

Re-Thinking Politics in Film: Thai Independent Cinema After the Coup d'état 2014

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Abstract

During the period of political instability that led to the coups d'état of 2006 and 2014, the independent cinema flourished both domestically and internationally. The political conflicts of the past decade have become an important backdrop for independent filmmakers to explore various issues. With a certain degree of freedom, their films created a discourse on independent films that offered both an alternative mode of filmmaking and an alternative discourse to mainstream cinema during the coup d'état periods. For this paper, I would like to take a closer look at some of the recent independent films that were made and internationally shown after the 2014 coup d'état, particularly the most recent films, including *Motel Mist* (Prabda Yoon, 2016), *The Island Funeral* (Pimpaka Towira, 2016), and *By the Time It Gets Dark* (Anocha Suwichakornpong, 2016), and how each of them offers an alternative vision of the country following the coups d'état and made it possible for us to rethink the subject of politics in Thai cinema, particularly at a time when political subjects are under the microscope of the authoritarian government.

Keywords: Thai independent cinema, politics, coup d'état

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Introduction

Since the coup d'état of 2006, followed by political conflicts and another coup in 2014, international audiences have paid much attention to Thai cinema and attempted to look at what these events have meant for the people living in the country, as evidenced by the visibility of Thai cinema at international film festivals. Although it was no isolated occurrence that Thai cinema, particularly the independent section, became the centre of attention at many international film festivals, it has happened concurrently with the rise of Southeast Asian independent cinema since the late 1990s and continuing into the 2000s. At the forefront are figures like Apichatpong Weerasethakul, with his feature-length debut *Mysterious Object at Noon* (1997), who paved the way for the second generation of independent filmmakers in Thailand and Southeast Asia, particularly after the coup d'état of 2006. The second generation of independent filmmakers, including Aditya Assarat, Anocha Suwichakornpong and Tanwarin Sukkhapisit, among others, all launched their careers after 2006. Assarat's first feature, *Wonderful Town* (2007), and Suwichakornpong's first feature, *Mundane History* (2009), were nominated for Tiger Awards at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam and shown at many other film festivals. Both films, as well as other independent films, have in one way or another discreetly conveyed a political context. The independent cinema has, then, become an alternative space for many filmmakers to voice their concern over political issues while mainstream cinema continues to churn out escapist films in the form of teen and horror films. These independent films made it possible for us to rethink the subject of politics in Thai cinema, particularly at a time when political subjects have been under the microscope of the authoritarian government following the coup d'état of 2014. Therefore, for this paper, I intend to examine the three films made after the 2014 coup d'état, particularly the most recent films, including *By the Time It Gets Dark* (Anocha Suwichakornpong, 2016), *The Island Funeral* (Pimpaka Towira, 2016), and *Motel Mist* (Prabda Yoon, 2016), how the political subjects have been explored during the time of the authoritarian government, and how they offer an alternative vision of the country following the coups d'état which differs from the notion of 'political film' in the 1970s.

Given the complexity of the political conflicts in Thailand, and the space allowed here, I intend to limit myself to a contextual background in order to explore the political implications of the contents represented in Thai cinema from the 1970s until today, and how political subjects have been at the centre of independent cinema amidst the political instability of the past ten years or so. In the final section I will look into the three films released after the 2014 coup d'état and during the authoritarian regime, and how they engage with politics to construct a new narrative enabling the traumatic past, memory, and previously excluded voices to be integrated.

Politics and Thai Cinema: political films of the 1970s to independent cinema

Politics and cinema have not mixed very well throughout the course of Thai history. They are two separate domains on which the authorities have long attempted to keep a border patrol. Despite the lack of overtly political films, it is still possible to identify some films as political in Thailand, as shown by Patsorn Sungsi's (2004) attempt to categorise Thai political films over different periods. Tracing Sungsi's categorisation through to recent independent cinema also shows that the term 'politics' can take on different meanings and forms at different times as Thailand

switched between authoritarian and democratic governments. I will demonstrate below how films changed during the 1970s-1990s and through to the more recent coup d'état, and how international factors have increasingly influenced the Thai film industry and the ways in which the filmmakers express themselves.

Sungsri uses significant political events to divide the political influences on cinema into three decades: the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. The 1970s were marked by the events known as 'October 14', which took place in 1973 and set in motion political conflicts that have lasted to this day. Given the complexity of the political conflicts of the 1970s, and the space allowed here, I intend to limit myself to a contextual background in order to explore the political implications of the contents represented in Thai cinema from that period until today.

The 'October 14' incident resulted from a series of confrontations between university students and the government, which finally led to a mass student demonstration demanding democracy from General Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn. Eventually, the demonstration led to a bloodshed at Thammasat University on 14th October 1973, during which many protesters, mostly university students, died. The incident caused General Marshall Thanom Kittikajorn to flee the country. In the wake of these events, under the interim government, a period of much desired freedom and political consciousness followed and spread among the new generations, prompting an outburst of political activities from different groups of people ranging from labourers and farmers to student movements. However, the freedom was short-lived as the two sides gathered momentum while witnessing the collapse of the monarchy in Laos and Cambodia. General Marshall Thanom Kittikajorn was readmitted to the country amidst the anger of relatives of those killed in 1973. The protest gathered pace to demand the expulsion of General Marshall Thanom Kittikajorn, eventually leading to the mobilisation of both groups and ending in the massacre of 6th October 1976, known as the '6th October' incident in which a number of students at Thammasat University were killed.

These two incidents, '14th October' 1973 and '6th October' 1976, and the political climate of the 1970s, marked the birth of the so-called political films in Thailand, with the new generation's political consciousness being raised to a new awareness both in the period leading up to and in the aftermath of the 1973 incident. Within this context emerged a kind of socially engaged film, known as '*nang sathorn sangkhom*' (literally translated as social reflection films) or by some called '*nang pua chiwit*' (literally translated as film of life), among many young filmmakers wishing to portray the social problems faced by ordinary people, particularly farmers, labourers and urban migrants, and especially on the subject of injustice and inequality in Thai society. This was evident during the years 1973-1976, with creative freedom at its peak despite the coup d'état of 1976 to take over the government that had committed the atrocities at Thammasat University, and with the harsh censorship once again in place. During this period, as suggested by William J. Klausner (1993), the new group of filmmakers had made a departure from the films of the past, not only in terms of content but also in terms of form (p. 337). The filmmakers of this generation, many of whom had grown up during the authoritarian government and political upheavals, '*sought new faces and treated contemporary themes with frankness; avoided complicated and irrelevant subplots; discarded comedy and violence when not*

relevant to the storyline and used improved editing and photographic techniques' (Klausner, 1993, p. 337).

While the period of freedom between 1973-1976 created a new direction in mainstream cinema, the coup d'état of 1976 changed the situation by driving political subjects underground. Such films as *Tong Pan (Isan Group, 1976)*, *Prachachon Nok (On the Fringe of Society, Manop Udomdej, 1978)* and *Karn Torsu Khong Kammakorn Ying Rong-ngan Hara (The Hara Women Labourers' Struggle, produced by Joh Eungparkorn, 1976)* are not commercially mainstream films as the post-1976 political atmosphere and the censorship forced films that directly engaged with politics to be made independently and in the underground. These films were seen among left-wing university students and activists instead of being shown on mainstream cinema screens. For Example, *Prachachon Nok* is also about farmers and the injustices they were subjected to, whether by corrupt officials or middlemen. These underground films are also close to Sungri's (2004) definition of 'Third Cinema'. According to Mike Wayne (2001), Third Cinema aims to explore the process "whereby people who have been oppressed and exploited become conscious of that condition and determine to do something about it" (p.1). It is this quality which made the three films different from previous social realist films.

From the end of the 1970s, there was a period of gradual democratization of Thai politics, uninterrupted by coups as the two attempted in 1981 and 1985 failed (Tamada, 1995, p. 1). It was therefore 1980s a period in which Thailand steadily progressed in economic terms. Yet another successful coup d'état was staged in 1991 by General Sujinda Kraprayoon, who took over power from the elected government of Chatchai Choonhavan (1988-1991), leading to a pause in the democratic development of the country. According to Ubonrat Siriyuvasak (2000), in 1992 the rising middle classes joined with the workers and other lower classes to protest against the non-elected Prime Minister General Sujinda Kraprayoon (p.100). The protest turned into what is known as *Pruspa Tamin* or *Black May Incident*, which ended in another bloodshed. This once again drove any political film subjects underground. This time, the political films no longer circulated among the left wing but among the middle classes instead. In the aftermath of Black May 1992, there have been many films relating to the incident, particularly in short form. However, it was not until Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Mysterious Objects at Noon* that the possibility opened up for independent films to emerge. *Mysterious Objects at Noon* was funded mainly by the International Film Festival of Rotterdam's Hubert Bals Fund and was screened at international film festivals.

The platform of political subjects has then moved from the underground to international venues. The international film festival has offered a space for independent films, particularly during times of coups d'état, and allowed them to rethink the subject of politics. After the last coup d'état of 1992, the country's economy changed with the continuous rise of the middle classes in the global financial markets, which led to their political power in the 2000s. Boosted by the first civilian businessman to become Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006), the middle classes have become even more active participants in politics. With its base in the northeast areas known for the lowest incomes, "the pluto-populist regime of Thaksin overreached itself politically, alienated and antagonised the middle class and other elite groups" (Prasertsuk, 2007, p. 893). Many allegations, ranging from

corruption to lèse-majesté, culminated in the last straw of a conflict of interest and abuse of power when Shinawatra's company failed to pay tax on the sale of his business to a Singapore company, and led to a mass protest which eventually resulted in a peaceful coup d'état in 2006. The period afterwards was filled with political conflicts between Shinawatra's supporters and the royalist middle-class. After several governments took turn to run the country, amidst the continued political conflicts, another coup d'état would soon take place to end the conflict in 2014.

Re-Defining Thai Political Films in the Context of Transnational Cinema after the Coup d'état

In rethinking the subject of politics in film, philosophers such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière provide productive ways of understanding the new Thai cinema after the coups d'état of 2006 and 2014, as well as the trends evident at international film festivals. Rancière attempts to demonstrate that 'art' and 'politics' cannot be in different spheres, as politics inherently incorporates an aesthetic dimension, and vice versa. He suggests the term 'aesthetic regime of the arts'. In the aesthetic regime of the arts, "artworks can produce effects of dissensus precisely because they neither give lessons nor have any destination". Rancière (2010) argues that "art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible" which is at the heart of the 'aesthetic regime of the arts' (p. 140). As further suggested by Martin O'Shaughnessy (2007), Rancière's work plays a central role in understanding that:

The radical cinema cannot simply seek to represent contemporary reality, to be 'realist,' no matter how dark the tones that it employs. It must bring disagreement over the order of things to the surface, defining the dominated not by their subordination but by their capacity to challenge it while pushing its audience back towards a politics (p.4).

In a way, the aesthetic regime of the arts opened up the possibility of new forms of political subjectivation that are not confined only within the fictional story but extend to the audience's sensory perceptions (Lerma, 2013, p. 100). For Badiou (2004), as he writes in 'Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art':

...the question of art today is a question of political emancipation, there is something political in art itself. There is not only a question of art's political orientation, like it was the case yesterday, today it is a question in itself. Because art is a real possibility to create something new against the abstract universality that is globalization (p. 107).

Moreover, Badiou (2008) argues that 'ideas in art do not so much carry a judgement upon the world as they indicate the point from which the world could be transfigured' (p. 7). Alex Ling (2011) further suggests that:

This transfiguration is, however, accomplished in a very particular way. Not, as we have seen, through a process of identification – this being the common failure of many ostensible 'political' films, where the supposedly political idea at work ultimately rests on some trite variation of 'respect for the other' – but rather through a subtle, quasi-Mallarmean process of revelation, a process less

political than ‘pre-political,’ involving the ‘bringing to light’ of a site of political possibility, a space in which politics might come to be (181).

In response to the above discussion of the relationship between ‘art’ and ‘politics’, which sheds some light on the relationship between ‘art cinema’ and political subjects, I will take a closer look at the three films in question here: *By the Time It Gets Dark* (Anocha Suwichakornpong, 2016), *The Island Funeral* (Pimpaka Towira, 2016), and *Motel Mist* (Prabda Yoon, 2016). The films after the 2014 coup d’état can be said to have more directly engaged with political subjects - for instance, the three films in question here. These films were mainly made with international audiences in mind, and they were produced at the height of a period of crisis, when a coup d’état was looming large. Most of the independent films needed at least two or three more years to complete. The three films I look at here have one thing in common, as they chose to make reference to the discourse of ‘power’ and how to ‘resist’ that power in different ways. Starting with *By the Time It Gets Dark* - in Thai entitled *Dao Khanong* (literally “shooting stars” but here referring to a Bangkok suburb) - the film engages with the political incidents of 6th October 1976, which still traumatises the nation to this day, in particular the generation who witnessed and participated in the incidents. Few mainstream films have inquired into the events because of the censorship, but one film that did directly engage with the incidents of 14th October was *Moonhunter (14 Tula Songkhram Prachachon*, Bhandit Rittakol, 2001), a mainstream film made by Five Stars Studio. The film tells the story of a student uprising in October 1973 and the journey of Seksan Prasertkul, a well-known student leader, from the site of the 14th October incidents to the jungle in order to join the communists. Prasertkul himself wrote the screenplay for the film. However, the film focuses on the characters of Seksan and his then girlfriend rather than on the incidents themselves.

By the Time it Gets Dark is Suwichakornpong’s second film. His debut film, *Mundane History*, won the Tiger Award at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam, known to prefer films with an experimental edge, as also favoured by critics (Valck, 2005, p. 100). Along the same lines as *Mundane History*, *By the Time it Gets Dark* was experimentally handled in a complicated and cryptic narrative, starting with a staged scene of protesters being captured while we hear a woman’s voice shouting ‘Be more brutal,’ ‘Kick them if you want.’ The scene ends with a staged photograph of a soldier standing over victims perhaps as a reminder of the only evidence left from the 6th October incidents that people remember. It is perhaps the only evidence, film footage and photographs, besides the people who were involved, that Thai people need to connect the dots for themselves of what happened at the site of the incidents, as the incidents were not allowed to be included in textbooks or freely discussed in the media.

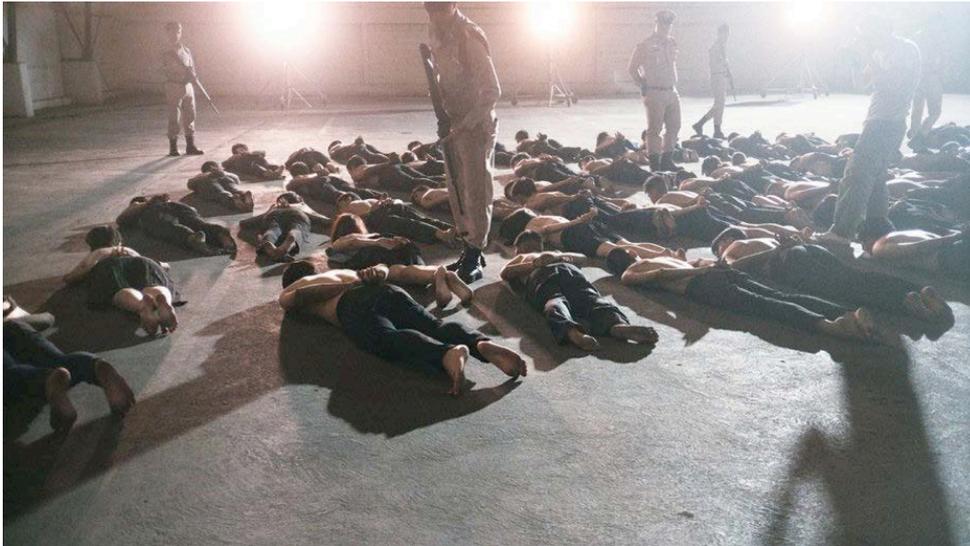


Figure 1: By the Time it Gets Dark

The film then centres on the filmmaker, Ann, who is on the process of writing a script about the incidents in October 1976. Ann conducts interviews with a former leader of the student movement, Taew, in a country house, trying to grasp the reality of those past incidents, while we also see events such as a visit to a mushroom farm, walking in the woods and possible hallucinations. The film then moves to another character, Peter, supposedly a worker on a tobacco farm, and we are shown the tobacco-making process. We then realise that Peter is an actor and that the previous scene on the tobacco farm was a fiction within a fiction. The film then fuses other actor characters with Ann and Taew in a repeated scene where she is showing him around the country house. Another young university student appears in scenes of past events leading up to 6th October, and we are not certain whether these are scenes from Taew's memories, or something unrelated. What is clear is that the director's intention is to question the boundaries between fiction and what is real, particularly in relation to the past, in this case the incidents of 6th October. The narrative cannot be connected smoothly but instead unfolds in Mallarmean style, leaving cracks open to a variety of interpretations by the audience. Along the lines of thought of Rancière and Badiou, the film becomes a space of possibility and of dissent, where logic has dissolved and scenes do not add up. The political incidents of 1976 have become one big jigsaw of various characters, of facts and fictions, of different generations of the past and the present. According to Bo Stråth (2007), "*history is thus not free evolution but the creative ordering of the past, or in the language of today, construction*" (p. 28). Stråth further writes:

In the processes of history construction, the idea of a collective memory and a specific history is a tool that bridges the gap between high political and intellectual levels and the levels of everyday life. What constitutes collective memory and what is consigned to collective oblivion, that is, taboos and what we do not talk about, is a highly disputed question, reflecting power relations in the definition of social problems (p. 28-29).

It is this creative ordering that Suwichakornpong handles in relation to the traumatic incidents of 6th October as a way of bringing to light what she considers 'collective oblivion' and what could be seen as trivial or unimportant, such as the growing mould

in the bread and fungi in the mushrooms. History is often considered an instrument for propagating ideology through a meaningful narration of the past, and Suwichakornpong wants to call into question this very idea. As Ann tells Taew, “You’re living history,” “Your life is meaningful, whereas me, I appropriate someone else’s life and turn it into a film”. Taew responds, “I’m not living history. I’m a survivor.” It is not only history that is being called into question but also memory, truth, politics and, more importantly, the power inherent in the construction of all these elements.



Figure 2: Island Funeral

By the Time it Gets Dark deals with the politics of time, the fragments of time portrayed by each character, who can also be seen as political agents or, in the words of a character in the film, a ‘living history’, each competing with the others to occupy a meaningful space in the history. The past, present and future compete in the narrative to construct their own story. *Island Funeral*, (Thai title: *Mahasamut Lae Sasaan* literally meaning The Ocean and the Cemetery), on the other hand, deals with geopolitics. It depicts a current situation of conflict in three provinces in the southernmost part of Thailand where Muslim separatists and the military often clash. The film is a road journey undertaken by Laila, her brother Zugood, and her brother’s friend to Pattani, one of the Muslim-dominated provinces involved in separatist insurgence. Their aim is to visit Laila’s aunt whom she has not seen since childhood. They get lost along the way, with much time spent on finding the location of her aunt’s small village. At the beginning of the film, in the dark of night, the news on the radio reports on the protests in Bangkok and the violence in the south. Laila suddenly stops the car, thinking she has seen a naked woman in chains. She decides to get out of the car despite the protests of the two men inside as fear sets in. Laila is not certain of what she saw, and neither is the audience. The mood of the film acquires mysterious/mystical overtones as it increasingly moves into unknown territory. No clues are provided as to where the locations are to avoid creating a feeling of familiarity in the audience. Most of the film is spent on trying to find a village that is increasingly felt as non-existent. The characters are guided by a stranger who finally seems to find the place, but there is no village left except for a battered signpost and a boat waiting by the shore to take them further. In the last part of the

film, after a long boat trip, they finally reach an island set in the deep jungle by night. With its own traditions and a mixture of people of different races and classes, the island becomes symbolic of a utopia. Michel Foucault (1986), in *Of Other Spaces*, suggests that our society comprises two kinds of spaces: utopia and heterotopia. For him, utopia is a site with no real space as “they present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces” (p.27). He uses a mirror as an example of utopia, since it is a placeless place:

In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror (p. 27).

While heterotopias can be located in reality, Foucault describes them as spaces that “suspend, neutralise, or invert the set of relationships that they designate” (p. 27). The island is more or less a utopia where Laila was hoping to rediscover her roots, despite barely remembering anything about it and the possibility that it is actually no longer there. The island, in its perfection of beautiful houses filled with music, arts, idealism and freedom is in fact on the verge of collapse, as young boys are continuously dying and funerals have become a common occurrence. The film urges the audience to rethink the politics of space in various dimensions, not only as places defined by the borders of nation-states, but in terms of religions, classes, and the ideological space where the polarisation between people has been ever present in Thai society, as in the case of the Yellow Shirts and Red Shirts over the past decade or so.



Figure 3: Motel Mist

Last but not least, *Motel Mist* (Thai title: *Rongram Tang Dao*, literally meaning ‘alien hotel’) is a film that directly addresses the abuse of power over the powerless, echoing the relationship between authorities and citizens. *Motel Mist* is rather different stylistically from the above two films as it uses style to the point of fantasy instead of

a more realistic mode of representation. The film centres on a love motel in which we find five characters: Tul, an ex-star who believes he can communicate with aliens; Sopol, an older man who comes with Laila, a young student; Laila's friend; and the motel caretaker. The abuse of power is obvious and exerted to the point of absurdity in the case of Sopol and Laila. Laila's body, in her student uniform, has become a space of invasion by various tools that Sopol, who represents a figure of authority, uses on it.

In the scenes between Sopol and Laila, he orders her to wear various uniforms, after which he goes back to her student uniform, ties her up and orders her to do as he pleases, such as holding a glass of whiskey on her chest and going through various acts of eroticised violence in exchange for money. In submitting to Sopol's sexual fantasies, Laila could be seen as cooperating with the dominant ideology. Moreover, Elizabeth Cowie (1997) argues that "*fantasy as a mise en scene of desire is more a setting out of lack, of what is absent, than a presentation of a having, a being present*" (p. 133). Fantasy is then a setting of desire, according to Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis□

By the excessive use of power on Laila's body, Sopol can be seen as acting out of lack, out of insecurity. If the Sopol character represents an authoritarian figure, with his choice of uniform bearing a similarity to those in authority, it could be seen as a fear of losing their hold over power, as the country was undergoing a transitional crisis with an unknown future ahead at the time of the filming and release of the film, and using their power to excess, particularly on the docile bodies of women. The film successfully links patriarchal authority to sexual frustration.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to demonstrate the ways in which the independent cinema has reappropriated political subjects after the coup d'état of 2014, through films such as *By the Time It Gets Dark* (Anocha Suwichakornpong, 2016), *The Island Funeral* (Pimpaka Towira, 2016), and *Motel Mist* (Prabda Yoon, 2016). In the first part I have tried to contextualize the way in which politics, particularly coups d'état, have related to filmic representation from the 1970s, when political awareness was at its height, through to the present time, with independent cinema emerging in a transnational era where film festivals function as an alternative source of funding and exhibiting. Since the 2006 coup d'état, Thai politics has been beset by constant conflict, leading to violence and ultimately the coup d'état in 2014. After the 2014 coup and the ensuing authoritarian military government, independent films have become an alternative space for filmmakers to voice their concerns. Instead of going underground like the 'political films' of the 1970s, independent films have found their main audience abroad through international film festivals. The three films examined here were made at a time of political crisis and released after the 2014 coup d'état. These films contain direct political messages that differ from those of the 1970s, when underground political films predominated on the subject of inequality among farmers and workers, as well as social realist films. The three films I have looked at combine the form and styles of art cinema with political subjects that are no longer concerned with inequality, as in the 1970s, but focus instead on middle-class interests. The three films urge us to rethink political subjects in different ways. *By the Time It Gets Dark* gives a new treatment to the nation's traumatic political incidents of 6th October 1976

while questioning various aspects of the political events themselves, whether their construction of history, memory or truth. *The Island Funeral* implies the larger-scale geopolitics of the nation, borders and identity. And in *Motel Mist*, authoritative figures are directly presented in the game of sexual desire and body politics. All in all, these three films are preoccupied with middle-class issues such as identity, in an attempt to understand one's own history and roots, which make *By the Time It Gets Dark* and *The Island Funeral* distinctly depart from the political and social realist films of the 1970s.

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