

***From the Nightmarish to a Dreamy State of Being: The Troubling Present in Thai Independent Cinema after the 2014 Coup d'état***

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The Asian Conference on Film & Documentary 2016

Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

From Apichatpong Weerasethakul's debut film, *Mysterious Objects at Noon*, to *Blissfully Yours* and on to *Tropical Malady*, the subjects, forms, and modes of visual presentation reflect the evolution of a unique style of filmmaking that deals intimately with themes such as desire and sexual ambiguity which are rarely explored in mainstream cinema. Weerasethakul paved the way for a second group of Thai independent filmmakers that followed in the 2000s, in particular during the period of political protests which led to the coups d'état of 2006 and 2014, when the independent cinema flourished both domestically and internationally. Their films have created a discourse on independent films, or nang indie, that offers an alternative mode of filmmaking as well as an alternative discourse from the mainstream cinema. For this paper, I would like to take a closer look at some of independent films made after the 2014 coups d'état, in the period where military regime has attempted to impose its ideological values through films and other mediums. I will look through three particular films, *The Blue Hour* (Anucha Boonyawatana, 2015), *Snap* (Kongdej Jaturanrasmee, 2015) and *Cemetery of Splendour* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015), and how they offer a vision from the nightmarish to a dreamy state of being that perhaps give us a glimpse into the undercurrents embedded in the mentality of Thai independent filmmakers at the present time.

Keywords: Thai Independent Cinema, coups d'état, cinema and politics

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## Introduction

This paper examines Thai independent cinema since the coup d'état in 2014, particularly through three films: *The Blue Hour* (Anucha Boonyawatana, 2015), *Snap* (Kongdej Jaturanrasmee, 2015), and *Cemetery of Splendour* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2015). While mainstream cinema produced by film studios, for instance GTH and Sahamongkol, continues to produce mainly teen and horror films as well as nationalistic historical films, such as *May Who* (GTH, 2015), *Fanday* (GDH, 2016), *King Naresuan 6* (Sahamongkol, 2015), the independent sector has become an alternative space to explore the unspoken and challenging issues. My argument is that the films *The Blue Hour*, *Snap* and *Cemetery of Splendour* have offered an alternative discourse to the mainstream films and revealed the undercurrents of Thai society after the 2014 coup d'état, the thirteenth in the past 80 years.

In an attempt to examine the above argument, in the following section I will look firstly at the way in which independent films in Thailand have occupied an alternative space to that of the official history often seen in mainstream cinema. I will then argue that the use of memory in these films has played an important role in constructing the narrative of the films, offering a vision from the nightmarish to a dreamy state of being, and what this suggests with reference to the political crises and the current situation in Thailand.

## Thai Cinema and Politics: A Testament of Personal Memory

The development of the Thai film industry has always proceeded hand in hand with the exercise of power through censorship to keep the three institutions, namely: nation, Buddhism and the monarchy, above criticism. The first film censorship legislation was put in place in 1930, before its replacement by the Film and Video Act 2008, passed by the coup-appointed National Legislative Assembly and centred around a controversial rating system, as the Censorship Board Committee can ban any film deemed inappropriate to be screened in the kingdom. The major criteria are the *lèse majesté* law and any contents which are deemed detrimental to religion or endanger national security. Under the strict censorship rules, it has therefore been difficult for Thai filmmakers to choose the subjects of their films freely, particularly any that might be considered to endanger the pillars of the nationhood, including political content which is rarely seen in Thai cinema. Since the coup d'état, in particular, the censorship has become more rigid.

While the focus of the censorship is more on issues that come under the *lèse majesté* law, there is more openness on some other subjects, such as homosexual relationships, in an increasing number of films. The gradual blooming of independent films has also become evident since the 2006 coup d'état, and they have gained increasing visibility both at international film festivals and with domestic audiences. Weerasethakul led the way, making his debut in 1997 and inspiring new generations of independent filmmakers in the 2000s. With films being made outside big film companies and mainly catering to international film festivals, as many films were funded overseas, the independent filmmakers have gained more freedom in terms of subject and content as well as aesthetics and stylistics. They have produced films that

have come to challenge what Adadol Ingawanij (2007) called “the narcissistic mode of patriotic spectatorship that accounts for the public prestige of heritage films” (p. 260) which proliferated from the 1997 economic breakdown onwards. Moreover, according to Malinee Khumsupa and Sudarat Musikawong (2016), the recurrence of the coup d’état – referring to 2014 – “elicits a *déjà-vu* experience that has unfortunately not triggered resistance within the Bangkok bourgeois public sphere, where we see a strengthening of grand narratives saturated in national security and the maintenance of social order”. They argue that while the mainstream media seem to imply that Thais accept military rule, independent cinema functions as a counter-public, offering opposition through political ambiguity (Khumsupa and Musikawong, 2016). Not only do they function as an alternative discourse on Thainess at international as well as local venues, but they offer a space for negotiation and reconciliation at times of crisis such as during coups d’état. As observed by David Streckfuss (2011), with the censorship “history has not been served well in Thai movies” (p. 278) and independent films have become, in a way, a testament of an otherwise forgotten history. As Streckfuss writes (2011):

History is the victim of defamation for it de-peoples the past, making the past void of names, attributions, and responsibility. The bad past becomes personal, with no names....Defamation-based law drives the hard history of Thailand into darkened streets....There are sometimes signs that critical commentary may appear, but if it does, it is always in a coded language (p. 279).

Many independent filmmakers—three of whom: Boonyawattana, Jaturanrassamee and Weerasethakul being used as exemplars here – have, in one way or another, gone through the process of self-censoring during the making of their films. They use different strategies and stylistics in dealing with censored subjects, with their depictions ranging from the nightmarish to dreamy states of being, which I will explore further in the next section. The degree to which they refer to political events and censored subjects also differs among these filmmakers.

Despite their different strategies, they all emphasise personal memory and how memories of the past may resurface in the present, disrupting what seems to be a harmonious present and questioning the future. They have all used personal memory as a way of bringing the subject of politics to the personal level. As many traumatic political events of the past have been forgotten and possibly erased from the mainstream media, alternative public spaces such as social media and independent films have become personal sites for re-thinking the past. In many ways, cinema has represented history by way of embodying and preserving our personal memories, as these films do here. However, as Marla Morris (2009) writes:

Personal memories, perhaps, effect historians’ renderings, but personal memories are different from historical renderings because they are not constrained in the same ways. Psychological interferences such as repression, resistance, denial, projection, introjection, and transference shape memory and therefore may determine, to a certain extent, the ways in which historians select, imagine, deconstruct, and reconstruct documents (p. 8).

A personal memory contains what may be censored out of the official history. For example, as Streckfuss (2011) suggests, “Thai history and the writing of that history (historiography) are constrained by the law protecting the monarchy” (p. 315). Moreover, Patrick Jory (2003), referring to Nidhi Eoseewong, a Thai historical scholar, writes that “Thai historiography as it has been produced over the last two centuries originates out of a desire on the part of the Thai elite to define a Thai self that is periodically threatened by outsiders”. Therefore, the independent cinema, which predominantly employs personal memories in their films, has played an important role in constructing and possibly de-constructing the official history. The films offer an opposing discourse to the official one, relying on personal memories and subjectively challenging the Thai identity as defined by the state.

Ozan Tekin (2014), referring to Pierre Nora, suggests that “history and memory are opposed terms in perceiving the past and points out that memory is embodied in living societies” (p. 29). For him, memory is rooted in the concrete, such as space, image and object. These elements are used effectively in independent films. In these films, space is intertwined with various layers of historical context as well as becoming a site of negotiation between different forces vying to control meaning. As Tekin (2014) writes:

....in order for memory to be something other than a fantasy, what we remember must have taken place somewhere. Places matter as cinematic products have the power to essentially transform or change our mnemonic perceptions of particular places converting them into sites of memory and forgetting (p. 25).

By looking into the spaces of these films, I hope to reveal them as bearers of different meanings over the years. As Chris Berry (1994, 14) further points out, not only do we need to understand these changing spaces but also the way in which we position ourselves in them in order to understand the ever-changing identities and landscapes.

Moreover, for me, independent films played a key role during the period described by Ackbar Abbas (1997) as the “space of disappearance”, referring to the state of Hong Kong at the time of the 1997 handover, when its people were searching for lost identities and cultures. It is a process of displacement and reversal “when an ‘older’ but still operative politics of national legitimacy and geophysical boundaries comes into conflict with a ‘newer’ politics of global flows, information, and the devalorisation of physical boundaries” (Abbas, 1997, p. 4). Thailand is now at the crossroads with the end of the beloved King Bhumipol’s reign and the new still unknown. In this case, nostalgia is no longer triggered by objects but by the absence of the object or the space of disappearance (Abbas, 1997). The filmic images have become a testament of what we may or will lose, a space of nostalgia in which we can imagine what may disappear and become invisible, or what we might refuse to see in the past. Abbas (1997) explains the culture of disappearance, arguing that the imminence of the disappearance is what precipitates an intense and unprecedented interest in the present.

## **Making Memory Instead of History: from Nightmare to a Dream State**

The three films I have chosen here, *The Blue Hour*, *Snap* and *Cemetery of Splendour*, were selected for being made after 2014 and for its variety of aesthetics and stylistics. Although these films may not directly address the political situation and do not represent the direct aftermath of the coup d'état, their meaning is implicit without much need for coded language. As they say something different from the mainstream cinema, they could also be considered political films, particularly at a time, as Thongchai Winichakul (2014) points out, when the political crisis may escalate with the end of King Bhumibol's era (p. 81). The Thai monarchy, which has been the country's bedrock and provided stability, now looks to become the cause of increasing instability. According to Winichakul (2014), as he explains the Thai political conflicts over the past 10 years that led to the coups d'état, there are two major factors he likens to elephants in the room. The first is the monarchy, which has been a major political actor throughout the country's history but, as suggested above, this cannot be expressed directly. Secondly, therefore, the critics and sceptics of royalism are the other elephant in the room of Thai politics. Some independent films, including the three films here, are threading along these invisible elements that rarely become public subjects, indirectly pointing to fears about the imminent future. In the following section, I will look at how the memories in these films are being made to construct an alternative discourse.

## **Memory, Ghosts and Other Worldly Subjects:**

Thai cinema has long been associated with ghost stories, a staple of mainstream films. According to Adam Knee (2005) writing about the popularity of Thai horror films at the beginning of the 2000s following the economic breakdown, "Thai traditions and history are thus multiply engaged in many of these texts, which make a return of the past tradition as a source for narratives explicitly dealing with the return of the past in supernatural form" (p. 142). He further points out that this relates most specifically to the subject of women's oppression. Two of the independent films in focus here, *The Blue Hour* and *Cemetery of Splendour*, also employ popular ghost stories, though with rather different implications from the ones in the early 2000s. Bliss Cua Lim (2001) suggests that "the ghost narrative opens the possibility of a radicalised concept of non-contemporaneity; haunting as ghostly return precisely refuses the idea that things are just 'left behind,' that the past is inert and the present uniform" (p. 288). Not only are the ghosts being used here to disrupt the boundaries between past, present and future, but also to collapse memory, reality, and wishful thinking into the same plane. This is exemplified in *The Blue Hour*, centred on the relationship between two boys: Tam, a loner who is constantly bullied at school and at home by his brother and father for being homosexual, and Phum, who lives alone without a family. We gradually learn that they are victims of serial abuse, particularly Tam who is subject to abuse both at school and at home by his brother and unseen father. They frequently meet at a deserted swimming pool, where Phum tells a story of a haunting ghost that has led many people to drown in the pool. He tells Tam that "*phii bang ta*" (literally: "the ghost covers your eyes"), signifying that the ghost will blind us and we will not be able to see a particular person or particular things, which could lead to our death. The ghost story seems to register in Tam's mind. From then on, their encounters become like a nightmare where the haunting of ghosts overshadows their

lives and corpses can pop up anywhere, down to their plan to kill Tam's whole family. The ghost here is nowhere to be seen in the film but does disrupt the boundaries between the memories, reality and wishful thinking of the characters, so that we are no longer certain where one begins or ends and we are left only with one long nightmare.



Figure 1. A deserted swimming pool in *The Blue Hour* (2015)

Citing the term “negative hallucination”, employed by Sigmund Freud in his essay on Wilhelm Jensen’s *Gradiva*, Abbas (1997) further suggests, with reference to the “space of disappearance”, that “if hallucination means seeing ghosts and apparitions, that is, something that is not there, reverse hallucination means not seeing what is there” (p. 6). *The Blue Hour* uses “*phii bang ta*” to create a world of denial, an excuse to refuse to see what is there, as if the characters refuse to accept responsibility for their own actions and the violence they might commit. Although the film may focus on the relationship between two boys and their marginal place in society, and suggests the new generation’s dark psyche, haunted by a ghost that has either blinded them or rendered them invisible to others, the director’s intention of also alluding to an absent father figure is apparent. Although he is absent, his existence can be determined from his influence over every character’s life through his rules, his pistol and his uniform. At one point, Tam says to Phum that his father is not a soldier but he likes to wear a uniform. Towards the end, after the gunman kills the whole family, Tam looks at his lifeless father lying face down on the floor with his soldier’s T-shirt on. The ghost here may be implied by the absence of the father figure, which has affected us all and blinded us to reality at the time of the coup d’état.

Ghosts are also used regularly in Weerasethakul’s films, which according to Aparna Sharma (2015) “dwell extensively on marginal spaces as containers of absent figures, ghosts and communal memories, those that get suppressed in mainstream narratives of history” (p. 160). In *Cemetery of Splendour*, the ghost is used in a more direct political way as the film was funded by international sources as well as aiming for international audiences. Weerasethakul made the decision not to screen within the country, though the film is still filled with symbolism and allegory, as so often in his other films. The film’s original title before its release, *Cemetery of Kings*, makes clear the director’s intention.



Figure 2. The old elementary school-turned temporary hospital *Cemetery of Splendour* (2015)

With the recent passing of the beloved King Bhumipol, this question has become even more pertinent. With the soldiers lying unconscious in the old elementary school-turned temporary hospital, being treated by variously coloured neon-lit tubes, the film re-creates the dream state of both the film's characters and the audience. Their symptoms are explained as deep sleep with no discernible medical causes. Jen, an ageing volunteers to take care of one of the soldiers. She then discovers the reason for the deep sleep from the two Laos princesses at the shrine she frequently visits with offerings and to make her wishes. The princesses tell her that underneath the elementary school is the site of an ancient kingdom's graveyard and that, while asleep, the soldiers were enlisted to fight in a battle as the king's army. They add that the soldiers will never get better as their energy has been taken. The close ties between king and soldiers have undeniably been at the heart of the nation's stability for centuries, and still are today, as with the recent coup d'état's aim to stabilise the country at a critical time of the reign. The kings and the soldiers are spellbound by each other. Weerasethakul seems to suggest that all Thais are like living ghosts, as when the soldiers wake up and go through their daily routines and then return to their deep-sleep condition. He further criticises the system where the king has limited constitutional powers through the governing bodies but his invisible power has its effect on the Thai people's collective psyche. This effect is expressed through the atmospherics of the film, which is like a dream where the past intertwines with the present and the dead with the living. Moreover, as in *The Blue Hour*, in *Cemetery of Splendour* there is also an absent figure of authority, but the underlying narrative of past kings, to whom most Thais would refer as father figures, dominates the whole narrative.

### **Making Memory through Photographs and Places:**

"To photograph disappearance is not to defamiliarise, only that a sense of the unfamiliar grows out of forms that remain stubbornly familiar. Like the uncanny."

Ackbar Abbas (1997,

Instead of being devoid of a political agenda, as in *The Blue Hour*, *Snap* uses the 2014 coup d'état as a backdrop to a romantic love story. And although the director may frame it as a backdrop, politics creeps into each individual and relationship. The film centres on the reunion between a bride-to-be and her past high-school love during the coup d'état of 2014. The film uses the two coups d'état of 2006 and 2014 as marks of the lovers' separation and reunion. Instagram posting is sporadically used in these times of political instability where identity is in crisis and where a personal memory is a social-media snapshot attempt to build a public persona. Pueng, a 26-year-old, is about to marry a military officer who is occasionally on call during the coup d'état, and she continues to post happy photos of her life while having serious doubts about the marriage after reuniting with Boy, her high-school lover, at a friend's wedding in the eastern province of Chantaburi, where they went to school together and where Boy's family live. Pueng and Boy share a brief moment in which their mutual feelings re-emerge. She asks him his reason for not turning up to their supposedly last rendezvous before her family had to move to Bangkok following her soldier father being called up on duty. Boy does not explain the reason to her, but as the audience we learn that Boy's father, in an attempt to take his son to see Pueng on that day, suffered an accident that has affected his health ever since. It is probably also Boy's feeling of guilt that has made him keep his distance from his father before the latter passes away at the end of the film. In a similar way to the other two films, the father figures, both Pueng's and Boy's, may not be the main focus of the film but both of them instigated the separation, as Pueng's father was ordered to move to Bangkok during the 2006 coup d'état and Boy's father was the reason Boy missed his last reunion with Pueng. With the personal losses – the separation of the lovers and the loss of the father – marking the two coups d'état, *Snap* may be referring to the eight-year timeframe between them, where the relationship became frozen as if stuck in the same loop of political crises, seemingly with no way out.

A nostalgic and melancholic feeling permeates the film throughout, giving it a rather dreamy quality as if the present time had already passed. When she revisits her high school and tries to find the spots where her memories with Boy were made, Pueng asks, "How come nothing is good as it used to be?". In a way, she represents many members of the Thai middle class who greet coups d'état with numbness, or some even with welcoming arms, at times when one needs something stable to hold on to and when the future is unclear, while lamenting the passing of good things that will never return. The easy way out for the middle class is to resolve the political conflicts through the outer selves they put up through the social media. The politics, while seemingly unobtrusive, permeates through personal relationships as well as the construction of the self. Photographs are used here as a means of seeing and preserving, but the act of preserving what is past creates a rather uncanny feeling. Pueng needs photographs to reaffirm her life and identity in the most concrete way, as seen in her Instagram and pre-wedding photographs. The meaning of photographs for her evokes Heike Jenss's (2015) comments on new social media such as Instagram: the experiences of time and memory have been integrated into consumer culture:

This kind of ersatz nostalgia does not generate a connection with one's own lived and memorized experience of the past; ...but rather fosters a feeling of desire or longing for an imagined past; one that can be directly translated or channeled into consumer desires (p. 145).



The Instagram photographs have simply been reduced to consumer desires which are the opposite of a real nostalgia based on the experience of loss (Jenss, 2015). For the new generation like Pueng's, photographs may be used as a mask for the loss of a real feeling of nostalgia. Boy, meanwhile, is a photographer who uses photographs as way to remember and possibly preserve what is now gone or on the brink of disappearing, as when he snaps what turns out to be the last picture of his father at work. Photographing disappearance creates "the mixed, heterogenous space of the uncanny, where the unfamiliar arises out of the familiar and is a dimension of it: not another space but a space of otherness" (Abbas, 1997, p. 50). As Boy takes pictures of Pueng and their friends dressed in their high-school uniforms, trying to recreate the past, the photographs are more than a memory of the past but create a rather uncanny feeling, unlike the return of the ghost which creates a separation between the otherworld and the living.



Figure 3. *Snap* (2015)

Eight years have gone by but the past has not remained the past: it becomes a source of anxiety as seen in their situation and in Boy's photographs. As Sigmund Freud (1997) describes it, "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression...the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light" (p. 217). In *Cemetery of Splendour*, the photograph is also used to create a similar meaning. Weerasethakul uses a photograph, hanging in a canteen, of General Sarit Thanarat, who was in power from 1958 to 1963 through the use of martial law. His regime, during the time of the rise of communism, is remembered as repressive and authoritarian and is one of those periods fast left behind in the official history of the country.

As suggested by Teki (2014), a space is where a memory has been created. The space plays an important role in all three films, and they are similar in terms of their reinterpretation and reappropriation of the space to use in their political messages. For example, the deserted swimming pool in *The Blue Hour*, a luxury usually associated with a particular class, is now neglected, full of polluted water, and haunted by a ghost. It becomes a space occupied by homosexuality, present on the margins of society. It is a space that we may not relate directly to politics but is undeniably embedded in everyday politics, similar to the school in *Cemetery of*

*Splendour*. The school is being used as a hospital while still being haunted by the remains of what was once a place upholding rules and regulations, as confirmed by the picture of General Sarit Thanarat. Weerasethakul suggestively employs a school as a site of repression which helps to sustain the dictatorship's repressive regime. It is also a place where Thai textbooks and official history, a blend of royalism and nationalism, have been taught and cultivated (Meyer, 2014, p. 135).

More importantly, in the film *Cemetery of Splendour*, Weerasethakul uses his hometown Khon Kaen, in northeastern Thailand, as the main location, where the local tales and historical setting provide a significant context in this and other of his films. The town of Khon Kaen, and overall the northeastern region of the country, have been involved in many political events in the past. For example, it was a sensitive area at the time of the spread of communism and the later involvement of the U.S. The area is, according to George Modelski (2015), "poor, underdeveloped and traditionally neglected – has been a prolific source of opposition politicians and is potentially a fertile ground for guerrilla warfare" (p. 200). The communists used the area to campaign for separation of the northeast and reunification with Laos. Moreover, both Weerasethakul actress playing his main character, Jen, who frequently appears in his films, grew up in the area and have close ties to Laos, which used to form part of the same territory before the separation of two countries. This remembrance of forgotten history is relived in the town of Khon Kaen where the past has become more significant to the present, in the same way as the story of the cemetery of kings underlies the main narrative of the relationship between Jen and the soldier.

## **Conclusion**

This paper attempts to demonstrate the ways in which the independent cinema has functioned as an alternative discourse at a time of crisis after the coup d'état, through three films: *The Blue Hour*, *Snap*, and *Cemetery of Splendour*. In the first part I attempt to conceptualise the way in which personal memories, the key tool used in the three films as well as in other independent films, enable the construction of an alternative discourse that differs from official history despite the censorship. Moreover, these films have played an important role, through the use of personal memories, in making their appearance in what seems to be a space of disappearance at the time of the coup d'état and the end of King Bhumipol's reign. They are all critical of the past in different ways. In *The Blue Hour*, the past may be embodied by violence and hauntings as in a nightmare; in *Snap*, the past is an unreachable space of nostalgia that produces a rather uncanny feeling; and in *Cemetery of Splendour* Weerasethakul is most critical of a past which can only be represented through dreams or something not visible within the narrative layers. In order to move on to the future, it is important to come to terms with the memory of the past. The uncertain future is already here while the Thais are more than ever attempting to search for and preserve a nostalgic past. It remains to be seen how independent cinema will respond to such phenomena at this challenging time.

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