

## ***The Dependence on International Film Festivals of Thai Independent Cinema***

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### **Abstract**

The essay explores and critically looks at the process of independent filmmaking in Thailand, examines various factors affecting the subject matter and aesthetic choices of Thai independent filmmakers, and how this plays an important part in the whole process of independent filmmaking. The paper explores the various strategies employed by Thai independent filmmakers to achieve an 'independent' or alternative/minority status for films targeted at a new audience, the emergent urban middle class who look to the West and aspire to change their own cultural environment, and place the film in the context of international film festivals. The strategies include the use of de-dramatisation, experiments with structure, the use of fragmented and non-linear stories are among the various tools employed in these films. The strategy known as 'slow cinema' has been evident in many films, as well as the Western thinking which supports this concept

Keywords: Thai Cinema, Independent Cinema, Film Festival

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## Introduction

During the last ten years, films from Southeast Asia have increased their presence at major international film festivals. Filmmakers such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thailand), Lav Diaz and Raya Martin (The Philippines), Tan Chui Mui (Malaysia), Martyn See (Singapore), Nia Diata and Riri Riza (Indonesia) have all raised their profiles in the same way that many East Asian filmmakers did in the 1990s. Many of these films and filmmakers are being associated with the term 'independent cinema', a usage that has gained popularity since the late 1990s and describes a new tendency in mode of production and distribution that has proliferated across the globe.

Over recent years, there have been many contributing factors to the increase in independent filmmakers and the growing popularity of independent cinema among urban socialites in Thailand. In the 1990s, the first wave of Thai films that highlighted Thai filmmaking in international venues included films by Nonzee Nimitbutr, Pen-ake Rattana-rueng, and Wisit Satsanatieng. Interestingly, their first breaks came just a few months before Thailand, along with the rest of Asia, experienced an economic breakdown in 1997. They are known as the so called Thai New Wave. All three filmmakers have similar backgrounds in commercial work and they brought this sensibility to the film industry, which at the time was being overwhelmed by formula-driven Thai teen flicks and horror films. Though many have argued that the Thai New Wave marked the beginning of independent Thai filmmaking, there was also another group of filmmakers who worked outside the studio system. In the same year, 1997, Ing Kanchanawanich made *My Teacher Eats Biscuits*, a feature film using 16 mm. The film was entirely self-funded. Another important director's debut film, Weerasethakul's *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000) was partially made with his own money and also received funding from the Hubert Bals Fund from the Rotterdam Film Festival. Weerasethakul works exclusively as an independent filmmaker. *Mysterious Objects at Noon*, with its experimental nature, immediately set him apart from the rest of his colleagues at the time. His unique and alternative approach to filmmaking, along with his successful debut in the international film festival circuit, also influenced many filmmakers of the younger generation to follow in his footsteps and carve out careers outside the world of the film studios. His follow-up film, *Blissfully Yours* (2002), won the Un Certain Regard prize at the Cannes Film Festival and was also a great inspiration for many.

Over the last few years, new directors such as Aditya Assarat and Anocha Suwichakornpong have made their feature debuts. Their film projects were partially self-funded as well as receiving funding from sources outside the industry and the country. Both features, *Wonderful Town* (2006) and *Mundane History* (2009), were successful in the international film festival circuit. The mode of production of Thai independent filmmaking has gradually changed since 1997, due significantly to the new group of directors. Filmmakers' backgrounds have influenced the way in which they approach filmmaking. The first group of filmmakers came largely from backgrounds in commercial work. Their films leaned towards genre film and marketability. The later generation of filmmakers, Weerasethakul, Assarat and Suwichakornpong included, with a background of foreign education, are focusing more on world cinema trends and aesthetics as they depend largely on foreign support and success to sustain their careers. Given the limited resource of foreign funding, the films have to specifically match the taste of foreign investors. The film then needs

to conform to the microscopic vision of each film festival and its attached funding schemes. In general, festival films are different from those in general distribution and tend to be non-studio-produced, lower budget, serious films or in a way similar to those with the label 'art house' or 'art cinema' (Wong, 2011, p.5).

According to Marijke de Valck (2007), the festivals are appropriated the notions of auteur and new waves as a strategic discourse (p.175). In order to differentiate themselves, their main task became to present the contemporary condition of world cinema to the world and become institutions of discovery. With the increasing number of new film festivals, the pressure to make new discoveries, once generated by the archetypal French New Wave, was also growing (Valck, 2007, p.175). The 1980s brought about the second set of new waves from, among others, Taiwan, West Africa, Spain, Ireland, New Zealand, Iran and China. However, the excitement for the 'new' or 'discoveries' for the audience, as Rosaline Galt and Karl Schoonover (2010) suggest, is not located in director, star or nationality, but is constructed as a similar pleasure to that of previous 'new' art cinemas. The question of which national cinemas are brought into the film festival, and at what historical juncture, has also been raised by Galt and Schoonover (2010), where they suggest that it correlates to structures of uneven development and postcolonial power (p.13).

In turn, the 'discovery' films and filmmakers started to differentiate film festivals from each other as many began to search further in the developing countries. Most of the time, the two primary processes of finding a source of funding and securing distribution for a film are closely linked, particularly in today's situation where many film festivals have created their own funding schemes. Film festivals are often involved in both production and distribution of the film. From financial schemes to film market, film festivals are eager to compete in the discovery of new talent. With its own CineMart launched in 1984, followed by the Hubert Bals Funds (HBF) in 1988, Rotterdam has become one of the primary funding sources for many Asian filmmakers. Additionally, the Busan Film Festival set up currently known as the Asian Cinema Fund – has also been focusing on Asian projects. Therefore, many Southeast Asian filmmakers have relied on these funding schemes and indirectly the film festivals have become involved in the process of production through to distribution. Once a film project receives funding from a given festival, the usual requirement is that the film is screened at the festival as well.

A film festival such as the International Film Festival Rotterdam, with a strong reputation for bringing in new films from Asia to Europe, has become a platform for many new filmmakers from Asia, and Southeast Asia in particular. The Rotterdam Film Festival and its Hubert Bals Fund (HBF) and CineMart have become major sources of funding for a few independent Thai filmmakers in the past few years. The objective of its Hubert Bals Fund is rather clear, as it is designed to support *"filmmakers from developing countries whose films are formally innovative, shed new light on their countries of origin, and/or contribute to the improvement of the local film industries"* (Valck, 2007, p.180). This is the case for many Thai independent films/filmmakers, where the Rotterdam Film Festival has been used as a platform to carve out their careers in both international and national venues. Many filmmakers are dependent on both the funding for a chance to get their films made, and on the International Film Festival screening their films to have a further chance of international distribution.

The Rotterdam Film Festival has been a landmark for Thai independent cinema. With the recent win by Nilthamrong's *Vanishing Point* (2015) of the Hivos Tiger Award at the 44<sup>th</sup> International Film Festival Rotterdam — the fourth win by Thai filmmakers — it is undeniable that a 'certain' kind of films favoured by the Rotterdam Film Festival has set the tone for Thai independent cinema. Starting with the first Hivos Tiger Award winners, including Aditya Assarat's *Wonderful Town* in 2008, followed by Anocha Suwichakornpong's *Mundane History* in 2010, Sivaroj Kongsakul's *Eternity* in 2011, and the Fipresci Award for Urupong Raksasad's *Songs of Rice* in 2014, the Rotterdam Film Festival has become well-known among Thai art cinema goers. Weerasethkul's first experimental feature film, *Mysterious Object at Noon*, was a recipient of the Hubert Bals Fund in 2000. This was the first opportunity for a Thai film to receive funding from the Hubert Bals Fund and opened the door to other new Thai directors. With its experimental edge and innovative storytelling, *Mysterious Object at Noon* set the standard for the kind of films that would be given attention by European funders. With the film festival's influence over Thai independent filmmakers, 'independent' cinema — or 'indie' cinema, as it is called by Thais — it is undeniable that a certain kind of films, favouring a personal point of view and often experimental in style, which relating to the International Film Festival Rotterdam are preferred by the filmmakers.

To trace a certain trend, the statements issued each year for the winners of the Hivos Tiger Award have made it clear what kind of films are desired and cherished by film festivals. With the recent win by Nilthamrong's *Vanishing Point*, the International Film Festival of Rotterdam issued the statement:

*Vanishing Point* (Jakrawal Nilthamrong) combines and juxtaposes image and sound to create a powerful style. It grapples with ideas and story-telling in a provoking and different way, making it a visceral cinematic experience ([www.iffrr.com/professionals/press/press-releases-2014-2015/iffrr-2015-awards-announced2/](http://www.iffrr.com/professionals/press/press-releases-2014-2015/iffrr-2015-awards-announced2/)).

Assarat's *Wonderful Town* was commended for its 'amazing imaging through the film and a fresh perspective on the disaster of the Tsunami'. While the statement for Suwichakornpong's *Mundane History* was as follows:

For us this film appeals to both intelligence and spirituality. We are impressed with the accomplished interplay of abstract ideas and harrowing reality in this film ([www.iffrr.com/professionals/the\\_festival/news-archive/tiger\\_award\\_winner\\_2008/](http://www.iffrr.com/professionals/the_festival/news-archive/tiger_award_winner_2008/)).

Last but not least, Sivaroj Kongsakul's *Eternity*, produced by Aditya Assarat and Soros Sukhum, and supported by the Hubert Bals Fund, received the following statement:

With a great sense of cinematic duration, this film builds its own universe, finding its own pacing, so consistently, to tell its particular story. A film that seems on the surface to be about death but which is really about love, a beautiful and delicate love story ([www.iffrr.com/en/films/tee-rak/](http://www.iffrr.com/en/films/tee-rak/)).

From the above statements, it becomes clear that a certain trend of experimenting with cinematic space and time, such as the slow pacing of the film, visual style and abstract ideas in order to create a new cinematic experience, has been preferred by the festival. This trend has been forged among Thai filmmakers following the path set by the International Film Festival Rotterdam. Valck (2007) points out that from the start, the International Film Festival Rotterdam, or in 1972 known as Film International Rotterdam, was already being described as 'super experimental' (p.163). The characteristics of the festival emerged as a consequence of the preferences of its founder, Huub Bals, whose taste lay in art cinema and experimental works.

There are also other funding schemes, mainly in Europe, that Thai filmmakers received the funding, for example, Fonds Sud, supported by France, the Swiss fund *visions sud est*, launched by the Foundation *trigon-film* Baden and the Fribourg Film Festival, in collaboration with Nyon's *Visions du Reel* and the support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. It supports film productions from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe. Although the funds provided by these different funding schemes are not large sums of money compared to the money needed to complete a film in Europe, it is quite a large sum for the recipients' countries. While the amount may not be sufficient to complete the film, it could make a difference to many filmmakers. The aim of lending support to developing countries and countries with emerging economies is well-intentioned, but there is also a questionable side. As noted by Hing-Yuk Wong (2011), in 2007 the World Cinema Fund awarded a total sum of 230,000 euros to five projects from Argentina, Angola, Colombia, Israel, and Iran, countries in the midst of critical international affairs as well as at the centre of cinematic politics (p.150). It could be said that in a way it is the festival, with the official support of each European government, intentionally making a statement in an international arena, taking a special interest in internal affairs, and in some cases opposing the official discourse of each country. In the case of Iran, for example, the filmmaker Jafar Panahi was sentenced to six years in prison in 2010 and banned from making films for 20 years for making 'anti-government propaganda', while many others have been placed under house arrest. Many of these Iranian filmmakers are funded from the UK, France or Germany. In many cases, films supported by the funding schemes are being banned, and in some cases, by deliberately focusing on certain subjects or images, have fueled the interest of the international press and international film festivals. As suggested by Hing-Yuk Wong (2011), in the case of the People's Republic of China, a certain imagery pointing to the repressive regime is favoured by the festivals; or in Malaysia, certain films made by ethnic Chinese can be looked upon as festival favourites because of their anti-mainstream Malay and anti-Muslim cultural stances (p.157). The evidence can be seen in the films of Tan Chui Mui, a Chinese ethnic filmmaker whose films have been funded by the Hubert Bals Fund and *visions sud est* and have been successfully shown in film festivals. The film festivals, in a way, could be seen as an alternative space or counter-space to national politics.

Therefore, Thai independent cinema, due to its dependence on Western patrons in terms of sources of funding, has more relevance in an international/transnational context rather than the local Thai film industry when it comes to exhibiting and distributing. Although the films are based on local elements, they are part of the international aesthetic of 'art cinema', which is often favoured by film festivals, as demonstrated above, through the selection of Thai films by the International Film

Festival of Rotterdam. They are affirmatively forming part of the 'transnational institution of art' where film festivals have taken a key role in indicating the choice of aesthetics, form and stories.

### **Further Notes on Subject Matter and Aesthetics in Thai Independent Cinema:**

A highly regarded Thai film scholar, points out that Weerasethakul's *Blissfully Yours* (2002) became the foundation for a truly underground cinema emerging alongside the many changes in Thai society and the globalisation that has crept into it. Besides the fact that the film was funded by foreign sources and co-produced by a foreign company there are also factors which make *Blissfully Yours* significantly different. Apart from the film's minimal narrative style and long static shots, the subject is also important as it is about marginal people: in this case, the main characters are a Burmese illegal immigrant and a factory girl living along the border. the film features an ambiguous sexual identity in relation to the characters, which might be interpreted as bisexuality, and that female characters are portrayed as 'predators' rather than 'victims' in terms of the sexual desires explicitly shown in the film.

The issue of sexuality has formed part of public discourse over the past decade or so. The subject of sexuality, particularly those aspects previously relegated to the margins, such as homosexuality, never before seen in Thai cinema, has become one of the important features of Thai independent films. It makes a departure from the Thai New Wave and directors such as Nonzee Nimitbutr, Pen-ake Rattanaarueng, and Wisit Satsanatieng. Referring to Nimitbutr's *Nang Nak*, Fuhrmann (2009) suggests:

In the context of contemporary Buddhist-inflected efforts to reinvigorate Thainess, femininity bears some of the burden of organizing claims to coherent national identity. In contemporary cinema, I argue, the ghost, a distressed version of Thai femininity, emerges precisely at the moment when the heretofore dominant form of femininity - that of selectively westernized, globalized, and economically startlingly productive femininity - had partially "exhausted" its effectiveness.

Instead of conforming to the view of Thai femininity as the fulfilment of wifely duties or women appearing as 'ghosts' or a 'distressed version of femininity', independent cinema attempted to represent a multiplicity of sexualities. The previously oppressed desire has found its way into this group of films to emerge not as a distressed version but rather, as Fuhrmann writes in regard to Weerasethakul's film *Tropical Malady* (2004), featuring a homosexual relationship: "homosexuality ambivalently haunts the political and aesthetic present in Thailand, on the surface primarily as a trope of diminution – as a thing that uniquely instantiates either cultural loss or minoritarian injury – but ultimately also as a figure of creative talent, potential economic productivity, and affective abundance" (p.142).

In addition to sexuality, ethnic minorities have also seen increased representation in Thai cinema, particularly after 1997. Films such as Weerasethakul's *Blissfully Yours* (2002), as discussed previously, are certainly part of the new trope of representation found in other contemporary independent cinema. Since *Blissfully Yours*, films with the subject of sexual minorities have increased, including Weerasethakul's *Tropical Malady*, and have been at the centre of attention, in particular the films of Tawarin

Sukkhapisit, a well-known transgender filmmaker. Sukkhapisit made his name with many short films before making his feature debut with *Insect in the Backyard* in 2010, about a transvestite father raising two children who are unable to accept their father as he is. It then became the first film to be censored by the Censorship Board under the new Motion Pictures and Video Act B.E. 2008, which uses a rating system for films. It seems that the law allows for a degree of flexibility in terms of some films being able to screen with a higher age rating, but there is the 'banned' category whereby a film can easily be banned and forbidden from being shown anywhere in the kingdom if deemed offensive to the monarchy or constitute a threat to national security or religion. Despite appeals from Sukhapisit, *Insect in the Backyard* has still been unable to be released in Thailand. The film sparked a renewed debate about homosexuality as well as about the new Censorship law.

The majority of independent films in Southeast Asia that have been shown at international film festivals have used the aesthetics that belong to the trend of world cinema at large. According to Tiago de Luca (2012), films such as those by Abbas Kiarostami (Iran), Apichatpong Weerasethkul (Thailand), Carlos Reygadas (Mexico), Bela Tarr (Hungary), Pedro Costa (Portugal), Lisandro Alonso (Argentina), Nuri Bilge Ceylan (Turkey), Tsai Ming-Liang (Taiwan), and Jia Zhan (China) display a similar tendency towards a 'new realist aesthetics' (p.183). Luca suggests that they are "steeped in the hyperbolic application of the long take, which promotes a contemplative viewing experience anchored in materiality and duration" (Luca, 2012, p.8). Their extended focus is on material phenomena that can be translated into a phenomenological film experience (Luca, 2012, p.2). Luca proposes that semiotic systems alone are insufficient to justify cinema's impact and significance, and therefore it also needs to be somatically experienced. The above group of films of the so-called 'new realist aesthetics', Luca argues, produce a particular kind of sensory audiovisual experience, in which he believes the use of the long take is key to the sensory effect (Luca, 2012, p.9). He adds that "these cinemas whose contemplative-sensory mode of address is strictly premised on the viewing conditions of the theatrical experience" in a way constitute a response to the revolution in the technological development of the digital era, which often replaces the viewing experience restricted only to the private sphere of the home (Luca, 2011, p.24). It is also why these films go hand in hand with international film festivals, where the fact of being in the cinema, as well as possibly participating in a public discussion, is central to the film festival experience, unlike watching the small screen at home.

It is also in tune with what Ira Jaffe writes in his book *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action*. Jaffe (2014) argues that in the last three decades, what he calls 'slow movies' represent a style that has been embraced by cinephiles around the world (p.2). These movies, as Jaffe suggests, "are slow by virtue of their visual style, narrative structure and thematic content and the demeanour of their characters" (p.3). Jaffe gives a good description of certain traits in these films. He writes:

With respect to visual style, the camera often remains unusually still in these films, and when it moves, as it does persistently in Bela Tarr's work, it generally moves quite slowly. Curtailed as well is physical motion *in front of* the camera. Furthermore, editing or cutting in slow movies tends to be infrequent, which inhibits spatio-temporal leaps and disruptions. Not only do long takes predominate, but long shots frequently prevail over close-ups.

Consistent with these stylistic elements, which may distance and irritate the viewer, is the austere mise-en-scène: slow movies shun elaborate and dynamic décor, lighting and colour. Moreover, the main characters in these movies usually lack emotional, or at least expressive, range and mobility. .... Further, a bit like slow-movie characters, the plot and dialogue in the slow movies often gravitate towards stillness and death, and tend, in any case, to be minimal, indeterminate and unresolved (p.3)

In these films, slowness is an important element, as Song Hwee Lim (2012) further points out. With reference to Tsai Ming Liang's films, he elaborates on the 'aesthetics of slowness', as also seen in the aforementioned films. For Lim, the two important elements of slowness are 'stillness', where he refers to the use of static and long takes for shots that also feature stillness of diegetic action, and 'silence', which means the sparse use of sonic elements (p.90).

*Blissfully Yours* influenced many independent filmmakers of Weerasethakul's generation in a variety of ways, as it opened up new territory for filmic representation of marginality and the new political aesthetics, and enabled filmmakers to challenge the relationship between form and content. Both Weerasethkul's films and other independent films have certainly been influenced by transnational art cinema since the post-war European art cinema. Following the recent trend, as also seen in the above discussion, this group of independent films is substituting the classical narrative with the use of sensory exploration, opening up a space for marginality and making possible a variety of interpretations and questions. With Western academics supporting the new direction of cinema by talking and writing about it, Western tastes are firmly legitimised through international film festivals and the expansion of transnational art cinema.

Film festivals such as Cannes are particularly known for their controversial subject matter, including sex and violence, as well as pressing issues of current interest to the international media. According to Wong (2011), festival films are more often than not 'political' and embrace more controversial subject matter as they see the festival as a space of art, and art as freedom (p.89-90). Another characteristic of festival films are those "personal journeys in which the subject matters are quite devoid of any direct political or social contexts" (p.89). This seems to be one of the qualities of European art cinema. Many Thai independent films shown at European film festivals are fitted into these moulds in one way or another. In terms of subject matter, the independent filmmakers' concerns are focused on the subject of minorities on various levels, whether sexual, ethnic or political, as well as on the subject of personal memory and trauma.

Popular memory revolves around the private sphere of ordinary people and often counter the official history. The subject of personal memory is commonly used by the new generation of filmmakers. For example, Thamrongrattanarit's *36*, which captures the memory of a relationship in 36 shots, reminiscent of the 36 shots in a roll of film; Kongsakul's *Eternity*, about the memory of his parents' love story, told in three parts; Suwichakornpong's *Mundane History*, about the inner life of a paralysed boy trapped in his home; Somunjarn's *In April the Following Year, There was a Fire* (2012), a mixture of documentary and experimental film about the director's memory of his family; and *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015), which premiered in the competition



section at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival, about the director's memory of his hometown. These personal stories form a kind of 'look back to the future', which Gabriel (1989) suggests is necessarily dissident and partisan, wedded to constant change (p.54). It is a reassertion of the past where marginality and oppression find their rightful place.

Through the marginality of independent cinema, both in terms of subject matter and aesthetic choices, as well as their international sources of funding and exhibiting, an alternative version of 'Thainess' is offered, composed of personal memory and an unorthodox version of the nation, instead of the nationalistic viewpoint of a middle-class group with cultural-national aspirations to place itself on the global stage, and capture international attention. In particular, the majority of independent filmmakers who are educated in the West aim to attract Western audiences in order to escape the limited opportunities in their own countries, where commercialisation and Hollywoodisation are one and the same. Art cinema here is being used as a strategy, both for the filmmakers' survival in their own country and for a brand that will differentiate them from mainstream cinema and mass audiences.

## **Conclusion**

In terms of subject matter, these films represent minority issues in various dimensions, including ethnicity, sexuality and political agendas. The personal themes of memory, death, dreams and internal conflicts serve to explore the larger context of society. As for their formal strategy, the filmmakers attempt to find a new form of storytelling, in line with European art films and transnational cinema. The use of de-dramatisation, experiments with structure, the use of fragmented and non-linear stories are among the various tools employed in these films. The strategy known as 'slow cinema' has been evident in many films, as well as the Western thinking which supports the concept. By using 'slow cinema', these films choose to distinguish themselves from the mass. They function on the periphery of the Thai film industry as far as revenue and distribution are concerned, and are mostly only available to a particular middle-class audience.

Independent cinema opens up a space for an emerging urban middle class who look to the West and aspire to change their own cultural environment. This is also the case of the new generation growing up alongside the expansion of international film festivals, which have sprung up in every major city in the world over the past two decades or so. Film festivals have become an ideal alternative space for the capitalist world, where films from all over the world are presented in such a way that they also offer an outlet for local audiences to participate in what is a global middle-class phenomenon. For these particular audiences, the films of international film festivals are needed in a world where liberalism clashes with the ideology of the nation state, and there is no real independence from capitalism.

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