude into glossy Bangkok and reveal a hidden underside of female exploitation. This division between the lower-class female and upper-class male can be found in the *mise-en-scène* of *Shutter*. Natre's former existence is represented by the supernatural, corpses, old country houses, jars of dead preserved animals, ragged worn clothes, decaying country roads, leaking fluids, slightly unbalanced middle-aged mothers and intense romantic devotion, all indicative of a slightly undesirable connection to the 'past'. Thun however is firmly situated within modernity, he is surrounded and at ease with technology and urban life in the form of fast cars, capitalist shops, sexual freedom, skyscrapers, city-scapes, alcohol, glossy graduation gowns, modern architecture and plush apartments, all of which point to a contemporary existence. These different realms construct a definite distinction between the worlds of masculine and

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feminine. In its mobilisation of this monstrous abject and repressed social anxiety, New Thai horror gives voice to the repressed and abused feminine.

<sup>85</sup>The local 'accents' of visual excess haven't completely disappeared from *Shutter* however, even if they are few and far between. A moment of comedy ensues when the terrified Thun accidentally mistakes a Katoey for Natre's ghost in a petrol station bathroom, who interprets his kicking down her cubical door as a sexual advance and states "can I shit first"? Also, while the ghost of Natre is decidedly *onryou* in her appearance, she is also notably more rotten and disgusting than the Japanese depictions.

<sup>86</sup>A notable difference between these two productions is the ending, in which Thun/Ben sits silent and unmoving in a mental hospital with the spirit of Natre/Megumi draped possessively over his shoulders. The American version depicts Jane abandoning Ben to his fate as forever entwined with the angry *onryou*. In her Thai incarnation however, Jane returns ready to engage with this stalemate and so suggests that in her duality she can possibly construct a solution to the chaotic consequences modern Thailand finds itself entwined within.