

Re-defining the Self: Thai Documentary Films After Coup d'état in 2014

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Abstract

During the period of political instability that led to the coups d'état in 2006 and 2014, the independent cinema has become an alternative space for exploring political issues. With political issues having long been a taboo subject in Thai cinema, particularly during times of military control, many filmmakers have chosen to portray the issue in a subtle form. Not many films have dealt directly with the political situation. For this paper, I would like to take a closer look at some of the recent documentary independent films that were made and internationally shown after the 2014 coup d'état, particularly the most recent films, including *Railway Sleepers* (Sompot Chidgasornpongse, 2016), *Phantom of Illumination* (Wattanapume Laisuwanchai, 2017), and *By the River* (Nontawat Numbenchapol, 2013), and how each of them offers a subtle commentary on political issues as well as critiques of the Thai social class system post-coup d'état. My argument is that the three filmmakers have used their films to construct a space for re-definition of what is 'Thai' post-coup d'état through their own paths.

Keywords: Thai independent cinema, Asian documentary, coups d'état, politics

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Introduction

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Re-defining the Self: The Aftermath of a Decade-Long Political Instability

Since 2006, after many years of political conflicts between supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra, a former Prime Minister who was ousted by a political coup d'état in 2006, and those against Thaksin, the formerly marginalised rural poor have become the centre of attention. The political hostilities between the two sides reached their peak in 2010, when the Red Shirt protesters occupied the heart of the city of Bangkok, which ended in violence. The Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts, according to Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2015), can be separated simply by income, with the Reds towards the lower end and the Yellows towards the higher end of the income scale (p. 16). While the Yellow Shirt protesters were mainly part of the Bangkok elite, the Red Shirts came from the rural areas, particularly the northeast, which was the stronghold of Shinawatra's party. According to Chairat Charoensin-o-larn (2013), the main two components within the Red Shirts are the rural masses and the urban poor that have long been ignored in Thailand's political space (p. 211). The movement expanded the political space for these two sectors. However, following the 2014 coup d'état, the political movements were banned in public. Despite the Red Shirt movement being subdued, with many of its leaders prosecuted and imprisoned, the rural mass and the urban poor undeniably remain a forceful factor in Thai politics. The movement also pinpointed the deeply divided society underpinned by class tensions in Thai society.

One of the focal points of the Red Shirts is the subject of class and inequality, and some journalists go so far as to regard the conflicts between two camps, Red and Yellow Shirts, as a 'class war'. The problem of 'class' has been embedded in Thailand's political problems for a long time and became more evident during the recent crisis. The subject of class has been understood as associated with the communist movement since the 1970s, which has traumatised the nation for so long. The student movement mobilised by the Communist Party of Thailand did not end well as it was suppressed through military brutality. According to Illan Nam (2015), the communists were viewed by the right-wing movement as enemies of the nation, religion and the monarchy (p. 115). Therefore, the class issue was inevitably rarely discussed openly in Thai society as it was seen as disrupting the monarchy, one of the most revered institutions in Thailand. Through the Red Shirt movement, the issue of class reawoke in Thai society. Although both coups d'état in 2006 and 2014 stopped any advancement of the argument, it remains the undercurrent waiting to resurface.

According to Phongpaichit and Baker (2015), the recent situation is not one of class politics in the old sense, as incomes in Thailand have tripled in the past generation (p. 16). The rural people who were once very poor and supposedly uninvolved in many aspects including politics are climbing towards partaking in a 'new middle class' and have wider horizons as a result of their experience of labour migration (p. 16). Instead of wealth equality, the Red Shirts were rallying against the old establishment and their privileges with regard to justice and power. The movement both helped to gain awareness of the rural people as well as the rest of the society and to re-define what was once considered us and them, self and other, rural and urban, in order for the society to move on from the divisions within the country. This is evident in the films in focus here, and I will attempt to look closely at each one of them. In this context, philosophers such as Jacques Rancière may help to provide productive ways of understanding the relationship between politics and film and this set of documentary films.

Rancière (2010) 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, p. 148). 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. 148). 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). 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 ostensibly ‘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 (p. 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 the politics of class, I will take a closer look at the three films in question here.

The three films: *Railway Sleepers*, *Phantom of Illumination* and *By the River*, have all attempted to address the issue of post-coup d’état class in different ways. The three films were all made independently from studios and portray the filmmakers’ personal journeys and experiences. They did not show commercially and have been labelled art cinema. The three films have all focused on people from the rural areas as their main protagonists, while the background of the filmmakers is educated urban of the new generation. The films may not directly discuss the issue of class but devote much of the screen space to rural people, or what Rancière (1999) might refer to as ‘that of the part of those who have no part’ (p. 29-30) if considering their relationship with the centre of power and suggesting the gap between rural people and the middle class. My argument is therefore that the three filmmakers have used their films to construct a space for re-definition of what is ‘Thai’ through their own paths. Moreover, these films have appropriated the strategy of art cinema in the context of what is considered ‘high culture’ and redirected it to the subject of the rural people. They are fitted into the category of the so-called ‘slow cinema’. According to Lee Carruthers (2016), ‘slow cinema’ identifies a mode of film practice with a set of distinctive features we have come to identify with the contemporary festival films that have the following qualities:

... the use of long (often extremely long) takes, the films’ protracted pace may be enhanced by the use of an unhurried mobile camera; on other occasions, a static frame is deployed to deepen their sense of lassitude. Comparisons are studied, built to accommodate the lingering scrutiny of extended duration; narrative and dramatic actions are typically diminished, instead foregrounding the quiet unfolding of quotidian routines. Taken in combination, these effects produce an aesthetic that may be called contemplative... (p. 7)

Furthermore, as Carruthers (2016) suggests, it has been ‘proposed as an aesthetic practice whose rigors articulate the pressures of a lived history and its politics’ (p. 8). It is similar to Rancière’s (2009) suggestion that “the politics of the filmmaker involves using the sensory riches – the power of speech or of vision – that can be extracted from the life and settings of these precarious existences and returning them to their owners” (p. 81). By using the strategy of ‘slow cinema’ and putting emphasis on visual imagery, the three films in question here have suggested a new construction of knowledge beyond storytelling and opens up a way for rethinking their political address.



Figure 1: Railway Sleepers

Railway Sleepers is a poetic documentary film about the passengers on the railway service all over the country. Instead of following the flow of storytelling, the film focuses mainly on the interior of the train, looking at its passengers, from small children to the elderly of different classes, and the apparently class-divided communities within those train compartments. The focus moves from the third-class passengers in the crowded compartment with no air-conditioning to the second class with air-conditioning and adjustable beds, and finally to the private compartment in the first class towards the end of the film. People from different religions and professions are being portrayed randomly. From people sitting idle, sleeping, to a small party, these are private and mostly mundane moments that take up most of the film space. The two-hour film length can be compared to what Chidgasornpongse (personal communication, April 25, 2017) suggests in an interview, that “during the time spent on a train, a communal area is created, as strangers have to sit face-to-face across from one another”. The audience, who is supposedly urban educated middle class, has the rare opportunity to sit almost face-to-face with those they have rarely encountered in their real lives. For the director, Chidgasornpongse, the train symbolically carries a political message that encompasses the country as a whole. He suggests that:

The railway was used to centralise the power of the king, so he could reign over the entire country, and especially the remote areas. The train was also the symbol of modernity for Thailand. We used trains to show other countries that we are not uncivilised, and to deliver goods to other parts of the country, bringing about growth in our economy (S. Chidgasornpongse, personal communication, August 23, 2017).

However, with social and technological changes over the span of a hundred of years, instead of remaining a symbol of modernity, the Thai railway system has become one that hangs back, with no major transformations having taken place since its inception. Instead of a king’s carriage, as seen in many pictures from the past, the train became

the choice for many kings to travel to visit their people in different parts of the country, and those left behind in economic terms have now become the regular passengers.

While the title *Railway Sleepers* has its poetic undertone, with the term ‘sleepers’ on a journey that leads to nowhere in particular, it is no different from the comatose state of the characters in Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015), on which Chidgasornpongse worked as assistant director. Both the films are highly allegorical in a country where many things couldn’t be said, particularly political comments and all things related to the monarchy. The train is, then, like a country carrying individuals that should preferably be put into a state of sleep rather than be aware of what is going on. The film’s original title, *Are We There Yet?*, might suggest more in terms of a country stuck in the middle of somewhere with no destination in sight. We do not know when we are going to arrive at the destination. Chidgasornpongse is attempting to focus on similarities instead of class differences neatly organised into sections. Including all classes, with much attention being paid to the lower-income class, is one way of trying to reimagine and identifying who we are. It is also a question of how the Thai people are going to come together as a whole. On this train, we are being put together in one hell of a ride.



Figure 2: Phantom of Illumination

Phantom of Illumination is about the main protagonist, Samrit, who came to Bangkok from a northeastern province to work as a projectionist in a stand-alone cinema that is being torn down. In the first half of the film we follow Samrit, who lives in the cinema, going about his day-to-day life while waiting for his last day at work. Finally, the last day arrives and everything is being cleared out of the cinema, including the seating and projectors, before the building is torn down. In the second half of the film, Samrit, with no job to attend to, returns to his home in the northeast where most of the villagers work in the rubber plantations. For more than 20 years, he had been working various jobs in cinema, from usher to projectionist, and he has no other skills beyond his work in the cinema, which is on the brink of becoming obsolete due to the new technology. He then has no choice but to return to his

hometown, Surin, in the northeast of Thailand. He struggles while attempting to work in the rubber plantation where his wife also works. His wife says in the film that because he has worked for so long indoors, it is hard for him to work outdoors again. He has to find his peace living at home, but he is no longer fit due to alcohol consumption. In the past, he had had the opportunity to visit home only twice a year, but to be there every day with no means of supporting the family has left him in despair. It is a fate common among many going to find work in Bangkok that once the system has no more use for you, it leaves you high and dry. As stated in an interview, the director, Laisuwanchai, wanted to preserve the last memory of the stand-alone cinema, and also to project the plight of many northeastern people who came to Bangkok and worked tirelessly, only to be thrown out and left without any purpose in life (personal communication, October 19, 2017). Despite worked for the system controlled by the centre of power, Samrit was part of a dispensable capitalist machine. While *Railway Sleepers* refers to the class structure by focusing on Samrit, Laisuwanchai shone a light on past negligence. For much of the time, Samrit lives his life under the shadow of the big star on the big screen, but Laisuwanchai for once made Samrit the centre of attention. His intention is also to leave the space open for rethinking the subject. Towards the last section of the film, the gap between Samrit's past life and the current one in his hometown is visually presented to us in a poetic way, where the film combines the story of a ghost in the rubber plantation with a funeral ritual. Samrit is once referred to by his wife as a zombie, as he is losing his ability to work outdoors as a result of being indoors for much of his life in the cinema. The figure of a 'ghost' is not much different from Samrit as he has no visibility outside the cinema in the life he had in Bangkok and as a floating body with no life purpose in his hometown.



Figure 3: By the River

By the River is about the people in the deep forests in Kanchanaburi in west Bangkok, trying to make a living from a river contaminated by lead from a nearby factory. The film does not forget the problems facing the village as a whole but portrays the daily routine of one of the villagers, Somchai. Somchai's life revolves around the river where he often dives for fishing. In the second half of the film, Somchai is no longer on the screen as we see the other villagers prepare for his funeral. Nambenchapol brings the two conflicting points of view to the surface. While in reality the people are living under threat and fear, the film portrays the life of the village as peaceful and living harmoniously with nature. This paradoxical state of danger and peace in the life of the villagers by the river quietly floods into the psyche of the usual audience, the middle class. These two conflicting views open wide the gap between the two

classes: the view from the middle class and the reality among the underprivileged. With a serene nature rendered through a static long take, we the audience are forced to look below the surface, in particular when there is no Somchai to be the centre of focus. Although with no visibility in the second half of the film, Somchai haunts the screen and the mind of the audience.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to demonstrate the way in which the three independent documentary films screened after the coup d'état of 2014 have reappropriated the political subject of class after a period of political instability over ten years or so. The three films indirectly address the issue of class and attempt to re-define what 'Thai' means. Through what Rancière terms 'the aesthetic regime of the arts' that enables us to look closely at the visual imagery beyond storytelling, these films have constructed a new understanding of how we are in the process of constructing new Thai identity. While *Railway Sleepers* visually portrays a class-divided country, *Phantom of Illumination* focuses on one single protagonist's journey that ultimately makes us dive into the psyche of those who are in the underclass and underrepresented. Finally, *By the River* also takes us on a journey of the middle-class psyche that conflicts with reality, and through its subtlety and minimalism we find the conflicting world between the middle class and those on the lower end. These three films mark an important post-coup d'état stage in discussing the subject of class and the issue of identity that have preoccupied the middle class in recent years. Although the subject of minorities has been portrayed in various independent films over the past ten years, the recent documentary movement has blended in a middle-class point of view on the subject of class without hiding behind the façade of a fictional story. The Thai audience and Thai people as a whole are in a long process of looking back at themselves with that divided line in mind.

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