
The Politics of Aesthetics and the Contemporary Thai Art Film

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SYNOPSIS

The film movement often termed the “Thai New Wave” provides new ways of approaching the Thai demographic through a rupture in conventional regimes of political, social, and cultural representation, which I refer to, following Jacques Ranciere (2004), as the politics of aesthetics. I suggest that this particular film movement derives, in form, from previous ruptures in representation in the history of 20th century film made possible through its associations to the broader literary and political impetus of stylized communities beneath the radar, and in contradistinction to, the identity of an otherwise monolithic state image. I provide below a brief outline of the films we might include in this New Wave, it’s associations to similar movements outside Thailand, the implications it offers for cross-disciplinary studies, and an overview of the structural and infrastructural conditions and relationships that facilitate it. I conclude by suggesting a reorganized methodology in the study of Thai spaces through the channeling of an expanded Thai interpretive community.

Since the emergence of Wisit Sasanatieng’s *Tears of the Black Tiger* (2000), film in Thailand has arrived at a new ‘stylistic’ juncture between art and entertainment. Wisit’s first two films, *Tears of the Black Tiger* and *Citizen Dog* (2004), employ accentuated color schemes, eccentric character personalities, and are interspersed with moments of comical dialogue. By contrast, fellow Thai auteur, Pen-ek Ratanaruang’s *Last Life in the Universe* (2003) is dreamy but tragic, linguistically disjunct but visually affective, and, musically and cinematographically assisted. The combined effect slows the pace of Bangkok; a city that operates at light-speed. Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), *Blissfully Yours* (2002), and *Tropical Malady* (2004), explore the geographic diversity of the Thai landscape against the backdrop of everyday life. With all three of these Thai directors, we

lose our sense of an ideal film world and are drawn instead to a world of more authentic exigencies and everyday dilemmas; and yet these filmmakers foreground their ability to manipulate multiple film worlds through innovative technical means. This is to say they assert a constructive genius behind the camera to decorate a world that is only contextually, but not formulaically, similar to our own. Objects float at midday, multiple times conjoin, skies rain motorcycle helmets, radios report a hitherto concealed history, and stuffed animals smoke cigarettes. It is in this sense that the new emerging art film in Thailand has become both entertaining and engaging.

In the attempt to briefly review the horizon of the Thai New Wave, I would like to explicitly position the intent of my interest and the possibilities this move-

ment offers for new methodological directions in interdisciplinary studies. In 2001, I experienced an initial fascination with the architecture and infrastructure of foreign film consumption in Thailand and, in particular, how it differed from the viewing experience I was accustomed to in my previous home, New York City. One of the largest outdoor bazaars in Asia, known as the Jatuchak Market, housed a small booth in which fascinated film connoisseurs dropped by each Saturday to purchase Thai-subtitled VHS “art” features like Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* (1962), Francois Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1958), or Federico Fellini’s *8 1/2* (1963). The stock of art film seemed limited to foreign “classics” but, to its credit, the shop contested other productions from the West, namely Hollywood’s hegemonic position at the Thai cineplex. The French New Wave cinema showcased at Jatuchak was itself a break from clichéd Hollywood formulas and the predictable American style of the late 1950s and continues to inspire viewers today in nearly every corner of the globe, including Thailand. But it seemed that these sort of movements had to be sought out by the savvy film connoisseur and was not available to the mainstream Thai movie-goer.

Below, I will discuss some of the political implications of recent Thai films and the way they contest dominant representations, as well as their usefulness to research in political science, social theory, and film studies against the backdrop of Southeast Asian studies. Around September of 2002, I remember stumbling across a VCD version of Apichatpong’s *Blissfully Yours* (2002), and admiring the way that the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the Thai demographic could be filmed in a new and imaginative way. When I returned two years later to conduct research on the politics of the Thai/Burma border in 2004, I re-explored that film, along with Apichatpong’s older work *Mysterious Afternoon at Noon* (2000), to find a vision of Thailand that foregrounds Thai intersections within the Burmese diaspora. Apichatpong’s lens seemed to challenge simplified notions of Thailand and *khwaam pen Thai* (being Thai) that was isolated from its extra-national associations.

These films touched precisely on the subject matter that I had overlooked. What is it, especially in an Area Studies perspective, that we miss in a study that only engages a particular area? And how do cinematic projections of the national landscape contribute to this

through the range of images they evoke? A New Wave for Thai film means simply, a new way of seeing. Movie theaters like Bangkok’s Lido, House, or Siam Theater in Bangkok, film foundations, libraries, and film archives, or the variety of other places where films are distributed to the masses (sites of cinematic consumption throughout Thailand), provide an infrastructure for the presentation of the art film to Thai and expatriate audiences. It is through experiencing Thai art films in these places that one can realize the originality and creative depth that had, until this point, been largely overlooked by the global film audience. Reflecting back to several film history and theory courses I attended at Indiana University in Bloomington, in which the critical measure of a film derived from a handful of Western classics, it is my hope that New Waves in new places can work to broaden our understanding of global cinema. Furthermore, it seemed as though emerging Thai viewpoints are missed in other non-visual disciplines, like Southeast Asian Studies, because academic texts fail to measure the new and innovative cinematic images of contemporary life in Thailand. While recent Thai art films, such as *Tropical Malady* (2004), and *Invisible Waves* (2006), received only limited domestic runs in Thailand, the infrastructure for the creation and stylization of a more pluralistic image of Thailand is expanding. This article suggests that the film and its importance is often enveloped in a movement, and that the process of making, viewing, and citing the movement, is an empirical process. Below I draw links between some of the social, political, and cultural implications of the movement many have called the Thai New Wave.

Film, Social Theory, and Area Studies

Since Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s 18th century essay *On the Origin of Languages* and more recently with French social theorist Jacques Ranciere’s (2004) writings on film, explanations regarding the production of meaning have been closely allied with a politics of aesthetics.¹ Departing from the over-theorized way in which we associate how people communicate with consensus-oriented objectives to arrive at a common ground (for example Jurgen Habermas²), one is now more free to look to the domain of form through which different “aesthetic” communities operate and, ultimately, differ while remaining connected. This community-oriented constellation (i.e. an explosive

array of images, a multi-contextual frame, a way in which we sense and derive new things previously invisible, through art and a multiplicity of non-vocal forms of expression like movies) subverts, implants, produces, and as a result, gives form to meaning. Instead of interpreting what “Thailand” means, by coding or decoding rigid place-based hypotheses, we might attempt to provide a description of “how” they mean in aesthetic terms relating to these new images. How was it that a multiplicity of groups, of the variety depicted in new Thai films, could ever have been crunched into a deracinated visual identity that has for so long been projected as “Thai?” How do new cinematic projections contest the old notion of representation? How do we create a taxonomy of terms related to a particular phenomenon in film that criss-cross multiple fields of understanding: the auteur, academic disciplines, the film audience, the citizen or immigrant, the represented, etc?

Here, the film and its creator escape tired tropes overflowing with repetition that render and reinforce conventional notions of Thai space. Film, literature, and other mediums of aesthetic production can repartition space through diverging and/or departing from the normative practices of description. It is a matter of restoring the varieties of space that have been assigned to a unity through nominal codes and categorization. Simplified, one should, when inquiring about Thai space, be receptive to a variety of answers. In this way, the renowned Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul suggests:

Everything is related to films. Architecture has its own stories, it is just another way to tell stories. It is characterized by how a person experiences art by using space and time. It is walking from one point to another, which is very similar to cinema. Lighting, shadow, and space are about the story of emotions and of the mind. Some places do not make the person who enters feel that this place was constructed for so and so purpose, and it is able to take the visitor to the activities in that location, which are all prepared in such a way that we do them naturally. Just like humans- each person has a story. People will have different reactions in a relationship. *Going to places will give us different feelings or atmospheres, and we will have different reactions to each space. When I first began, I had to try*

to understand this media form (film) and know what it could do. I created a new structure, so it stands out in structural terms.

--Apichatpong Weerasethakul³

Apichatpong realized the potentialities of space through a departure from conventional film form. Thai film has, through Apichatpong and others with similar aesthetic experimentations, begun to multiply and re-envision the depth of Thai space.

Movements throughout the twentieth century, and specifically the late-1950s early-1960s, Paris-based film movement known as the French New Wave, from which I derive my conjecture, have drawn upon the strength and creativity of their aesthetic community. Images change. The changes produced in the social domain, and the connections underlying the production of meaning, suggest that scholars should turn toward a re-imagined area studies capable of examining the production and perpetuation of aesthetic communities that are linked across and beyond academically conceived and imposed boundaries. Geographically and culturally diverse artists are participating in literary and cinematic projects that can be seen as united by globalized aesthetic linkages. These linkages, like film festivals and market venues that capitalize on a unified notion like “Thai New Wave,” assist in the broader recognition of non-conventional filmmakers. The internationalization of film has the potential to liberate the filmmaker from localized conventions mandated by the expectations of a national audience, and the narrative of national identity that is often a key ingredient in successful domestic box office performances. I invoke contemporary Thai filmmakers participating in this sort of aesthetic community because it illuminates the way that traditional approaches inhibit important avenues for interpretation. It is not adequate to interpret these films only within the context of Southeast Asian Studies, or only in terms of Thai politics or Thai aesthetics. Instead these films point to a larger picture of associations between different times and distant places. In other words, to understand the questions implied in new Thai art films is to understand how the question has been framed in the history of cinema broadly construed. For this reason I’ve chosen to denote “the new” in Thai art cinema as the “Thai New Wave,” in order to draw affinities between these selected films and the canonical New Waves of cinema past. Fruitful analysis of Thai cinema requires a famili-

arity with the global history of cinema and an approach that is unfixed in both time and space.

Taking the Thai art film outside the context of Southeast Asian Studies offers several liberties. First, we come to realize that a contribution or innovation inherent in the Thai film is a contribution to the entire film canon, from which it has hitherto been excluded (for proof of this exclusion one need only do a quick search through the Western-centric selection of Criterion Collection Films). Second, instead of a study bound to a single social group and place-based context (the bread and butter of Area Studies) we are freed to look at the globalized links between infrastructure and form. For example, in the years 1958-1962 the French art films of Godard and Resnais, to name two widely recognized film auteurs, departed from regularized mainstream film aesthetics by adapting new, more literary narrative styles. Techniques like the jump-cut, in which conventional match-on-action time-compression shots were disrupted by visual “jumps” in the narrative, revolutionized French cinema. Alain Resnais’s reorganization of time, based on the empathic experiences of its two protagonists in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, nodded to literary changes in French literature by novelists such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras. All these transitions took place amid the backdrop of a modern fluid style disrupted by the plurality of human conditions in the post-war West. We will assess below the formulaic similarities between the conjecture I’ve just outlined and recent Thai art films.

Positioning a new Thai Cinema: New Auteurs, New Stories

If you ask me whether Wisit [Sasanatieng] makes “Thai” films, I’d say they don’t seem “Thai” at all. Many parts are more akin to Finnish films, and Japanese films as well. But why should you care since Wisit’s movies are “Wisit” movies through and through? That’s where I’d place importance. I’m excited every time one of his movies comes out because both his vision and identity are specifically his. I’m excited more about these things than whether it’s Thai or not. I’m not so concerned about those things and don’t think we should give too much critical attention to it.

--Pen-ek Ratanaruang⁴

Turning back to the form and style of recent Thai films, and whether they should be seen as conceived by

a “Thai” or “auteur,” we can focus on what I would describe as the extravagant volume of tone versus the play of melody in the art film. But our reflections on the broader history of alternative cinema, New Wave cinema, helps to clarify the breaks, shifts, and historic affinities, in new Thai films. In this way we can more easily extract key features and influences on Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s films. Like the films of Jean Luc Godard, such as *Une Femme est Une Femme* (1961) or *In Praise of Love* (2001), Apichatpong’s characters are not as central to the film story so much as their associations are central to the way they, and we, perceive the world they inhabit. As such, the narrative, or story line if you prefer, opens up to numerous points of arrival and departure. Without conventional beginnings, middles, and endings, the audience traverses the film’s landscape from multiple points of view. In terms of genre, in which particular rules stabilize the expectations of the audience (e.g., horror, musical, action, drama, or comedy), the structure of the story purposefully blends and confuses the elements.

If we continued along the lines of an Apichatpong/Godard comparison, which would situate certain affinities between a French New Wave of 1958-1961 and a present Thai New Wave, many other aspects of Apichatpong’s five feature films convey genealogical linkages. In *The Adventures of Iron Pussy* (2003), in which the hero is a 7-11 clerk by day and a drag queen/secret agent by night, characters break from comical dialogue into the conversational idiom of a Thai folk musical. This film is unlike any of Apichatpong’s other work, likely due to the collaboration with the conceptual artist and lead actor Michael Shaowanaisai. This project’s attempt to utilize the musical genre as a means of questioning normative gender roles imposed on Thai society is very much akin to the stylistic and musically-infused narrative composition of Godard’s *Une Femme est Une Femme*.

Blissfully Yours (2002) and *Tropical Malady* (2004), Apichatpong’s 2nd and 4th feature films, are more difficult to apprehend with any predetermined analytical or interpretive frame. The films differ in narrative style but again we can locate them within a personal approach to film-making that creates certain similarities between two otherwise disjunctive films. In *Blissfully Yours* we can identify an immediate political context, the plight of the Burmese illegal immigrant, Min, who must remain silent because he lacks a voice in the

broader sphere of Thai citizenship.⁵ But the film chooses to demonstrate this relationship in other ways. First, Min suffers from a rash which two Thai characters attempt to treat with a cream of their own concoction. Though the sun may indeed irritate the rash it also provides moments of happiness into which Min and his Thai girlfriend, Roong, can escape. A long drive from town and into the countryside culminates in a picnic on a scenic cliff somewhere on the edge of the jungle where Min and Roong evade, if only briefly, the difficulties of their daily routines. Nearby they swim in a stream and comment on their lives. But their happiness and escape is interrupted, at several junctures, by the irritation of Min's rash. Here Apichatpong puts oppression and momentary bliss into conflict such that neither has the power to cancel out the other, and, ultimately, reflecting on the opening scene in a doctor's office, the realities of a structural oppression are difficult to treat permanently. Apichatpong has noted that a personal experience inspired this dissection of structural inequality in the global order. In 1998, Apichatpong witnessed Thai police handcuffing several illegal Burmese immigrants, apparently apprehended while trying to enjoy the day at a Thai zoo.

It should be stated that *Blissfully Yours* utilized several stylistic devices that reappear in *Tropical Malady*. One is that the opening credits don't appear until several scenes have taken place. Based on several clues (including the directors commentary to *Tropical Malady*, the understanding of which must be called a "clue" based on my own deficiencies with the Thai language) the opening credits appear only after the theme of the movie crystallizes, which in both cases was a process-oriented relationship embedded in the practice of life. For example, in *Blissfully Yours* the relationships between multiple oppressions, the light of day, and an escape to the jungle where the characters arrive at moments of bliss, are clarified in-transit, i.e., at a moving moment between the foregrounding of their daily routines and the departure from routine into the jungle. Almost halfway through the film, as they are driving along a two-lane road, away from town and toward the mountainous jungle, the music starts to play and the opening credits begin to roll. Life doesn't unfold as stories, but only becomes so as we select elements to form a particular narrative. Thus, Apichatpong allows the opening credits to roll only as he foregrounds the consciousness of a particular selection of

images and stories. This same delayed opening takes place far into *Tropical Malady* as two men seemingly infatuated with one another, Keng and Tong, ride a motorcycle in darkness along a country road. Elements of a story have been told and a new story is about to begin. As such, *Tropical Malady* is a movie in two parts and the opening credits begin at the point of division.

Apichatpong's first feature film, *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), has revolutionized the way Thailand could be "seen" through multiple frames and methods. Shot during the late-90s economic downturn in Thailand, discussed in depth by several academics,⁶ Apichatpong's film represents resistance to any single narrative by employing the surrealist technique of *Exquisite Corpse* to traverse the multiplicity of the Thai landscape. [Note: *Exquisite Corpse* is a technique by which objects, images, or story parts are collectively assembled through either rule-following or by supplementing the most recent segment.] Applying this method in cinematic form meant beginning a part of a story in one geographic locale and continuing where it left off in another. The voice of an unknown interviewer (out of the view of the camera) opens the film in Bangkok with the words "could you tell us a story" after which a women's voice begins the fictional story of a young boy named "Dogfah" [meaning: "high-class woman"]. As the film moves across a variety of Thai provinces, and cultural and economic landscapes, the attention is aligned more with how the story is told than a coherent narrative structure. The form of the story is both implicit and explicit, in that it takes on different styles contingent with the place and group of people who must pick up where the other storyteller left off. The dimensions of the disjunctive story are fused with contemporary rural realities, such as being sold to a go-go bar. Narrative disjunctures pile-up as contemporary fiction is adjoined with historiographic details related to Thai-Japanese relations during World War II; rural northern folk traditions are employed to convey a soap opera melodrama to dramatize the story of Dogfah; while Thai school children in a southern province use Japanese manga (comic book) references to facilitate Dogfah's ultimate demise. Though the story seems complete, for another 10 minutes the film continues to capture the everyday lives of potential storytellers. This choice foregrounds the fact that all the film's details were captured by the camera in a particular place and at a particular time. Who would've

guessed that *Mysterious Object at Noon* would be distributed to the world by the same distributor, Plexi-Film, that compiled the concert DVDs of my favorite two bands: Galaxie 500 and Low. Like any musical adventure, *Mysterious Object at Noon* creates a new melodic journey by disturbing the harmony of old notes.

Though I hesitate to position fellow-Thai film directors like Pen-ek Ratanaruang and Wisit Sasanatieng into a comparative lens with Apichatpong since they are very likely attempting to do different things, and since Pen-ek and Wisit are likely to generate a broader appeal to mainstream audiences (a point amply demonstrated during my summer course in the Politics of Film at the University of Hawai'i), there is something new in their separate styles which contributes to the constellation of a new Thai aesthetic. Pen-ek's *Last Life in the Universe* (2003) represents one such New Wave film. The primary characters are not uniquely "Thai" nor are they the prototypical identifications of any particular national stereotype. Instead they, like renown film theorist David Bordwell's list of art film commonalities [e.g., alienation, psychologically-complex characters, open-ended narratives, disjointed temporalities, etc.⁷] represent psychologically complex characters aloof from, yet tied to, the complex processes of globalization. In the backdrop, Noi, an unemployed and eccentric Thai chain-smoker suffering from her recent sister's death, meets Kenji, a tidy Japanese expatriate librarian alienated by life and in search of the appropriate suicide technique. The film begins in Bangkok, where Kenji eventually finds peace, and ends in Osaka, where Noi finds employment. Throughout the film different languages are spoken, cultures are oddly juxtaposed, while national identity is cleverly downplayed but not disguised. In interior spaces the speed of the film is slowed down in opposition to the speed at which the world outside operates, an effect achieved through extended camera shots and dream-like landscape visuals where, in key frames, multiple times operate. In Pen-ek's more recent film, *Invisible Waves* (2006), a disjunctive narrative unfolds in Hong Kong, Macau, and post-tsunami Phuket, Thailand amongst Thai, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean actors. Again, the languages spoken within the film's soundtrack include Thai, Japanese, and English. Primary characters flow across supposedly stringent national boundaries that also demarcate the borderlines for so-

called "national cinemas". Obviously this point makes it increasingly difficult to use the terms "new Thai cinema," "the Thai New Wave," or "the Thai art film," and so on. Perhaps this is a wider phenomenon happening in many places beyond these so-called Thai art films, as directors seek to be relevant to international market, transnational identities, and globally integrated social spaces. The market has opened up this space such that film narratives need not be constrained to simple national representations of identity.

Yet, outside market parameters, other sorts of associations and alignments work into the ultimate film product. This process of association is part of a broader plurality in which the institutions of society collaborate in a community of aesthetic production. This community of mediums can be described as a site of association whereby different sorts of illustration collide through an intersection of social practices (e.g., in capturing scenes of life in film and literary writing) which are then accessible in an interactive form (e.g., by watching a film or reading the work). Consider the triangular relationship between film auteur Pen-ek Ratanaruang; the musician, contemporary fiction and essay writer Prabda Yoon; and the observers of their respective work (which might include movie audiences, readership, newspaper or magazine reviewers, academic interpreters, and others). Each element of this stylistic constellation takes part in the form and reception of the actual work. I first became aware of how this community of style could be framed through an article printed in the Bangkok-based newspaper *The Nation* (August 24, 2002) following the announcement that up-and-coming fiction writer, Prabda Yoon, had become "one of the youngest writers ever to win the SeaWrite Award," one of the most prestigious awards in Southeast Asian literature. The article suggested that his "unconventional style" was destined to be a major magnet of criticism. Only days earlier another Thai newspaper, *Siam Rath*, declared Prabda's victory the "tragedy of the SeaWrite Award," and also raised another critic's claim that Prabda was the centerpiece for a generation of "inexperienced young writers." Veteran writer Sujit Wongthes responded in support of so-called New Wave writers like Prabda arguing that they should be welcomed into Thai literary circles. Other critics seemed to sidestep the quality of Prabda's writing to invoke personal injunctions against the author such as "his choice of a seemingly Bohe-

mian lifestyle and his image as an avant garde thinker.” These mundane elements also seemed to draw the ire of the old guard of the Thai literati.

Pen-ek Ratanaruang, who had become familiar with Prabda’s work through a collection of essays on film called *Unstill Pictures* (2001), began collaborating on the story for *Last Life in the Universe* (2003). Their association merged their distinct styles while maintaining key differences. As an avid film aficionado and avant-modern fiction writer, Prabda Yoon’s screenwriting roles in both of Pen-ek’s recent films, *Last Life in the Universe* (2003) and *Invisible Waves* (2006) break with the conventions of adaptation. Instead of collaborating on the individual parts of the story, as it progressed, Pen-ek relayed the conception to Prabda in one sitting. After a few months without contact, Prabda relayed, in written form, a rough draft of a story called *I Am Home* that later became *Last Life*. Obviously, between any two artists (painters, writers, auteurs, etc.) there will exist points of disagreement, without which they could not be called artists because they would create the same thing. The interesting aspect in the case of the *Last Life* project is that both Prabda and Pen-ek had a deep respect for each other’s work which, ultimately, led to a sort of freedom for each to pursue the end-product with some sense of personal direction. With Pen-ek, the film respected the story to some extent but departed from it at several junctures. In the case of Prabda, the story was released later as a short fiction work by the same name, but with different plot developments, descriptions, and endings.

I think it might be hasty to suggest that their isn’t something culturally Thai about a particular film captured in a Thai social space, especially if we consider Wittgenstein’s injunction that language frames a particular world and context. Many Southeast Asianists will surely jump to critique the idea that I even invoke a French history four decades past as a useful conjecture from which to gauge modern film phenomenon as it is unfolding in the space of the Thai nation. Because of certain marked similarities, or even cultural affinities practiced more regularly in a regional proximity, there is something to be said for an area studies view of film. In this way I can share the deep reverence I hold for Pen-ek, Apichatpong, and Wisit with the likes of Eric Khoo or Wong Kar Wai, both of whom position their films in the context of a particular place (i.e., Singa-

pore and Hong Kong respectively). But to partition the cinematic phenomenon off from a canonical film history is to focus solely on social context without regard for formal innovation and technical similarity, which, in turn, produces that very social context. The way in which technique fruitfully intersects with social realities to produce something new and different is very much a part of the artistic and political process I am attempting to illustrate here.

The New Thai Critical Voice

The key development in the emergence of modern publics was the appearance of newsletters and other temporally structured forms oriented to their own circulation: not just controversial pamphlets, but regular and dated papers, magazines, almanacs, annuals, and essay serials. They developed reflexivity about their circulation through reviews, re-printings, citation, controversy. These forms single out circulation both through their sense of temporality and through the way they allow discourse to move in different directions. I don’t speak just to you; I speak to the public in a way that enters a cross-citational field of many other people speaking to the public. (Warner 2003:66)

For an academic focusing Thai film, an occasional scavenger hunt through the larger and larger sections of Thai-language critical materials available from Bangkok-based bookstores suggests something promising. As a Hawai’i-based academic doing research related to Thai film, I must first consider how to organize these materials into a useful methodology while also entering into a productive conversation (critical or otherwise) surrounding what it is I’m researching. Chetana Nagavajara (2003), has underscored the way in which the creative process and its interpreters must move outside of the oral tradition common to the Thai cultural context and into a written, accessible form. He presents something of a treatise on how the textual conversation can bring literary and visual arts into a broader engagement with the Thai public. As one makes their way through the gargantuan Japanese-exported Kinokinaya Bookstore in the fashionable Bangkok-based shopping mall known as Siam Paragon, or several magazine stands in the hipster-frequented area of Bangkok known as Siam Square, or in the nooks and crannies of Thai suburbs where one accidentally stumbles upon a translation of Dostoyevsky, one notes the growing body of written work which is

beginning to treat the phenomenon of film unfolding against the backdrop of the Thai national imagination.

In this regard the recent printing of user-friendly guides to interpreting and understanding various Thai film projects should be received with great interest to those attentive to a so-called Thai New Wave. Bioscope, a monthly Thai-language film magazine which has brought new auteurs to the Thai film public (which may not have immediate access to them otherwise), has recently printed *The Making of Invisible Waves* (Roongrun 2006). Apart from your average film project summary, this particularly interesting text contains interviews with people involved along with descriptions of the roles they undertook in the composition of the film. Bioscope's undertaking, along with Navarat Roongaroon's excellent interviews and textual composition, emphasizes the film through its systematic process and production. In contrast, books like *Pry Pansang's As Films Go By* (2002) focus on the subjective magic of the viewing experience. A recent collection of interviews between Waraphoj Phanthupong and Pen-ek Ratanaruang (Phanthupong 2006) grants the film historian access to the development of an innovative Thai auteur. Even a comparison between the textual contributions of Prabda Yoon's *Last Life in the Universe* (2003) and Pen-ek's cinematic adaptation allow for a critical analysis of the differences between literary and cinematic diegesis (i.e. the internal worlds of the work).

With the potential of critical analysis in mind, one should remain attentive to academics like Kamjohn Louiyaphong (2005). Kamjohn's analysis suggests that Thai ghost films, previously overlooked as B movies without theoretical weight, are instrumental in understanding a broader social and political context in Thailand due to their accessibility. In light of this popular genre Wisit's latest film *Pen Chu Gap Phi* (*Love Affair with a Ghost*), still unreleased at the time of writing, appears to be responding to a particular context within which film worlds in Thailand are increasingly finding representation. Wisit, an auteur who seemed largely focused on comical and mundane issues of content, and stylistic issues of color, is probably the least likely of directors to enter the ghost world. In conversation with several Thai film fans I've received the same response to Wisit's film: usually something like "the title seems impossible." And the sentence "*Pen chu gap phi*" does seem impossible. But film is, thankfully, not

forced to sustain the normative rules of the so-called "real world." In this way new films seem to be representative of a New Wave and the interpretive community seems to be taking note.

There is something to be said for the availability of print materials related to new Thai films and film auteurs, the combination of which can be said to underpin what Michael Warner calls, in the above epigraph, a "public." I've attempted to suggest that such publics are stylized communities by virtue of the content, style, and form they pursue. This aesthetic constellation becomes political in so far as it imposes or, alternatively, proposes a way of sensing the world. As one works from new points of view, through the sort of epistemological shift that could be offered through the structures of the film world, one is likely drawn away from the disciplinary frames of area studies, or political studies, or social studies, or Thai studies. Instead one is forced to closely examine the community influx beneath the categories previously assigned to them.

There is a likely bias in the way I've decided to pursue this relationship between film and, to a lesser extent, print as a way of enveloping a community of mediums and aesthetic production. The French New Wave is known for such a relationship, between the emergence of new magazines (*Elle*, *Paris-Match*, *L'Express*), journals (*Cahiers du cinema*, *Positif*), the New Novel/nouveau roman (Alain Robbe-Grillet, Natalie Sarraute, Claude Simone), and new forms of film production and technologies (Neupert 2002). Falling in love with the French cinema at a young age likely influenced my recent obsession with new Thai films. With new Thai fiction authors like Prabda Yoon, auteurs like Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Pen-ek Ratanaruang, and Wisit Sasanatieng, all of whom have been called New Wave, an evident constellation of stylistic diversity is emerging from a particular geography. Whether it can be sustained is altogether another question, and likely irrelevant, as the movements converge, diverge, and role into the next modern tide. Locating movements, always on the rise, and locating connections between them, contemporaneously and historically, is a political question of importance.

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End Notes

¹ See—Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966; and Ranciere, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London: Continuum, 2004. There are two points I'd like to make about Rousseau. First, Rousseau demonstrates that the way we approach the study of language, as a tool of communication and operation, is largely misconstrued. Language is not a relationship between "speaker" and "hearer" (as goes the conversation of much analytic philosophy), but between conveyor and the subject(s) toward whom something has been conveyed (transmitted, manifested, etc.). This broadens the scope of politics within which language becomes a central ground of analysis. Examples of the conveyor, within a contemporary scope, might include the musician, the film-maker, the "voice" of community radio, the discourse of a particular political debate, the discourse surrounding a particular politician, etc. In this way context and language use are central: "if only he has some means of contact with his fellow men, by means of which one can act and another can sense, he will finally succeed in communicating whatever ideas he might have (10)." Elsewhere Rousseau states, "[i]nstead of inspirational inflections, our tongues allow only for cries of diabolic possession (50)."

² Habermas, Jurgen. *On the Pragmatics of Communication*. Boston: MIT, 1998.

³ My emphasis. See- Thunskha Pansittivorakul. "A Conversation With Apichatpong Weerasethakul." *Criticine*. http://www.criticine.com/interview_article.php?id=24. Posted 29 April 2006.

⁴ Waraphoj Phanthupong. *Yaang Noi Thee Sut: Prawat lae thasana nai wainum khong Pen-ek Ratanaruang* [The Smallest Things: History and Perspective in the Youth of Pen-ek Ratanaruang]. Bangkok: Typhoon Books, 2006.

⁵ In Abdelmalek Sayad's *The Suffering of the Immigrant* (2004) there is a stark similarity between Min's experience in the opening scene of *Blissfully Yours* and Sayad's diagnoses of the structural conditions delimiting the body of the immigrant. In Sayad's chapter entitled "Illness, Suffering and the Body," he suggests that "Illness (or accidents) and its aftermath... provide us with the best insight into the contradictions that constitute the immigrant condition itself (179)." Accordingly we note that Min possesses a type of illness, a rash, but also that he is oppressed by the structural conditions of being an illegal immigrant in Thailand. Sayad continues, "[a]ll that an immigrant who is uncertain of his status can actually do is to take refuge in his illness and 'settle into it', just as he once settled into his immigrant condition (181)."

⁶ For example see sections in: Warr, Peter. Ed. *Thailand Beyond the Crisis*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005; and Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker. *Thailand, Economy and Politics*. Oxford and New York: Oxford Press, 2002.

⁷ Bordwell, David. "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice." Braudy and Cohen. Eds. *Film Theory and Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.